

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH HERMAN BERENSON

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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LAWRENCEVILLE, NEW JERSEY

OCTOBER 31, 2005

TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Herman Berenson on October 31, 2005, in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth and ...

Rodolfo Medini: ... Rudy Medini.

SI: Mr. Berenson, thank you very much for having us here today.

Herman Berenson: You're quite welcome.

SI: To begin, could you tell us where and when you were born?

HB: Well, my name is Herman Berenson, no middle initial, and that's the name by which I was known both as a child and as an adult. It was by that name that I was registered in kindergarten, known throughout elementary, junior high school, high school, college and during my Army service. I remember that, sometime during my early elementary school years, that my given name at birth was Clarence and that's the name on my birth certificate. Now, how did I come by that name? Well, I didn't choose it, believe me. It's traditional among Eastern European Jews to name a child after a deceased, never a living, relative and I was named after my maternal great grandmother, whose Anglicized name would be Clara, hence Clarence, but I abandoned that in a hurry. [laughter] I abandoned that in a hurry. As a matter-of-fact, my parents probably had some misgivings about it, because I never heard myself called Clarence. It was always Herman. So, there you have that much.

SI: Where did Herman come from?

HB: Well, that's a counterpoint to that. The Hebrew name that I was given would have sounded somewhat like Herman. So, I was called Herman, but no relationship to any of my ancestors by that name.

SI: Could you tell us a little bit more about your family's background, beginning with your father, where he was from?

HB: My father was born in Odessa, Ukraine. He was a child, baby, when he came here. My mother was born in Bucharest, Romania, and she too was a baby in arms when she arrived here. It's sad to say I know very little about my parents, really very little. We never think of asking while we're growing up. My father was killed in an automobile accident in 1933 and he was thirty-eight at the time. Subsequently, my mother remarried, and then, in 1962, my mother was killed in an automobile accident.

SI: Oh.

HB: So, that's the background that I can give you.

SI: They never explained why their families came to the United States.

HB: No, never explained that, really. My mother was the fourth or fifth of six children. She had one younger brother, but I don't know whether they ever asked their parents why they came here, why they left Europe--probably because Europe was not a very pleasant place for them and, as all new immigrants had learned, the streets of New York City were paved with gold. I guess you must've heard that little fable. So, they came here looking for gold and freedom, above all.

SI: You were born in Brooklyn.

HB: I was born in Brooklyn, New York.

SI: Is that where they settled, both families?

HB: No, originally, they settled in Lower Eastside Manhattan, but, when my parents were married, they moved to Brooklyn and my early years are of growing up in a section of Brooklyn which we refer to as Brownsville. Brownsville was one of the poorer neighborhoods of Brooklyn. Years, oh, perhaps ten or fifteen years ago, I learned that the neighborhood that I was born [in] was actually called Crown Heights, which was a little bit better than Brownsville, but that didn't change my parents' finances one bit. They were still [poor]. We were in an area that was bordered by a street called Ralph Avenue. Ralph Avenue was a borderline, a geographic borderline, between Crown Heights and Brownsville. The street on which I was born, or lived after I was born, was Prospect Place and it was a nice street, considering that we lived in tenement houses. What differentiated a tenement house from an apartment house is that apartment houses, at least in my view, had elevators. We had no elevators in our place, but the other side of the street, Prospect Place, the other side of the street was undeveloped completely and I remember goats roaming the empty, vacant lots. Then, subsequently, may have been around my third or fourth grade, perhaps later, there were some one-family homes [that] were put up, with garages that actually were built so that the garages faced each other. I remember that distinctly, because, I remember, we used to climb the roof of the garage and jump from one garage to the next. [laughter] I don't know how we did it, but at least that's the memory that I have. I went to PS 144, Public School 144. Sometime in my early grades, a new school was built, PS 210. This was a brand-new school. It was about two blocks from us, but the school authorities decided that the kids on our side of the street would be going to another school. 144 was overcrowded and that meant walking about six or seven blocks and we had to cross a very busy thoroughfare, Atlantic Avenue. My mother decided that her son wasn't going to go to that school and cross over a busy street. So, she managed to get a lot of women together and they kept their kids at home, until, finally, the school boards yielded and we went to 210. Then, I went to Junior High School 178 and Franklin K. Lane High School and one of our eminent classmates was Red Holzman. I don't know if you know the name Red Holzman?

SI: No.

HB: No? Red Holzman was a basketball coach, very well-known in his day. Anyway, that's my history; went to Brooklyn College. My college career was interrupted by the war and that's what brings you here.

SI: To go back a little bit, did you ever find out how your parents met?

HB: No, never, had never reached the age when I would be speaking to my parents as a young adult to adults. Okay, I don't know if you've ever encountered--put yourself in that or visualize yourself in that situation. There's a time that you just simply accept everything on faith.

SI: The neighborhood that you grew up in, was it primarily immigrants or first-generation Americans? What was it like?

HB: Well, my mother, I guess my mother knew some Yiddish, but she spoke English. My father spoke English. They started kindergarten [here]. I don't even know what grades they left school. I can't even tell you that and, as I remember, there was a mixture. I think the street on which I lived was primarily Jewish. As I said, I was born on Prospect Place. The next street over was St. Marks Place and, between the houses, there were empty backyards, so-to-speak. St. Marks Place was primarily Italian. So, we were separated, which kept us at a nice distance from each other. There you have it.

SI: Did the groups not get along in the neighborhood?

HB: No, I wouldn't say not get along. It's just that your home territory--just out of curiosity, where were you born? Where did you live as a child?

RM: Me? I was born in the United States. I was raised in Jersey City early on.

HB: Jersey City. Did you have close neighborhoods?

RM: I could not tell you, because I moved shortly after.

HB: To where?

RM: A suburb, Colonia.

HB: Oh, a suburb. Well, your entire life was really--you lived your entire life within a few feet of the home in which you were born and that's where your friends were and kids on the next street, one over this way or one over this way, were just simply not part of your environment, period. It's not like living in individual family homes, where you have one family per home with a frontage of seventy feet or a hundred feet and your next neighbor may have two kids, so, the number of kids available to play with was really limited. We lived in a tenement house. There were three stories to the house. Every apartment was occupied. Every apartment was occupied by young people with children. So, within a stone's throw, you had twenty to fifty kids to play with your own age.

SI: How many families would live in one tenement house? Was it three or four?

HB: No, I would guess--there were three stories--I guess twelve.

SI: Wow.

HB: Four apartments to a floor.

SI: How did the Great Depression affect your neighborhood and your family?

HB: How did it affect it? hard, very, very hard, but I was unaware of that, as I'm sure you too were unaware of what your family's financial condition was like. This is what we had, this is what we knew about and that was it. I like to tell a grade school story that I remember reading, probably in the second grade, "During the spring, when the pod was green, the peas thought all the world was green. Later that summer, as the pod turned yellow, the peas thought all the world was yellow." There's a message there, if you see what I mean. So, we couldn't know that we were very poor, poor or moderately wealthy, because what we had was what our neighbors had. That was our entire world. In retrospect, yes, we were poor. The Depression really hit us hard. It's hard to convey to you what the Depression was like, but I can tell you that there was a song that was a popular song, *Buddy, Can You Spare a Dime?* and it's sung by war veterans, by vets of World War I, and, "Buddy, Can You Spare a Dime?" apples were sold on the streets for a nickel, probably not even a nickel. So, that's how bad the Depression was, yes.

SI: Growing up, did you see the bread lines and the soup kitchens that we see in books?

HB: I don't think I ever saw the breadlines, personally. I never saw the breadlines, but the Depression was severe. We undoubtedly had financial help. My father was killed when I was thirteen years old, so, it was rough. My mother was awarded the grand sum, to do her for the rest of her life, of five thousand dollars. So, there you have it. That's a measure of what the dollar was worth then.

SI: Do you recall how people reacted to the New Deal and Franklin Roosevelt coming in?

HB: Oh, yes. Franklin Roosevelt was the benefactor. I don't have to say any more. [laughter] Yes, he was welcomed, he was welcomed.

SI: Did you see the effects of any New Deal programs in your neighborhood, like WPA [Works Progress Administration] projects?

HB: Some of the older kids would have, yes, worked for the CCCs, Civilian Conservation Corps, or the WPA. [Editor's Note: The Works Progress Administration, or, after 1939, the Works Project Administration, was a New Deal agency that employed millions on public works projects like buildings and roads, as well as in specialized areas, such as the arts, from 1935 to 1943. The Civilian Conservation Corps was a New Deal agency that employed young unemployed males in outdoor conservation projects from 1933 to 1942.] Yes, I didn't know any personally, because, in 1932--let's see, Roosevelt was elected in '32, wasn't he?

SI: Yes.

HB: First election. So, you subtract nineteen from thirty-two and that leaves me, what? twelve years old, thirteen years old. So, bread lines, soup kitchens didn't mean anything to me, really. I

was unaware of those things. We didn't have a car. We didn't have a telephone. I don't know if you know the story of the poll that was conducted by *The Literary Digest*; never heard of that magazine? The magazine went belly up. The poll was conducted and the poll predicted that Dewey would be the winner. He lost because the poll was conducted by telephone. Now, who had telephones back in those days? the middle class and above. What else can I tell you about the Depression? [Editor's Note: In the 1936 Presidential race, *The Literary Digest* predicted that Republican nominee Alfred Landon of Kansas would overwhelmingly defeat incumbent President Franklin Roosevelt; in the actual election, Landon only carried Vermont and Maine. Later analysis found that the magazine's methodology of polling its own subscribers, registered automobile owners and telephone users skewed the results heavily to those with more disposable income.]

SI: When you were in junior high and high school, what were your interests and what were you doing on a daily basis? Were you mostly focused on school? Did you work or play sports?

HB: I didn't work, focused on school and played sports, yes, street ball, stoop ball, [laughter] I don't know if you know what those are, punch ball, street hockey.

SI: I do not know about punch ball.

HB: Well, punch ball, you throw a ball up in the air, a soft ball, rubber ball, throw the ball up in the air and you punch it with your fist and your fist does the service that a bat would do and you had to run bases. Street hockey, I played street hockey. This is a memento of my street hockey. Can you see my ...

SI: Your scar?

HB: No, no, look at the shape--I fell like so, broke my wrist in two places, broke both bones, the ulna and the radius. I was hospitalized, put in a cast and X-rayed and the physicians decided that, in time, I would lose motion to my wrist. So, they took me back to the surgery, re-broke my wrist, reset it, again, took me back to the X-ray, after resetting it, and they concluded that it was not going to function properly in some time. So, they did what they called an open reduction. They cut me open and set the bones. So, there you have it, yes. So, I played street hockey--that was the last time I played street hockey. [laughter]

SI: I find it interesting that you went to Brooklyn Polytech.

HB: No, not Brooklyn Polytech, Brooklyn College.

SI: I am sorry.

HB: I did go to take a course at Brooklyn Polytech, subsequently. That was after the war.

SI: Okay, but it was very unusual for people to go to college in that era, was it not?

HB: Well, it was almost automatically assumed that I would be going to college.

SI: Really?

HB: Yes. I never thought twice about it. I knew I was going to be going to college, I mean, studies, the tradition, the cultural background, "Schooling, schooling, schooling." So, there was no question about it. We never discussed it. It was just automatically assumed, that's where I'll be going. Brooklyn College was a free college, so, that's where I went.

SI: What did you study at Brooklyn College?

HB: I was a biology major.

SI: What got you interested in the sciences?

HB: I was always interested in the sciences. In fact, I visualized that, one day, I'd be a physician, never made it, though, but I was always interested in science, always.

SI: Do you have any questions about his early life?

RM: I am trying to think.

HB: I urge you, come up with a question; practice on me. [laughter]

RM: No, not really, to be honest.

SI: If you think of one, just jump right in.

HB: Just jump right in, sure. I'll do my best to answer.

SI: What was Brooklyn College like at that time? Did you live at home?

HB: Yes, oh, yes. Brooklyn College was a nickel fare, a nickel subway fare, for me. Subways were five cents, streetcars were five cents. You could ride the entire system for a nickel. I worked during the day. My first job paid thirty-five cents an hour, which was not bad money then.

SI: Where did you work?

HB: Oh, factory work, nothing; work as varied as you can possibly dream of. As an example, one job that I had, I worked for a company called (Ransom, Fraser and Huff?); don't ask me why I remember that name. They were intermediaries in the fur business. They sold the raw pelts and it was the job of fellows like myself to bring out particular pelts, bring them out and display them to the prospective buyers. These would be mink or beaver or what-have-you. Another company that I worked for made costume jewelry. It may have been sometime along around October of that year, whatever year that year was, I decided that we weren't being paid enough and that we should go out on strike and strike for higher wages. It was a good time to go out on

strike, because the costume jewelry would be sold during the pre-Christmas sales. This was a good time to get them. Unfortunately, some of the young boys succumbed to the pleas of the boss's son and the rationale that he gave for going back to work, and then, shortly thereafter, I was fired and several others who had instigated the strike were fired, but that's the type of job that was available. I had no serious training in anything, so, [I took] anything that came along.

RM: Was there an organized union, a way for you guys to organize and gather to strike?

HB: Subsequently, this same firm hired a young man who was a union member, a member of one of the labor unions, and he pulled them out on a strike, in a successful strike, but, no, I didn't belong to any labor union, not that I wouldn't have, but, just, labor unions then were pretty much selective, a father-to-son type situation. Since my father had been killed in '33, he was not a union member of any organization. My mother told an interesting story. My father had a small laundry and the equipment used to iron clothes--I have to reconstruct this--was hollow. At least according to my mother, the local police wanted to store liquor in his shop and, rather than get involved with that kind of nonsense, he closed it down. That's the story. I never questioned [her], wasn't old enough, really, to get into any conversation and that was it, as far as I know. For all I know, that's it. I'll leave it at that. [laughter]

SI: That was his profession, though.

HB: Well, no, my father had no profession that I'm aware of and, again, thirteen years old. No, I don't know whether he had any professional training that I can tell you about. He was not an MD, he was not an accountant, I don't know.

SI: What did he do for a living?

HB: Yes, but I don't know, worked for wherever you worked without any formal academic training.

SI: Did your mother work outside of the home?

HB: Well, after my father's death, yes. My mother had a store in which she sold women's lingerie and, also, sold knitting equipment and skeins of wool, whatever. Then, subsequently, she remarried, and then, they had a fruit and vegetable store in Far Rockaway, and then, the local candy store and that's what my recollection is.

SI: Did you have any siblings?

HB: I have two younger sisters. The older of the two is seven years younger than I and the younger one is nine years younger than I. There may have been a miscarriage in-between the older of the two younger ones and myself, but I'm not even sure about that.

SI: What did you think you would do with your life? What were your career aspirations?

HB: Well, it wasn't really that carefully planned. I had no one to guide me, so-to-speak, and, for me, it was a touch-and-go situation. It was living in the present. The future is going to take care of itself when I got to the future. So, three-and-a-half years, equivalent of three-and-a-half years, of college and along comes the war, and do you want me to go into that? because that's where we are at this point, really.

SI: I want to ask one or two questions before we do that.

HB: Do that.

SI: What did you know about what was happening overseas before Pearl Harbor, in Europe with the Nazis, and so forth? Did you follow the news?

HB: Oh, yes, of course, I followed the news. I mean, after all, being Jewish, I couldn't help being exposed to what was happening in Nazi Germany. I mean, I was old enough for that and, now, we're talking about 1939 and, at that point, I'm aware of Poland being invaded, I'm aware of Chamberlain, I'm aware of what was going on in Europe. [Editor's Note: Arthur Neville Chamberlain, infamous for his policy of appeasement towards Hitler during the 1938 Munich Conference, served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1937 to 1940.] Oh, yes, I was well aware of that. I don't think we were--I don't think anyone in the country, short of those who might have been at the top of the levels of government--would have dreamed that we would be in a European war and Japan was absolutely not in my vocabulary. I don't think it was in the average American's vocabulary. Japan was just simply a non-entity. Japan came into existence with Pearl Harbor. We were Europe-oriented, all of us. That's where our ancestors came from, immediate ancestors, our parents, grandparents, great grandparents. That's where they all originated from. So, Europe, of course, was our daily existence--Japan, Asia? no, not really. You associated cheap toys, cheap trinkets, made in Japan. There was a city in Japan, I'm not sure, I think the original name was Osa, O-S-A, and they changed it, if I remember correctly, they changed the name to Usa, U-S-A, and then, the items were, "Made in U-S-A." So, that was our knowledge of Japan, not really very much, and, as I say, Europe, yes, I was keenly, consciously aware of Europe.

SI: Do you remember if there was a debate within your neighborhood over whether we should get involved in overseas affairs or not, whether directly or indirectly?

HB: I don't know--now, what year are you talking about when you say [that]?

SI: After the war had started in Europe.

HB: Now, we're in 1939.

SI: Yes, when lend-lease was being debated. [Editor's Note: The Lend-Lease policy was enacted on March 11, 1941, allowing the US to supply countries fighting the Axis Powers, such as Great Britain and China.]

HB: Yes. Well, we certainly supported lend-lease and, certainly, we wanted the Allies to win and we were all aware of the German position. We still remembered "the Hun," which is what the Germans were called during World War I, and we were aware of the barbarism committed by Germany in Belgium, in Holland, during World War I, when those countries were overrun. So, our sympathies were certainly not with Germany, with the exception of certain heavily Germanic or German--I don't want to say Germanic--was heavily populated by German origin people, which would include areas like Yorkville, Manhattan, and there were areas in Brooklyn and Queens that were heavily German and their sympathies were obviously with Germany.

SI: Do you remember if there was any *Bund* activity in the area, the German-American *Bund*? [Editor's Note: The German-American *Bund*, a pro-Nazi group based on the earlier Friends of New Germany, operated from 1936 until December 1941, when it was outlawed.]

HB: I never saw any.

SI: Marches?

HB: Yes. Personally, I never saw any, but I was aware of the activity. You couldn't help but read it in the newspaper. Despite the fact that *The New York Times* then cost a whole nickel, whereas *The Daily News* was only two cents, you still occasionally looked at *The New York Times* or *The Daily News* and, oh, yes, you were aware of that type of activity, plus, Hollywood was obviously pro-Ally and anti-Germany, because all the movies that we saw portrayed the Germans as the vicious monsters, which they were. [laughter]

SI: Do you remember where you were when Pearl Harbor was attacked and how you reacted to that news?

HB: No, I don't remember where I was when Pearl Harbor was attacked, nor do I remember when John F. Kennedy was killed. I don't remember where I was then. My memory is not something to treasure; otherwise, I wouldn't have to ask Shaun a second time for his name. [laughter] No, I don't remember where I was, but, obviously, after Pearl Harbor, I was certainly anti-Japan and keenly aware of Japan at that point, certainly. So, Japan was now added to my anti-list of Germany--who else was there?--Turkey, I guess, and Bulgaria, you name it.

SI: At that point, you were in Brooklyn College. Were you towards the end of your studies?

HB: I attended Brooklyn College at night, going to night school, and, during the day, I worked and, if I don't remember all the jobs that I had--and I make it a point of referring to them as jobs, not positions, okay, if you would see the distinction--so, my daily life was fully accounted for. I worked during the day, I went to school at night. When I entered Brooklyn College in 1937, Brooklyn College was located in various-and-sundry office buildings in downtown Brooklyn, downtown Brooklyn being the commercial part of Brooklyn. So, there was a building on Joralemon Street, there was a building on Court Street and that's where I attended my first year. Eventually, Brooklyn opened up another campus on Avenue H in Brooklyn, Avenue H near Flatbush Avenue, the area that my wife grew up in--I didn't know my wife, Amy, until many years later and she was no longer living in Brooklyn when we met. That was a very nice

neighborhood. That was a neighborhood that I would have envied or was keenly aware of the difference between that neighborhood and where I lived. We would pass through that on the subway train, going to Coney Island, and I was aware of those neighborhoods, but, to get back, Brooklyn was built by bricks, red bricks. Our first school president, college president, [Harry D.] Gideonse, referred to Brooklyn College as, "That building built with red bricks," the emphasis being on the red, not necessarily referring to the actual color of the bricks as to the political color of the school. [laughter] Okay, what else can I say about Brooklyn College? It was a nice school. No one lived on campus, because there was no campus, so-to-speak.

SI: Up to Pearl Harbor, you were working in the day and going to school at night.

HB: Going to school at night.

SI: How did the war disrupt or change your life?

HB: Well, of course, I was now subject to the draft. I had a cousin, he was nine months older than myself--he's dead now--and he was my older brother. I had worshiped him. He was drafted early and he actually served his one year of draft pre-Pearl Harbor. [After] Pearl Harbor, he went back and he enlisted in the Air Force and he was a navigator. When it came to my turn to be drafted, I faced the prospects of being in the Army and I said, "No way, no Army for me." So, I went to apply for the Air Force and I took the mental exam, passed that, and then, I took the physical and I had a problem with my eye, referred to as, or known by the medical name, exotropia. If I focused on an object, one eye would turn out. Then, I had poor depth perception. I had to line up objects at a distance of twenty feet and get them in a line and I couldn't do that. So, I failed the physical exam for the Air Force. So, next was the Navy and I'm filling out the form and at the bottom of the form to fill out is a statement, "Have you been rejected by another branch of the service?" Then, if you lie in filling out the papers, you were subject to a court-martial. So, I figured, "Well, that's the end of my naval career," and I waited to be called, drafted, into the service. So, I was drafted. I was drafted, went up to Camp Upton. I don't remember how I got to Camp Upton, but that's where I was, and then, from Upton, we took a troop train to Fort Jackson, Columbia, South Carolina. I remember, on the train, we were sitting up, playing poker, and a GI came around asking for volunteers to serve KP [kitchen patrol] at breakfast. So, I was one of the volunteers, I think one or two others playing cards, and it may have been about five or six in the morning and I found myself in the baggage car. There's the open door and I'm breaking eggs to make omelets or whatever--no, not omelets, whatever--breaking eggs at five or six o'clock in the morning. It was a long, slow ride, I can tell you. I think it was at least twenty-four hours. We pulled over at every siding available to let the milk trains go by, really were that slow. You're from New Jersey and you're from New Jersey?

SI: Yes.

HB: Do you know Secaucus?

SI: Yes.

HB: You don't know Secaucus if you haven't smelled Secaucus fifty years ago [laughter] and we rode through Secaucus on a warm day. Yes, we knew we were in Secaucus and we knew when we left Secaucus. [Editor's Note: Prior to the 1950s, Secaucus was known for its thriving pig farms and meat processing facilities, which created the odor Mr. Berenson refers to here.] We finally pulled into Columbia, South Carolina, and, for a Northern boy, this was a revelation. We get out into the main railroad station in Columbia, South Carolina, and there, on the station platform, we see the water fountains, whites only, blacks. This is a revelation. It may not mean anything to you, but I can tell you, I still get chills when I think about it, because it was an entirely different culture then, very much different, yes. So, that was my introduction to the South.

SI: Was Camp Upton just an induction center?

HB: It was just an induction center, yes. I don't remember how long I stayed there. I just don't remember.

SI: There were no tests or any of those things.

HB: No. I did take tests. I scored 131 on my IQ test. I don't remember where I took the test. I know this--I took the physical for the Army in Manhattan, at an armory, I think it was the Seventh Armory. There were long lines between ropes and you just followed the guy in front of you and there were all these guys behind you, and then, there was another lane of people coming back from tests that they had already gone through. I passed a man--there's my uncle, in his undershorts. [laughter] That was my mother's younger brother. He was the youngest in the family and, of course, he was not inducted. That may have been a week before, I guess, I actually went into the service. What happened at Camp Upton, I can't even visualize. It's interesting. You remember how selective your memory can be, because there are details that I remember about my life at that point and they're as vivid today as they would've been the day after the event, and then, so much of it is just simply gone.

SI: What are those vivid memories, like being on KP on the troop train?

HB: Oh, yes. I gave a talk at a local group in Princeton called the Evergreen. One of our friends called another one of our friends, asking whether she knew or they knew someone who was a vet and my name came up and I offered to talk. That's what these are.

SI: You have pages of notes.

HB: Yes, all those pages of notes, and I served--do you want me to go into that now?

SI: Sure.

HB: Well, let me do that now. When I arrived at Columbia, South Carolina, Fort Jackson, I was assigned to D Company of the 325th Medical Battalion of the 100th Division. Now, to give you a little background about medical battalions, etc., there were four companies to a battalion. A, B and C Company were so-called collecting companies. These were actually litter bearers who

served as litter bearers for the entire 100th Division. D Company was a clearing company. Those who were wounded were eventually sent to the clearing company, to D Company--that is, in battle, this would've occurred--and then, we treated them and either they were returned to the frontlines again, for additional combat, or they were sent back from the clearing company to the evacuation hospital, and then, from the evac hospital, either back to hospitals in England or the States, if they were really going to be unfit for further active duty, and then, back to the frontlines if they were rehabilitated at the evacuation hospitals. Well, shortly thereafter--I don't remember that, this is all vague in my memory--but, one time during basic training, someone called out, a non-com, called my name out and I responded. He asked me to report to headquarters. So, I go to headquarters and I'm informed by the company commander that I'm being transferred to XII Corps, a medical detachment. Well, it meant nothing to me. He says, "You'll like it," or something to that effect, but I'm sure he encouraged me to welcome that transfer. So, I arrived at the XII Corps Headquarters. Now, do you know how an army is constructed, what make-up?

SI: Roughly.

HB: Roughly. Would you like me to detail this?

SI: Yes, please, for the tape.

HB: For the tape? Well, all right, the smallest unit that you can imagine would be a squad and a squad would be led by a low non-com, but the official smallest would be a platoon. There would be two platoons to a company. There would be four companies to a battalion. There'd be X number of battalions to a regiment, and then, two to three or four regiments to a division, and then, there would be, perhaps, two, three or four divisions to a corps, and then, going beyond that, two to four corps for an army, and then, two or three armies would comprise an army group and I was a medical detachment. I was now assigned to a medical detachment for XII Corps Headquarters, which, as it turned out, was rather fortunate on my part, for me. It was an interesting place to be. It was a good place to be, frankly. Then, I think before I was transferred to XII Corps Headquarters, I was sent to O'Reilly General Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, for eight weeks' training as a surgical technician, and then, I think I was transferred to XII Corps, although that's open to discussion. Of course, I may have been sent there while at XII Corps Medical Detachment, I don't remember. That's vague. [Editor's Note: From February 1941 to September 1946, O'Reilly General Army Hospital operated in Springfield, Missouri. It later reopened as a Veterans Administration hospital.]

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE-----

HB: I'm not a native New Jersian, as you can tell, being born in Brooklyn, but I've spent far more years now in New Jersey than I did in Brooklyn, so, I guess my allegiance is now New Jersey.

SI: Okay, we are happy to have you. [laughter]

HB: Glad to be here, glad to be here, okay.

SI: We were talking about ...

HB: We gave the composition of the army. There were, I believe, seven of us, seven enlisted men. The senior enlisted man was a staff sergeant by the name of John (Leyhe?). Then, we had a tech third by the name of (Finkelstein?). Then, we had a John (Marino?), who was a Trenton boy. This is a little bit of an aside. John (Marino?) was from Trenton and he probably served at the--we have an armory not too far from here, within easy walking distance, field artillery, I guess it was field artillery. John joined the National Guard and he was subsequently sent, after the war, out to Oklahoma. It may have been cavalry. Then, he came in as part of a cadre group to form the 100th Division, and then, he was subsequently sent to XII Corps Headquarters. After the war, lo and behold, I find myself living in Trenton. So, I get on the phone and look up the telephone directory and I find a John Marino and I called John Marino. I identify myself and I asked, "Are you the John Marino?" "Oh," he says, "no, that's my son. He lives in Oklahoma." [laughter] He had married a girl from Oklahoma and that's where he was; never occurred to me, at that time, to look up John Marino in Oklahoma. So, I've never contacted anyone from the old outfit, and then, for this little talk that I gave, I went online and I found a book entitled *XII Corps: The Spearhead of Patton's Third Army*. I went to our local library and got the book out, on a loan from Rutgers, and, when I got the book, the book was really beat up. It had been abused, it had been water soaked, the binding was coming apart. It had a wrapper around it that said, "Fragile, handle with care." The pages were brittle, but it was exciting. There's my name in there as a member of the XII Corps Medical Detachment and I look at faces in that book and it's almost as if I had looked at that fellow's face yesterday and the names came back to me. It was just unbelievable, an unbelievable experience. I hope you guys live long enough to look back, be able to look back at your youth, your younger days, and relive some of those memories, an interesting experience. Anyhow, the book was written by a fellow, a man by the name of George Dyer, D-Y-E-R, and his address, at that time, was New Hope, Pennsylvania. Okay, so, there you have it.

SI: I have a quick question. When you were in the 100th Division, you were in a clearing company. Did you have similar duties at XII Corps? What were your duties at XII Corps?

HB: Well, at XII Corps--well, you see, XII Corps comprised XII Corps Headquarters and XII Corps Headquarters Company. The Headquarters comprised members of every branch of service. So, you would have engineers, you had the engineers section, the medical section, the artillery section. Every section was headed by a colonel, full colonel, and every colonel had a lieutenant colonel and there were majors and captains and first lieutenants and second lieutenants, all these officers, and, as I say, for every branch of the service. There was G-1, G-2, G-3, G-4, G-2 being intelligence, G-5 being military government, plus, as I say, the engineers, the Signal Corps--the names don't come to mind--but every branch of service was represented. So, there would have been several hundred members of Headquarters. Then, Headquarters Company also had several hundred and, there, you would've had the kitchen, the laundry, the motor pool. So, you now have a group of about four hundred people, I would imagine. That comprises XII Corps Headquarters and Headquarters Company and we were the medical detachment to serve them. So, we were the aid station and we were [there] whenever you went on sick call, whether that was stateside or whether it was overseas. Where do I go from here? What else can I [say]?

SI: What did you do specifically?

HB: We answered sick call, when we were not in combat. When we were in combat, if we were close enough to the actual fighting, then, we served as the aid station. We served as the aid station, or the equivalent of a clearing company and collecting company. Our first casualty--why don't I delay, hold off on that, until I get there chronologically, okay?

SI: Sure. Please, continue.

HB: You may find this interesting and entertaining, I don't know. How many war stories have you heard? Lots of them, I'm sure. Oh, may I go back to basic training?

SI: Sure.

HB: I've gone by that. I read that I get back to camp, Fort Jackson, one night. I got back too late to go through the guard. I didn't want to be reported, so, I climbed the fence and I'm caught climbing a fence. So, I'm brought in to the duty officer and I'm wearing my khakis, dress uniform. The first thing he observes is, I've got white socks on and he wants to know why, the officer wants to know why, I'm out of uniform and my response was, "No excuse, sir." You didn't give excuses in the Army. "No excuse, sir," was more acceptable than a poor excuse and, the next day, I report to the company commander and he wants to know whether I want--I think it was two weeks' KP--or a court-martial. I think and think and think and he calls attention to the fact that climbing a fence is illegal entry into government property and that's a general court-martial. I quickly said KP. [laughter] So, I took two weeks' KP. Well, let's see, again, part of my training as a medic involved learning how to use a rifle. Believe it or not, we learned to use a rifle. We could break down the rifle, load it. We had to know how to clean a rifle and we had shooting practice and I scored 138, which made me a marksman. I was glad I didn't make the sharpshooter, because, if I had been sharpshooter, they might've sent me into the infantry. Anyhow, I wasn't. [Editor's Note: Mr. Berenson refers to his notes.] Actually, the first medical officer in XII Corps was a Captain Joe (Sabino?), replaced by Captain Robert Stokes, and Stokes was the officer with whom we went overseas, etc. Our dental officer was Captain Hoffmann, the senior non-com was John (Lehigh?), John F. (Lehigh?), then, T-3 (Finkelstein?), Corporal John Marino of Trenton and Paul (Goodman?), Fred (Schmidt?), (Leonard Funderlevitz?) and Jack Gray and myself. (Funderlevitz?) was a very naïve kid from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. We used to tease him, called Wilkes-Barre "Milk Barrel." One night, we're playing poker. This was while we were on maneuvers, Tennessee Maneuvers. We're playing poker and we're trying to find out who's winning and who's losing. Nobody claims to be a winner. We're all supposedly losing and one of the guys said, "Must be somebody lurking in the bushes." So, (Funderlevitz?) goes out of the tent, looks in the bushes to see who was lurking out in the bushes. [laughter] Okay, it didn't go over very well, but that's one of the irrelevant, little things that you can remember. Oh, about the time that we were doing our training with the 100th Division, the 106th Division came in shortly, well, sometime, after we had started our training. The 106th Division is worth remembering because, at the Battle of Bastogne, the 106th Division was the unit that took the brunt of that breakthrough and they lost--there was one regiment that was virtually wiped out--and I think the 106th Division suffered about a two-thirds casualty.

Casualty means not necessarily killed-in-action; casualty is wounded-in-action, missing-in-action, killed-in-action. They took a real blow. [Editor's Note: The Battle of the Bulge, also known as the Von Rundstedt Offensive or Ardennes Offensive, was the failed German attempt to break through the Allied lines in the Ardennes Forest in Luxembourg and Belgium launched on December 16, 1944, and which lasted into late January 1945.] Oh, this is an interesting little event, too. Now, we're on Tennessee Maneuvers and Sergeant (Lehigh?), John Lehigh, manages to wrangle a few steaks from the officers' mess and this is at night. We were having our steaks cooked over a fire, just outside the aid tent, and a colonel walks in for treatment. We take care of the colonel, and then, he casually asks, "How did we come by the steaks?" Sergeant (Lehigh?) promptly replies, "Sir, some of the men have their wives with them and the wives used their meat ration to buy steaks for the boys here." [laughter] It took a little bit--you had to be prepared for an occasion like that, if you were a senior member of the group, and Lehigh was well prepared for that response. I would've flubbed, "Uh, ah." [laughter] Well, okay, we left New York City to board ship in Manhattan. As I said, it was a nice ship. It was the *Queen Mary* and they're capable of carrying ten thousand troops and our unit was in D deck, which was, I think, just above the waterline. Enlisted men were assigned to a specific area, which they could not leave, but, because I had the medical armband, all those in our unit, we were free to go to any deck. Every day, at some time during the day, early in the day, the captain would go to the ship's safe and remove an envelope dated for that day and, in that envelope, he had his course for that day. Do you know the expression that was [used] back then, in old barrooms, in all hotels, cafes, and all that, "Loose lips sink ships?" So, no, the captain himself did not know what his course would be until he opened that envelope. The *Mary* had cannon, I think they were four-inch guns, and, every day, they had gun practice and, during gunnery practice, of course, no one was allowed on deck, except those involved in the gunnery. The crossing was seven days, which was pretty good. In the seven days, I was on deck every day and never, never saw another object, except for the first morning out. We may have taken a course that took us somewhat southerly. Then, subsequently, after that, we went in a northerly-eastern course, but the first day, we saw a flying boat. This was a military plane and, thereafter, we never saw another, not another ship, nothing, just empty, empty seas. We landed at Greenock, Scotland, and, from Greenock, Scotland, we took a troop train to a little town called Stourport and that's where we set up camp. I remember Stourport, a nearby town was Kidderminster. Then, one day, we are informed that we were going to have a visit by a high-ranking officer. So, we're out, assembled and out. In the middle of the area where we were assembling was a platform and on the platform was our commanding general and his staff, which would be colonels. I remember--whatever the names of the officers were, unimportant--and the guest whose arrival we were awaiting was George Patton and Patton was there to inform us that we were going to be part of Third Army. We were sworn to secrecy, not to mention anything about Patton, Third Army, etc. Now, I ask you this as an aside, have either of you seen the [1970] movie *Patton*, ever seen the movie?

SI: I have.

HB: You have? Do you remember the opening scene?

SI: Yes, with the flag.

HB: With the flag and George Patton standing there and he made a talk about men fighting under fire. Well, that was--I had a verbatim copy of that speech. That was one of my prized possessions, which was stolen from me while I was still overseas, but, in the opening scene, and this is the Hollywood version, so, the Hollywood version had to use language that was appropriate for a general audience, but, in Patton's speech, he swore us to secrecy and he informed us that he wanted his men to fight like a team. "Those guys who write for the *Saturday Evening Post*, who write about war, they don't know any more about fighting under fire than they do about fucking." In the movie, it was fornication, but Patton wouldn't use that word.

SI: Yes, he was very salty.

HB: He was a big, barrel-chested [guy]. He was big. Later on in his speech, he said, "You might wonder why, here in England, where there are no enemy, you walk guard. That's to prepare you for walking guard when you're in Europe, and so that you'll be aware of it and would be aware so that a Heinie couldn't come up behind you and hit you over the head with a sock full of shit." Then, later, towards the end of his speech, he urged us to get the war over in Europe, "So, we can get over to Japan and beat the hell out of those purple-pissing Japs." That was Patton. So, he was informing us that XII Corps was going to be part of Third Army. I don't remember what the other corps were, but corps could be switched around to comprise the army and divisions could be switched around to comprise a corps. That was depending upon what the strategy was and what the tactical situation was. Yes, let me go back chronologically; you can restructure this chronologically.

SI: Most interviews are not chronological.

HB: Let me go back to my trip aboard the *Queen Mary*.

SI: Sure.

HB: At some time after arriving in France, or arriving in England, and then, arriving in France, I had the occasion to get a copy of the overseas *Tribune*, *Tribune International*, whatever it was called, and there was a news account of the trip aboard the *Queen Mary*. It pointed out that the enlisted men had the grand ballroom while the officers had the small clubroom, which was literally true, absolutely true, but what that reportage didn't cover was the fact that, in the grand ballroom, we sat at tables, wooden tables, that seated about twenty, ten or more, maybe twenty or twenty-four, ten or more to a side, on wooden benches and your bench was backed up by another bench with guys sitting butt to butt with you. If you were in the middle, you couldn't get out until the guys at the end left. Not only that, since we had two meals a day and, being a British ship, the Brits were not noted for their cuisine, so, what did we have for breakfast? kidney stew. [laughter] We had a cup of hot soup for lunch, and then, at night, Lord knows what we had. The food was served in huge bowls and placed in the middle of the table, so that if you were seated at either end, you were not sure that you were going to get an adequate portion. Not only that, not only does the ship's prow go up and down, but it also yaws from side to side and there's spillage. No problem--you had a little gutter that ran along the length of the table on both sides. So, the guy that was sitting at the end of the table, on both ends, they got the spillage on their uniforms.

[laughter] The officers did sit and dine, *dine*, in the little clubrooms. They had round tables with white tablecloth, four to a table, and they were served by people in the serving uniform.

SI: The waiters.

HB: Yes. Anyhow, I didn't want to miss that. That was really worth reporting. I don't know whether you've ever gotten the detail like that.

SI: Different versions of it, but a lot of people note that there was a real distinction between officers and enlisted men.

HB: Oh, yes. Well, back then, you didn't really question the difference. You knew that strict obedience was the word. You had to be a damned fool or an idiot or I can't think of the word, the word to describe someone who was really a foul ball from the word go, to be disobedient. The Army was structured on obedience. You followed orders almost without question. Even the fellows in the recent war, those who committed military crimes in the Abu Ghraib, they thought that they were doing the right thing, they really did. [Editor's Note: Mr. Berenson is referring to the Abu Ghraib scandal in which the United States Army and the CIA tortured and abused detainees of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The personnel involved were charged with human rights violations.] Let's face it, in World War II, as in World War I, when you're on the march in combat and you took a small platoon, the sergeant might say, "Take the men [POWs] back to the back lines, but get back here in a hurry." You know what that meant--that meant, "Get rid of them in a hurry and come back here." So, we all did it. "To the victor belong the spoils," that's war.

SI: Did you want to take a break?

HB: Yes.

[TAPE PAUSED]

HB: During our training in England, the Second French Armored Division was doing their training in Northern England, up around the City of Hull, and, for their training, they were assigned to XII Corps. So, at the conclusion of their training period, XII Corps now sent various officers representing the different branches of the service to see whether they had satisfied their training requirements and I was the driver, jeep driver, for the medical officer, who was a Captain (Hawser?), I think, later Major (Hawser?). I ate with the enlisted men, of course. Now, I'm sure that the French Army got their food supplies from the same source that the US Army did, but French Army, the enlisted men had a ration of wine every day. How about that? Not only that, their eggs, for breakfast, their eggs tasted like real eggs. We used to get powdered eggs and it was lousy--don't know how to explain that--but I enjoyed the few days that we were up there, practiced what little French I had. Our first casualty, when we finally crossed the Channel, was in the town called Sainte-Mère-Église. The man, the soldier, GI, that was brought in, evidently--this is only reconstructing, I mean, to see how he could have suffered that wound--but it may have been a shell fragment and it sliced through his right buttock, and then, he may have been taking a step forward with his left foot, because it sliced through his right buttock, I

don't remember, can't remember whether it had taken any of his genitals off or not, but, then, went through his left leg and severed the bone of his left leg. That was our first experience of a casualty and we had two medical officers at the time. We had our Captain Stokes, who was the assigned officer, medical officer, and we had a Captain [Burton] Olson, who was attached, and I have to say, I can visualize this, for the first few moments, they just were at a loss of what to do. Then, the first thing they did, really, was to take some bottles of sterile water and debride, clean out all of it, then, whatever they could do. Then, he was bandaged and bundled off and sent back to an evacuation hospital. That was our first casualty.

SI: Was that during a shelling?

HB: Yes, oh, yes. As I said, we were [the] spearhead of Third Army, which, at this point, I want to make clear, so, I don't leave an erroneous impression, we were not, at that time, and not generally, not usually, in fact, infrequently, within close arms range of the enemy. I mean, after all, a division headquarters is somewhat removed from frontline fighting and we were corps headquarters, which is somewhat removed from division headquarters, but we did experience contact by the enemy.

SI: I do not mean to interrupt.

HB: Do that.

SI: Do you remember how soon after the invasion this was that you came over?

HB: Oh, yes. We landed in France D-40, D-plus-40, and, according to the discharge papers, we went through the Ardennes, Central Europe, Normandy, Northern France and Rhineland. So, we were entitled to the European-African-Middle Eastern Service Medal and a Good Conduct Medal. I can provide you with a little more accurate details, I don't recall it right now, but, one night, we were called, we were in the Saar area, I believe it was, and I recall the names of such towns as Sarreguemines, Saarlautern, Kaiserslautern. We were informed that there was a report of civilians injured in a minefield. We have to go to rescue them. I was the driver, I think, ambulance driver. So, it was Captain Stokes, Sergeant (Lehigh?) and myself and we drive out and we walked to where the civilians were and there were two. It was a father and a son. By the time we reached them, the son was already dead and the father--it may have been the reverse, I don't remember that--the father had a leg or both legs blown off. Well, then, for that, we were awarded the Bronze Star Medal for heroism. It kind of makes me feel a little bit guilty, because, if I were with a collecting company, in the 325th Medical Battalion, that would've been my job, routinely, every day, while we were at the front, to go out and pick up the wounded and bring them back, but that was the case, in any event. Then, along around December, end of December, December 22nd, I think it was, we are now moving north because of the Bastogne breakthrough, the Battle of the Bulge, and we arrive in Luxemburg at about December 22nd, I think. There's snow on the ground. It was cold and I don't remember where we set up originally, but, then, eventually, we moved into the City of Luxemburg proper. The Corps sets up headquarters in what had been a girls' school and we were in a room that was actually an infirmary at the girls' school. On one occasion, we had a visit by some GI; I don't remember whether it was a GI or an officer. For whatever the reason was, he came in for medical treatment or whatever and he had a

gun that he wanted to sell. To show that the gun was not loaded, he squeezed the trigger and discharges a shell, which ricocheted around the room. [laughter] It was interesting.

SI: Did he hit anybody?

HB: No, fortunately. Oh, yes, there's another occasion. I had the opportunity--I thought this was a little interesting, not highly significant, but of great interest and amusement--I had the occasion to go through some papers which were marked secret, medical papers. There's a report, an official report, of what was known as the Dieppe Raid. [Editor's Note: In August 1942, Allied forces raided the German-occupied port of Dieppe, France. The purpose of the raid was to show Allied commitment to opening the Western Front, gather intelligence and improve morale. The raid convinced the Allies that they were not ready yet for an invasion of France.] You're familiar with the Dieppe Raid?

SI: I have heard of it.

HB: You've heard of it, yes. You didn't hear this, I assure you. [laughter] The Dieppe Raid was conducted by British commandoes in the town of Dieppe, which was in the northernmost part of France, where Belgium would be, near the French-Belgian border. It was a twenty-four-hour raid and this is a medical report of a British commando who contracted gonorrhea in that twenty-four-hour raid. [laughter]

SI: Wow.

HB: I take my hat off to that guy.

Amelia Berenson: Get on with the war. [laughter]

HB: Ah, but that's the war, that is the war, all these little stories. People get killed, of course we know that. It's these little tidbits that make a war unique for everyone who's recording his experiences in the war.

AB: When did Patton walk across the bridge? When was that, in Luxemburg?

HB: Yes, it was in Luxemburg. I was coming to that now. One day, Paul (Goodman?) and myself--at that time, Paul Goodman was a tech fifth two, that's tech with two stripes with a "T," and I was tech five--we decided we're going to take off and see what Luxemburg City looks like and there was a huge stone bridge that crossed a small stream. It was a wide bridge and it was a very, very wide street, a true boulevard, *boulevard* in French, and we walked some distance, and then, decided we're heading back. As we're heading back towards the bridge, we look on the other side of the street and who's walking on the other side of the street but Patton and an aide-de-camp, a major? They're walking at a brisk pace. We're walking slowly. So, we walk even more slowly, to make sure that he gets ahead of us and he's now ahead of us and they decide, or Patton decides, that he's going to cross over to our side of the bridge. We're approaching the last intersection before we crossed the bridge and there's a Third Army MP [military police] controlling traffic and an MP on the sidewalk looking into the street, obviously waiting to relieve

him, and Patton passes him. Patton takes about a dozen paces, passes him, and doesn't get a salute, doesn't get an acknowledgment. Patton wheels around, charges up to the GI and said, "Wake up, soldier. How long have you been dead?" [laughter] When you see a three-star general like that, you really got his attention. So, that's another interesting account of Patton, a personal account which makes each soldier's recollection unique, really does. So, anyhow, that's it. Oh, yes, one more little account of Luxemburg City--not too far from this girls' school, but on the other side of a street that the school bordered on, at an intersection, there was a café. Parked outside of the café was--this little incident shows the irony, the really bitter, tragic irony of war. Every killing, every serious wound, is bitter. There's a vehicle parked outside the café and there's a GI waiting outside, the driver. The officer is in the café and a shell, a German [shell], fired into the town and lands at the building, causes damage to the building, and the GI is struck by a piece of shrapnel. So, there, he recoiled out and there he is, lying in the snow, and the snow is now red with the blood. So, I'm out there trying to do what I can to heal [him]--his hair is matted, his helmet is off. Actually, a Signal Corps man, a GI from the Signal Corps with a camera, is taking a picture. I wasn't aware of it at the time. Subsequently, the picture was sent to me. I don't know whether this GI died or not, but, if he did die, what his survivors, his wife or parents got, was, "We regret to inform you that your son was killed as a result of enemy action," which is a lousy thing, considering that he's waiting outside while the officer is inside having a drink or whatever the hell. Now, that's bitter; anyway, let's move on. The town where we went out to the French citizens who were killed by the blast, mine blast, was in Avranches. Let me jump ahead to the end of the war, towards the end of the war. This is in April of '45 and we are told that--we're in a town now called Grafenau, which is near the Czech-German border--we're told that they have uncovered, I don't know who did the uncovering, but a burial place was uncovered. So, we--I guess Captain Stokes was there, Paul Goodman was there and I was there and it was a warm April day, a warm day like this--we drive out into a wooded area. There's a railroad track, railroad siding there, and there were boxcars there and we knew we were near the burial place, because you could smell it. I mean, it stunk of death. I guess we had to walk a hundred to two hundred yards, easily, and we get there and there are the bodies laying out in a row. Can I take a break?

SI: Sure.

[TAPE PAUSED]

HB: Well, this really should have been, I think, part of the tape.

SI: We can just recount it right now. We were looking at some reproductions of photos taken by Mr. Berenson of exhumed bodies, people murdered by the Nazis in--what was the town?

HB: The town was Tittling and there were four small towns in that immediate area and all males were required to participate in constructing wooden coffins to give the dead a proper burial. As I say, that's about the extent of my individual, my personal, memories of the war. I do remember, one day, large staff cars were driving by in Grafenau and there were a couple of German generals who had been captured. There was a Hungarian field marshal. I did have the opportunity--we were set up, the XII Corps, set up in the City of Regensburg and Regensburg bordered on the Danube and on the Danube was a big, large building referred to as Walhalla, that housed the

German busts of the German greats, and we went through that. I don't remember when this was. It could've been in April or whatever and it was a fascinating place. There were lots of empty pedestals without busts and I asked what the reason [was], why the busts were not present. I was told, earnestly, I guess, seriously, that those were very, very valuable busts.

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO-----

SI: This continues an interview with Herman Berenson on October 31, 2005, in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth and ...

RM: ... Rudy Medini.

SI: Could you just repeat that last part?

HB: We were in Regensburg and I had the opportunity to go through Walhalla. It was a rather large Roman type or Greco type building, built in stone, marble, and inside were lots of pedestals that bore busts of the German greats. Some of the pedestals had no busts on them and I asked the guide why those pedestals were empty. I asked the question knowing, at least secure in the knowledge that I knew, why they were empty and I was told that they were valuable busts which had been kept in an underground vault. I kind of thought, "Well, you're really telling a lie." They were probably busts of famous German Jews who were not allowed to be displayed as prominent. In any event, Regensburg and Walhalla were interesting, but, now, we're towards the end of the war and I will skip on towards the very, very end. One day, I'm called to company commander's office, XII Corps Headquarters Medical Detachment, and I'm informed that since I didn't have enough points--are you familiar with the point system?

SI: Yes, go ahead, though.

HB: Well, I didn't have enough points to go home and I was going to be transferred, but, since I had not completed my college training career for a degree, I had the opportunity to go to one of two places, either to the Sorbonne in Paris or to what was then known as Biarritz American University. Do you know Biarritz?

SI: Yes, I am familiar with it.

HB: You are familiar with it. Are you familiar with Biarritz?

RM: No, not at all.

HB: You'll have to tell him about Biarritz.

SI: Tell us your story.

HB: Well, Biarritz is a beautiful, plush--oh, the officer to whom I was speaking said, "Don't go to the Sorbonne, go to Biarritz." So, I took his advice and went to Biarritz. Biarritz is a plush resort town on the Bay of Biscayne in the southern part of France, not too far, about twenty miles

or so, from the Spanish border. I had two months of schooling there. I took a course in abnormal psych, I took a course in physics and a course in French, for which I got college credits, but it was really a bang-up two months. I stayed at the Hotel Miramar. The classes were conducted in what was known as the Hôtel du Palais and we had courses five days a week. I have photographs of myself studying very hard, in bathing trunks on the beach. [laughter] This is quite a wind up, quite a finish for the war, really. I was there two months. We dined, we really dined, in a lovely dining room. We were escorted to our tables by a maître d'. Our tables were covered with white tablecloth. We dined accompanied by a three-piece ensemble playing the music. It was lovely. It really was terrific, and then, at the end of three months--oh, at that time, I had been transferred to a tank destroyer outfit. I had not served during the war, really, with the tank destroyers and it was simply a matter of convenience. You had to be assigned someplace and, at the end of the two months, I was now allowed to go back home. The war was over in Europe and in Japan. I arrived at--I can't remember the name of the ship--and we're boarding ship at night. It's dark and I am the last man in this particular group. Someone, there's one individual, one GI, at the gangplank, reading off names and, individually, people are responding and going up the gangplank; gets to the last man before me and stops, and then, he asks me, "Well, who are you?" I give him my name and, fortunately, I had with me orders, official orders, assigning me to that port of debarkation. The officer there says, "Berenson, you go on up the ship. I'll take care of it from this point." So, from this point, I let him take of it. I go up aboard the ship and my heart was in my mouth until the ship actually set sail, really. I don't remember the name of the ship. I got the name of the ship from this book that I had taken out of the library on loan. It was an interesting trip. Every day at noon, we would hear a music broadcast--this was a favorite piece and I can't remember the title, a popular tune, journey home or whatever--and the captain, whoever it was, would announce how many miles we had covered and how many miles remained. Of course, the day before, the last day, it was quite an experience. We pull into New York Harbor and we dock, not in New York, we docked upstream in the Hudson. We'd gone home on a Liberty ship and we're greeted by a USO boat and the women, women mostly, I guess, come aboard ship and they greet us. What they brought us was something that I hadn't had in almost two years, fresh milk, drank two quarts of milk. [laughter] Then, I'm home and that's it. That's the end of the story. Lots of things, I obviously have forgotten, but these are some of the highlights that I remember. There may have been more important [things], there may have been bloodier events. There were--I remember being shelled. We were set up in, I don't remember where, it was called a kaserne, K-A-S-E-R-N-E, which would be an equivalent of an armory in Germany. We were being shelled and one huge shell landed in--the kaserne was set up as a quadrangle--and this one huge shell, probably a railroad gun, landed in the middle of the kaserne and it blew a huge hole in the ground, but that's it. Here I am, alive, some sixty years later, I guess it is now, isn't it? and recounting this for whatever little bit of history. So, that's it.

SI: We would like to go back and ask some questions, if you do not mind.

HB: Yes, oh, fine, fine, as long as the coffee holds out.

SI: I know Rudy has a question about the crossing.

RM: On the *Queen Mary*, you said that you had more liberty to move about the ship, more than anyone else. Was that also the case once you were in Europe, that you had a little more liberty, being part of the medical unit?

HB: No. When we were in England, before we went across the Channel, I decided I wanted to see London. I mean, with our economic background prior to the war, the likelihood that I would get to see London was remote, unless Uncle Sam paid for the trip. So, I took off, period. I went without a pass. If I had been caught, I would've been strapped. I went to London and--oh, God, I don't even remember the name of the famous railroad station--but pulled into the station and there's the sounding of the buzz bomb attack. Are you familiar with the term buzz bomb?

RM: No, I am not.

HB: No? Buzz bomb was a guided missile, trans-Channel guided missile, and you could hear it, and then, it would stop. It stopped and, of course, at that point, it's coming down. You don't know where the hell it's coming down. It's coming down and you'll know where it's coming down because you survived it. [Editor's Note: The German Fieseler Fi 103 V-1 guided missiles acquired the nickname "buzz bombs" for their distinctive engine noise.] So, that was my experience in Piccadilly Station. I remember walking around on the streets of London. It was ten o'clock at night and it was still twilight. We were on double British summer time. Well, we are, what, the fortieth some-odd latitude, forty something latitude? and London is further north. So, double British summer time, it was quite late and it was still just barely daylight now, just barely. It was interesting. I don't remember what I saw in London. I do remember the buzz bombs and, the next day, went back and, shortly thereafter, we crossed the Channel. I went to Paris on a three-day pass. This was a legitimate three-day pass and it was an interesting experience. I don't remember where I stayed, but, in London, I stayed at what was known as the Hans Crescent Club or the Hans Crescent Hotel or whatever, Hans Crescent USO club or whatever. I don't remember where I stayed in Paris. I do know that I had a camera slung over my shoulder. We ate at a restaurant that was opposite the Gare de l'Est, the east station, and you waited on line outside the restaurant until you could get in. As a GI, whatever you did, you had to wait. Whatever you did, you were on line, for whatever. [laughter] I do remember--and this I kind of thought was phenomenal, really--I'm on line, I've got the camera slung over my shoulder and a fellow walks up to me, a civilian walks up to me, and greets me as, "Landsman." Now, landsman is German and Yiddish. I don't know much Yiddish, but I recognized that word. Landsman is the equivalent of--you're what, of Irish descent? Well, I don't know the Irish, but Italian would be compadre. Did I say it correctly? Are you of Italian descent or Spanish?

RM: Italian.

HB: Compadre. Well, landsman would be the English literal translation, which says that you're a fellow countryman--he recognized me as a Jew. How the hell he survived, being Jewish in Paris--this is how many years? When did France surrender?

SI: 1940.

HB: 1940, right. It was amazing that he still was alive there in Paris. We had a brief chat, but I couldn't speak to him, he couldn't speak to me. What else do I remember? This is now going into a little bit of irrelevant things.

SI: No, go ahead.

HB: Well, more for entertainment or me exercising my memory, to see what I can recall, I can remember crossing the Channel. We were in a landing craft, LCT, Landing Craft, Tanks, I guess, yes, and our company commander at that time--not the company commander, but the senior officer--had been in the Tank Corps and we enlisted men didn't like him. The term bogie wheels, bogie wheels are the wheels that turn on a tank that cause the tread to move, revolve, rotate--rotate, no, revolve, revolving around two axes. So, we were singing, "Bogie wheels," to the tune of *Wagon Wheels*, mocking him. [laughter] I don't know whether he ever got the idea that we were making fun of him, but we were. It was a beautiful day. It was a day like this, but, crossing the Channel, it's forty days after D-Day. It was relatively safe. The German Air Force was now non-existent as far as the Channel area. You would've thought we were going on a picnic, really. It was just a beautiful, beautiful day. Summer was not long before the last, whatever, in retrospect, yes. What else? Biarritz was quite an experience, I have to say that. I had my first and only experience of a bullfight, which, for me, I couldn't stand it. It was disgusting. I know that the matador, the toreador, I know he's risking his life, the bull can kill him, but it seemed such a barbaric sport, really. One of the matadors, toreadors, whichever--they're not synonymous. Have you ever seen a bullfight?

SI: No.

HB: Well, the picador is the man who comes out with small, short spears and he reaches over it and plunges the spears into the bull's back, but what he is trying to establish is which way the bull instinctively turns his head to use his horns. So, after they have established that firmly, now, the toreador now knows which side to avoid, and then, there are those who come out with long spears and plunge. Now, they're infuriating the bull. One toreador did not perform well. Well, the audience knew that he wasn't performing well. I didn't see it. This is, incidentally, in the City of Bayonne, which is just north of the Spanish border, French-Spanish border, but the audience recognized the poor performance. They were throwing folding chairs at him. [laughter] They were whistling, hooting him. That was not one of my more memorable experiences, really, the poor bull. Anyhow, what else do I remember?

SI: It sounds like the war really broadened your horizons.

HB: Oh, yes. Earlier on in the talk, I said, having been born and raised in Brooklyn, my world comprised the street on which I was born, which, as I said, was Prospect Place, 1603 Prospect Place. It was a poor neighborhood, it really was. After my father died, we moved to a poorer neighborhood. Geographically, the street that I lived on was Prospect Place. The cross-streets were avenue streets and leaving the building in which I lived, to my left would've been Ralph Avenue--to my right, that's leaving there, so, facing it to my right would be Ralph Avenue--to my left would be Bergen Street. Ralph Avenue was actually the geographic dividing line between Crown Heights and Brownsville. Now, Brownsville was an even poorer neighborhood,

but, since there was just this one street, well, one street doesn't make a distinction between this street and this street, between the east side and the west side. It was poor. After my father's death, we moved to another street. We moved to Park Place, which was, let's say, one block south and one block east, and that was 1734 Park Place and that was even a poorer neighborhood. It really was. I was going someplace now, but I forgot--you see, I have such a short memory. If I deviate just one moment, then, I'm lost. [laughter]

SI: We were comparing your worldview before the war and after.

HB: Oh, yes. So, that constituted my world. My world comprised of Prospect Place, Park Place--well, now, I'm in my very young teens, I would've been going down to a street called Pitkin Avenue. Pitkin Avenue was a thoroughfare. There were lots of shops that were lit up at night and one street was famous, or infamous, that had bullet holes in it. This was where so-and-so, a gangster or hood, had been shot and these are the bullet holes to indicate that he had been shot at that corner. My world was broadening. My first experience to the South--somewhere in this, I point out that we were undergoing, that our training comprised more than just physical exercise, our training comprised being introduced to a much broader world than we had been exposed to as civilians, so, the South, the separate drinking fountains, the separate toilets. In a movie, I don't know if young men, young boys, young men, young women, do necking, what we called necking, fondling in movie houses--is that still done?

SI: I cannot say.

HB: I guess, I don't know. It's been so long. Well, you never did that when you were young, yes, of course, you, too. [laughter] You reserved that activity for the balcony, but you couldn't do that in the balcony down South, because the balcony was reserved for blacks, since blacks didn't sit in the orchestra. That's a learning experience. We lived in barracks; I don't know how many to a barrack. This is part of my talk, I guess. Is this still on?

SI: Yes, please.

HB: Good, let me give you this. The fellow to my right was Julian (Helm?). This was when I was still with D Company of the 325th Medical Battalion and Julian was a college graduate. He was a pharmacist. So, he was well-educated. Lights would be out at nine o'clock. Now, what does a young man, a young, healthy man, do at nine o'clock night, go to sleep? hell no. So, we were talking. We would converse and I had a lot of interesting learning experiences and a lot of conversations with Julian. Julian was a hell of a nice guy. The barracks were constructed with A-frame roofs. So, there's a row on a set of poles--it may have been two or three or four center poles and maybe two at each end and two towards the center--and there were two doors strategically placed maybe one fourth of the way from one end and one fourth of the way from the other end, and then, between them, walls lined with cots and cots arranged in parallel along the center. Julian and I would have lots of conversations. Invariably, the conversations would wind up talking about women, but we always managed to get in a conversation about blacks and the condition of blacks in the South. The guy occupying that furthestmost cot, his name was (Gowen?). One day, at night, one night, we're talking about blacks and, finally, (Gowen?) explodes, "I don't want to hear no more talk about the Negro. When you talk about the Negro,

you're talking about my religion." Now, how do you interpret that? Well, you interpret it on the basis of your own background. I infer from that, he's implying, that his views on the blacks are so strong and so firm, it's like a religion to him. That was it. We never spoke about the blacks again, really. Julian, here's a young man with a college education. He knows I'm a Jew and, one day, he confides in me, he says, "I'd have never thought you're Jewish." He says, "I thought Jews had little horns on their head." Do you know where he got that impression from? Are you familiar with Michelangelo's statue of David? If you've ever seen it, [it has] little [horns]--unbelievable. That's my learning experience in the world. It was a bad experience, it was a good experience, it was a learning experience. There was a lot jammed into those three years, really was.

SI: When you were in England, you mentioned that you went on this trip to London. Did you have much interaction with the local Englishmen?

HB: It was overnight, overnight; the next day, I had to leave. Remember, I'm without a pass. I can't risk staying too long and being questioned, stopped by an MP or something, for whatever reason; overnight, got to see London, got to see Trafalgar Square. One [story], it's now dark in Trafalgar Square and there's some gals who were hustling. One conversation--I don't see the people, really, it's now dark--he asks her how much and she quotes the price. He said, "I don't want to buy it," he says, "I just want to rent it for the night." [laughter] Now, here is a world war going on, fifty million people are killed--look at the trivia that you remember. What is it that determines what will make an impression on you and that you'll remember for sixty years later? I'm not a student of the brain, so, I can't tell you that, but there are little irrelevancies. I went through this book by Colonel Dyer--he was a lieutenant colonel at the time that he wrote it, that he and others, authored the book--and there were photographs of people that I recognized in XII Corps Headquarters. It was almost as if I had seen that face yesterday. The story that we heard may not have been accurate, but this was the story that was booted about among the enlisted men. We had a Lieutenant Colonel (Boysen?). He was the provost marshal. Provost marshal is like the equivalent of the head of the police, military, in XII Corps Headquarters, not XII Corps, but XII Corps Headquarters. The story was that he had been a master sergeant at Pearl Harbor and our then commanding general, General [William] Simpson, had been a full colonel at Pearl Harbor. After Pearl Harbor, sometime after Pearl Harbor, (Boysen?) was made a warrant officer, a senior warrant officer. A warrant officer is sort of a bastard rank. It's in between an enlisted man and a commissioned officer, but he doesn't have a commission, he has a warrant. So, there's a junior and senior warrant officer. Then, from warrant officer, he was given a direct commission as captain and then, subsequently, major. Then, the commanding general left, for whatever reason, so, poor (Boysen?) was not well liked among the other officers, and so, he left. I don't remember why, but he did leave and I remember him coming around to all the units, including the Medical Detachment, saying good-bye and saying, "I'm going to get all the medals the Army has to offer or get killed trying." It was in April or March of '45, snow is on the ground, and we hear that (Boysen?) had been killed and he's at such-and-such cemetery. So, we go to that cemetery and there is his corpse on the snow, lying on the snow. According to the book by this Colonel Dyer, he had been killed by shrapnel, and so help me, I can visualize it today. He had a little black spot right in his forehead and I thought that he had been--I can visualize (Boysen?), he would've been sitting on a lead tank or leading the troops, he was that kind of a guy--that he'd been picked off by a marksman. So, there he was, lying on the ground,

didn't get all the medals. What else? I guess I've reached the capacity of my memory. If you've got any more questions, I'll be glad to try to field them.

SI: You mentioned a few incidents where you went out.

HB: I've got another one. This raises a question, "What's a coward? What is a coward?" We get a call that there is a civilian--now, we're in Germany--we get a call that there is a civilian who's in a minefield. So, I think there are three of us who go out, John (Marino?), a fellow by the name of (Raykoff?), Bernard (Raykoff?) from Providence, Rhode Island, and myself. We reach the place and there's a lieutenant colonel waiting there and he points to the guy. The guy was about, oh, maybe two hundred yards in, where he's lying. Now, this was several months after we had gone out at Avranches to pick up the wounded civilians. Now, we're going, other volunteers, to go out to the minefield to get this guy. Neither Marino nor (Raykoff?), and there may have been a fourth, but, if there was a fourth, I cannot remember who, had accompanied us on the first. So, the Colonel asked for volunteers, "Volunteers?" So, I look at the guy on my right, the guy on my right looks to the guy on his right, that guy looks at his right, which was me--nobody moves and nobody says a word. Now, I want to tell you something, that silence and that inaction was absolutely unbearable. Can you picture this? You don't know whether to shit or go blind--pause, silence, and the Colonel asks again for a volunteer. Now, we all know that if we don't volunteer, you either step forward or the next guy's going to step forward, because, if you don't, he's going to appoint someone. Bernard (Raykoff?) steps forward, to, I am sure, our individual relief. So, that's cowardly, it really is, or what, I don't know. Bernard (Raykoff?) goes out and he walks very gingerly, very slowly. Now, you know that's baloney, walking very slowly. The weight's what does it, not [the speed], and he reaches the guy and he puts his arm around the guy, the guy puts his around (Raykoff's?) shoulder and they come back. For that, (Raykoff?) is awarded the Silver Star, which is considerably higher than the Bronze Star. That was bravery, because he volunteered. Well, we volunteered, too, but it was dark, so, you couldn't see anything and, if you don't see anything, there's no hazard. For this occasion, for this talk, I guess it's about a month ago, I had never previously discussed that event, that event with (Raykoff?) and the volunteer. Yes, it was not one of my most glorious moments. It's a moment that I'm ashamed of and that I really didn't talk about it, never talked about it. So, here it is, what the hell? How many volunteers would've gone? Well, one out of three, that's thirty-three percent. That's not bad. Okay, what else?

SI: What would motivate you when you were in these situations? Was it having to do your job?

HB: Well, you knew that you had to do the job. You had to do it, but you're hoping that the next guy will volunteer first. You had to do it. I don't know, I don't know how many more seconds--the elapsed time between the Colonel's first request for a volunteer and second was not all that long. I don't think it was a minute, but it was an eternity, really. It was an eternity. It was an embarrassing eternity.

SI: Had you been through a lot of experiences similar to that?

HB: Oh, no, no. There was no hesitation before, because you were not volunteering except on one occasion, going out to pick up the French civilians, but you were moving with everyone else. You were moving, so, what the heck? You're moving.

SI: However, you had seen enough that you knew that this was dangerous.

HB: Oh, yes, sure, you knew that, oh, yes. We were on--I don't remember what the occasion--but we had to go out in the ambulance and we got lost coming back. When we got lost, we realized that we were behind the German lines. [laughter] That was kind of a scary thing. When you drove along the road, you saw, moving from one location to the next, the casualties, the German casualties, well, the American casualties--you saw the casualties of war. You saw horse-drawn vehicles, the German horse-drawn vehicles. You saw carcasses of horses. You would have thought that this is World War I, before the mechanized era. Oh, well, what else?

SI: You mentioned that you were shelled.

HB: I don't remember the name of this kaserne, but, oh, yes, shelled. The Germans had railroad guns.

-----END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE-----

SI: Go ahead.

HB: You could hear the shell going overhead, sounded like a freight train, and, as long as you could hear it going overhead, you knew that this was not here to greet you personally. What else can I say? We were in one kaserne and we could hear a lot of small arms fire and we thought we were being surrounded; turns out that a shell had just struck an ammunition truck loaded with ammunition, "Bang, bang, bang."

SI: Did you ever come under an air raid?

HB: Air raid?

SI: The *Luftwaffe* was pretty much gone.

HB: The *Luftwaffe* was pretty much extinct. The *Luftwaffe* was still active when we were in England, no doubt about that.

SI: Were there any raids then?

HB: Oh, yes, oh, yes. In addition to the buzz bombs, yes, there was a raid, maybe two raids, I remember now. I have to say that my recollections, my memories, now are--why I remember is difficult to explain, why I remembered one as compared to another, but bringing up one subject, sometimes, helps recall another one. I suppose I talked more about the war among our friends and neighbors, comparing what we did during those three years of service, but, for the last, oh,

twenty-five, thirty, forty years, I haven't done much talking about it. So, it's just dormant, I guess. So, there you are. I thank you for the opportunity to talk about it.

SI: Thank you. Do you have any other questions?

RM: No, not really.

HB: Oh, formulate a question.

RM: Formulate a question?

HB: Sure. If you're going to be doing this, practice.

RM: After World War II, what exactly did you do after you returned to the States?

HB: Okay, after. Well, I looked for a job. I got my degree and I got a job with a chemical company called Heyden Chemical and Heyden Chemical was--I'm not sure what they did long before the war--but, during the war, they were manufacturing penicillin. Do you have any scientific background at all?

RM: No, not really.

SI: I know what penicillin is.

HB: Yes, but no scientific background?

SI: Not really.

HB: So, now, I can swamp you and you won't know it; [laughter] no. Well, penicillin, early on, was made in flasks, in glass bottles. Glass bottles, the volume--do you want this?

SI: If it is going to tell your story, go ahead.

HB: Well, the volume of a glass bottle was about the volume of a milk bottle, but the bottle was constructed differently. The bottle was fairly flat, perhaps two inches flat, and relatively wide and long and it was built with the neck of the bottle offset to one side, so that the bottle could lie on its side and, therefore, present a large surface, a liquid surface. The growing medium for the organism that produced penicillin, which was a fungus, then would grow on the surface of this medium, of this culture, or the culture'd grow on the surface of this medium, and then, these bottles are harvested. From those, through various processes, the penicillin was extracted. Well, subsequently, it was found that you could grow the organism in a tank, in a metal tank. The medium would have to be sterile. The contents of this tank and the tank itself would have to be sterilized and you'd have to pass air into it to provide oxygen, the necessary oxygen, and that had to be sterile and all the pipes that lead [into it] had to be sterilized. They were sterilized by blowing, let's say, a formaldehyde gas through before you actually added the sterile medium or the medium to be sterilized. So, by the time I got around to being hired, after the war, that was a

job that I was hired for, worked with small tanks, with a capacity of about fifteen gallons, in which we would test the composition of the medium growing to grow the organism that produced the particular antibiotic that we were interested in. It was purely experimental. The approach was sort of a fly-by-night, or not--catch-as-catch-can, let's say. You conducted experiments first in so-called flasks. Flasks were shaped conical, to, again, provide a wide surface for the liquid, but you put these on shaking machines, which shook them to get the oxygen in the air sterilized. The bottles were capped with cotton and the cotton served as a filter to filter out bacteria; performed experiments in flasks. From the flasks, they went to these small tanks, and then, those media, those conditions, that produced good responses, good results, high yield, we're going to transfer it to larger tanks and the larger tanks were then the commercial tanks. So, that was my job for quite a few years. Very early on, we produced streptomycin, and then, such antibiotics as bacitracin, streptothricin. We did some very early work on Vitamin B12, which is essential for your life. Then, shortly thereafter, I was married. Shortly after that, we had kids and, frankly, I was reluctant, maybe even insecure, to go out and look for another job. So, I stayed with this company, stayed there, period. I didn't risk looking elsewhere, with a mortgage and a family, and so, there you have it. That was my life. Eventually, I retired and that's it, no great accomplishments, whatever--three kids.

SI: Did you make any use of the GI Bill?

HB: Sad to say, no. I took one year at Brooklyn Poly Tech on the GI Bill and I took a half year course at the New School for Social Research. They were offering a course, a general course, a generalized course, a broad course, a scientific course for non-science majors, but the man who offered the course was, I don't remember his first name, but his last name is (DuBos?), who was a recognized authority on TV. I wanted to take a course under (DuBos?). So, I took that course, again, GI Bill. I then moved to New Jersey and I applied for graduate school--I applied to register for courses at Rutgers. At the time, the man who was there, prominent in the field of antibiotics, was a man by the name of Selman Waksman. You know the name?

SI: Yes.

HB: He was credited with the discovery of streptomycin. Schatz and Waksman, Schatz was a grad student who rightly, or not rightly, who knows? claimed that he was the sole inventor, but Waksman, being his guiding professor, was on the patent, too. I didn't want to stay for a master's, I just wanted one course there, and so, I was not accepted. So, I never pursued it further. So, I never got a graduate degree and that's it, here we are, current, eighty-six-and-a-half years old.

SI: Congratulations.

HB: Thank you. [laughter]

SI: How well do you think your training paid off in the military? When you got overseas, did you find that you were prepared?

HB: I turned down a battlefield commission.

SI: Really?

HB: I really did, but I was not unique in being offered that battlefield commission. Every one of us in the Medical Detachment of XII Corps was offered that and none of us accepted. One man in Headquarters itself, in the Medical Section of Headquarters, he was a PFC, he accepted. He was a second louie and he was a second louie with the 101st Evacuation Hospital. He was the only one who accepted. So, as far as I got was tech fifth. I never joined a veterans' organization, because applauding the war was not something that I leaned to, did not. I'm not quite sure what thoughts or what background motivated me, but, when I was a New York State resident, living in New York City at the time, that was before my marriage, we had a referendum on the ballot to award a bonus for GIs. I voted against it. Well, I figured, tried to recall what my mindset was, and I said, "Well, we were called to do it, we did it and that's it. I mean, why pay us now for what we had done in the past?" I never joined a veterans' organization, not the American Legion, not the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] and not the Jewish War Vets, never. I wasn't interested.

SI: Did you have any trouble readjusting to civilian life?

HB: None. You know why?

SI: Why?

HB: I had two months at Biarritz. As a matter-of-fact, the reason I was sent to that schooling, to that college training, was because I had not completed my college coursework. So, this was a transition period. We had college professors from the States who were dressed in military uniform, excepting that they did not wear the insignia of an officer, of an Army officer. I think we had GIs who could teach a college course who also wore that insignia. I should point out that, for example, you wore a brass button, a brass insignia, a solid brass insignia, with the eagle, I guess--I can't recall what it was like--and it was solid. An officer wore this so-called open insignia. The eagle was not a solid stamp, but an open space in between the eagle's head, wings, legs, etc., and the ring surrounding it. There was no saluting. You did not salute. This was strictly a college course, college environment. You were not required to study. If you didn't study, you didn't pass. Besides, who would not want to study when you could go out to the beach and study? We had really developed a high degree of technology for the time, but nothing equals the technology of the young French girl who could change from her street clothes to her bathing suit without revealing a little bit, any flesh at all. That was technique, [laughter] do it on the beach. Is that in there for the record?

SI: Yes.

HB: Good, [laughter] but we were sent there so that we could really readjust to civilian life. We were given that opportunity. So, I would have to say my volunteering consisted of volunteering for the Air Force. I flunked because of a physical. As a matter-of-fact, I wanted so badly to get into the Air Force, as I say, my eye, one eye, turned out when I focused. If you held up a finger and I tried to focus on that one finger, one eye is turning out, because I see two fingers there

now. So, I was given exercises. I was given cards and the cards had the letters "O," "N," with a space, and then, the letters "N," "E," and I had to look through a stereoscope and the space between the two "Ns" differed on different cards. I was supposed to study, put the cards in and see if I could reach the point when I can bring the two "Ns" together, so that they superimpose on each other and I would see the word "One." I tried and tried and tried and, finally, gave up, because I just simply couldn't do it, and, if I couldn't do it, I was not going to pass the test. Another test that I had flunked, again, visual, about twenty feet distance--well, there were two tests, as a matter-of-fact--twenty feet distant, there were two cylindrical posts, or cylinders, perhaps a foot high, I don't remember their height, and not very wide, diameter not very great, and they were on a bar or whatever that could separate. You had to pull the two strings until you got, looking through the eyepieces, them parallel. I couldn't do that. Then, there was another. You looked through this particular optical instrument, you looked through an instrument and you had a dial to turn. You had to turn the dial until you could bring what looked like notes on to a staff. I'm turning and turning and turning and I can't bring--so, I failed that. So, that was the end of my Air Force experience. I really wanted the Air Force, because this cousin of mine, who was nine months older than I, he made the Air Force and he was a lieutenant, first lieutenant, captain, major, and I wanted the Air Force. In fact, he didn't make pilot. He was a navigator and he was the lead navigator on a bombing raid on Schweinfurt, the Schweinfurt raid, in which they lost a huge number of B-17s, B-17 bombers, and he was lead navigator on that raid. [Editor's Note: On August 17, 1943, B-17 bombers struck the ball-bearing factories at Schweinfurt, losing over sixty aircraft and crews. On October 14, 1943, the US Eighth Air Force's B-17s returned to Schweinfurt at a cost of seventy-seven B-17s and their crews.]

SI: Do you know if it was the first raid or the second raid?

HB: I don't remember.

SI: They were both pretty bad. The second raid was worse.

HB: Yes. Schweinfurt was an industrial town and one of the important things that they made there were bearings and bearings are an integral part of almost every piece of the military machinery. Yes, so, he survived all that, survived all that. I didn't want the Navy. The Navy was not in my blood, for whatever reason. So, I wound up in the Army.

SI: In your job in the medical detachment, did you deal with battle fatigue cases at all?

HB: No, never had a battle fatigue case. Interesting, of all the memories that I had, the two months that I spent at O'Reilly General Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, are an absolute void, an absolute void. I cannot remember anything, excepting one kind of intriguing--well, two, but one intriguing detail--I remember that the floors in the barracks there were highly polished, like our floors here, whereas the floors in the barracks at camp in Fort Jackson were rough floors. Why do I remember that interesting detail? don't ask me. I remember another thing. I remember slipping. I may have been horsing around, I don't know why, but I slipped and landed on a cot, on the iron edge of a cot. I sat right down on my butt or between my butt, right down on the rectum, and I must've injured the tailbone, coccyx, and I complained of pain. This must have been at O'Reilly, while I was still at O'Reilly General Hospital. I guess I went to the medical

office there and, in retrospect, I'm assuming--this may have been after I had taken several courses in biology or what have you--I may have been assuming that the medical officer assumed that I was suffering from gonorrhea. You would not know this until you're well into your later years, but to test your prostate gland, to see whether your prostates are oversized--are you familiar with the prostate, the biology of the prostate gland? The urethra, you know what the urethra is? Yes, you do. It's encompassed by the prostate gland. When the prostate gland enlarges, it squeezes the urethra, so that you cannot now pass water. You can't pee. So, to test the size of it, you use your finger, of course with a glove on, and so, this medical officer assumed that either I had an inflamed urethra or an inflamed prostate or gonorrhea or what--he inserted his finger. I didn't expect it. I didn't know what the devil he was going to be doing and he did that. It was rather kind of startling and I guess he was satisfied that I didn't have anything that was contagious, one way or another. That, I remember; nothing else about O'Reilly General Hospital. That's gone, absolutely gone. I don't know how to explain that, but nothing about O'Reilly General Hospital. So, there you are.

SI: In all of the interviews and things I have read about the war, it seems like the Army was very paranoid about venereal disease and keeping the numbers down.

HB: We had one fellow come in, when I was with the 325th Medical Battalion, we had one fellow who had contracted gonorrhea and he was a Southerner. When I say a Southerner, I mean a poor Southerner, I mean the equivalent of a tenement dweller in the North, but, at least up North, we had reasonably good schooling. He did not and he believed that the leakage that he experienced was because he was thinking about his last exercise with a woman and he was having an orgasm again. That's what the leakage was and the easy way of curing that was to go to a stream and dip his penis in the cold running water--okay, ain't science wonderful, ain't biology wonderful? [laughter] There was another fellow who was a non-com, who may have had three stripes or four stripes--when I say four stripes, that would be three up and one down--who was in the aid station. This was overseas, France, Germany or England, I do not remember, and he had come into the aid station for some reason. I don't know what the bone of contention was. He didn't think that gonorrhea was serious, whether he had to pick up a condom going into town, I don't remember, and he thought it was not necessary or the examination was not necessary. Our commanding general was in the aid station at the time and he turns around and addresses that non-com as private. What he meant by that is, "You're busted, Private." Another time, XII Corps had two chaplains. Colonel (Hill?) was the Protestant chaplain and Major Murphy was the Catholic chaplain and Major Murphy once gave a lecture to the group, which, of course, included Catholics, Roman Catholics, non-Catholics, non-Christians, okay. When you went to town, you had to stop by Headquarters and pick up a condom and Chaplain Murphy said, lectured, "When you go to town and you have to pick up a condom before you can go into town, make sure you pick up two, one for your wife, and send it home to her--get the message?" You got the message, really? Do you get the implicit message, really?

RM: Like you are cheating on your wife.

HB: That you're cheating and, if you're going to cheat someone, send a condom home to your wives. Well, you know damn well that he's not going to do that, so, he's not going to cheat,

okay. Chaplain Murphy was far more down to Earth than Colonel (Hill?), who was a colonel then. He was much more removed from the men than Major Murphy was.

SI: Did you have much interaction with the clergymen?

HB: No.

SI: Did you go to services at all?

HB: I'm trying to remember. I think I did attend one service overseas. I did. I don't remember whether it was a military service. Generously, I will say this, that I am an agnostic and I'm generous when I say that. I would describe myself, and this is for public description, I describe myself as a cultural Jew. I don't want to argue about religion, because I look at my own and I see what I now consider perhaps mythical myth and I am aware that most of the well-established religions of the Western World and the Near East--I don't mean Shintoism or Hinduism, but I'm referring to Near East as dating back two thousand years, three thousand years--and a lot that we practice today routinely arose in dim, dim history. So, that's it. As one Hebrew sage, quoting one response to one Hebrew sage named Hillel, after whom many societies, Jewish societies at the college level, [were named], was asked to discuss the Hebrew Bible and his comment was, "I can discuss the Hebrew Bible while standing on one leg. Do not unto others what you would not have others do unto you, period." So, for me, the main emphasis of religion is not what you're allowed to eat or what you're not allowed to eat, it's just do not unto others what you would not want others to do unto you, period. It's a moral precept, period, ethics. That's why I was so uncomfortable, really uncomfortable, when that colonel asked for volunteers. That's why (Raykoff?) eventually volunteered, to do unto others what you would want others to do unto you. That's what makes heroes. That's why people give up their lives for people they never even saw or don't even know or haven't seen.

SI: Is there anything in your notes that you would like to put on record?

HB: I think I've covered just about everything. I came back with sixty-five points or something like that. You got a point for so many months of service and you got five points for every battle that you participated in and for every award that you received and I guess they totaled sixty-five points, I think, but I'm not even sure of that. In any event, as I say, that's what my discharge reads. It's an honorable discharge.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: This concludes our interview with Herman Berenson on October 31, 2005, in Lawrenceville, New Jersey; thank you very much.

HB: You're quite welcome.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Mohammad Athar 8/18/2015

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 9/1/2015
Reviewed by Molly Graham 9/21/2015