RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE BERSE BERKE

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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Sandra Stewart Holyoak: This begins an interview with George Berse Berke on September 23, 2010, in New Brunswick, New Jersey with …

Rebecca Schwarz: … Rebecca Schwarz.

SH: … and Sandra Stewart Holyoak. Thank you for driving up this morning from Northern Virginia. For the record, Mr. Berke, could you tell me where and when you were born?

George Berke: I was born on June the 8th, 1927, at the Muhlenberg Hospital in Plainfield, New Jersey.

SH: All right, and you grew up in?

GB: Westfield.

SH: Off tape, we were talking a bit about the middle name Berse. You were telling us something quite interesting about the research you have done on that name.

GB: Yes, the Berses were not exactly Norse, but, yes, they were in fact the people who actually conquered Russia. They were part of that tribe, I guess you would call it. They were the Rus and the word "berserk" comes from the fact that the Berses were kind of crazy and nasty people. [laughter] The reason I'm sure of this is that my sister had a problem with her hand and she went to a specialist and he looked at her hand. He said, "Oh, you've got the Viking hand. There's a certain formation that comes up around the thumb." So, people say, "No, no, you're not really the Norse." "Well, how come I know where I am in the middle of the Atlantic?" There was an incident where my flight leader said, "Berke, we are not lost," and I said, "Yes, we are." [laughter]

SH: The genes have been passed down is what you are saying.

GB: Yes, yes, I was very proud of that, my navigating ability. Both of my grandparents were very creative people. I'm not sure when they came over to the United States, but my paternal grandfather was Nathan J. Berkowitz and he was once known as the "King of Newark." He owned a string of saloons and my dad is always willing to say, "Well, when the church next door complained about my pop's saloon, he bought the church." [laughter] My dad tells the story that he went to an automobile race, probably in the Teens [1910s] of the last century, and there was a Buick--and, back in those days, no muffler or anything like that--that won the race. He said, "Well, my dad went down and bought the car and we rode home making a lot of noise all over the neighborhood," and so, my dad was very proud of his father. Nate also started the Newark Auto Supply as one of the first places where you'd buy tires and batteries for an automobile, and then, he went down to Florida with the family fortune. This was in the 1920s, when Flagler was just developing Miami, and he bought up a lot of property on margin. Now, we all know by now about margin. [Editor's Note: Henry Flagler, one of the founders of Standard Oil, helped develop Miami in the 1890s. Colonel Berke may be referring to Carl Fisher, a real estate developer associated with the Florida land boom and bust of the 1920s.] Then, the bubble burst and he called back home and [said], "I need money." So, my parents sold their house, the

silverware, everything else. My mother never forgave this, ever, ever, ever. So, we were all broke and, as my dad likes to say, "One day, my father was riding in a chauffeured Lincoln in Miami and, the next day, he was living over his brother-in-law's saloon in Bloomfield." [laughter] So, a lot of creativity there, between the saloons, and, by the way, Prohibition, yes, during Prohibition, my grandfather's one of the first, only, people in the whole family that got arrested. [laughter] [Editor's Note: The era of Prohibition began on January 17, 1920, with the enactment of the Eighteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, set in motion by the Volstead Act. It ended with the ratification of the Twenty-First Amendment to the US Constitution on December 5, 1933.] His brother-in-law, Bob, my Nana's brother, had the biggest saloon in Bloomfield and it was fronted by a barbershop. You walked in the barbershop, then, you went in the door after that and inside was the Chief of Police, the Mayor and everybody else, that there was really no Prohibition in Bloomfield. Well, Bob Braun, that was his name, had the place and my cousin, Harold, was a kid back then and he told many, many stories, but he liked to say, "I was sort of the beard. We'd get in this big, powerful motorboat and my dad would say, 'Hal, get your fishing pole out.' We'd pull out and, offshore, after a while, there would be a freighter staffed by Joseph Kennedy and they would throw the booze overboard and we would pick it up." [laughter] You might see that right now in that *Boardwalk* show [*Boardwalk Empire*] that HBO's doing. So, that was on my father's side of the family. I don't know much about my grandfather personally, because he died before I was born, but my [grand]mother was Luria and she talked about [how] she was from Vilnius, [Lithuania], Vilna, whatever you want to call it back then. She came over about 1860 with her eight-year-old brother. She was thirteen. I guess they were having a *pogrom* over there, some part. [Editor's Note: Pogroms were violent assaults on Jewish communities in the Russian Empire by neighboring populations and/or government forces, carried out from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth century.]

SH: What was her maiden name?

GB: Luria.

SH: Luria.

GB: Yes, and that goes way back in Jewish history, certainly. She said some relative was the Chief Rabbi of Lithuania, things of that nature. She had a great voice, and so, she supported herself and her brother, first of all, by singing on street corners. Then, she got into the Yiddish theater, and then, she was on a bill with Lillian Russell in the Teens. I don't know how she met my grandfather, but, as my mother and her three brothers were growing up, it was discovered, not too many years ago, when they were redecorating a place in Plainfield, when they were digging through, they found the Lyric Theater that my grandfather had started, the first movie theater in Plainfield. As my mother tells the story, her brothers would turn the crank on the projector and she would play the piano, to fill in for the silent movies. So, that's [the] kind of people I came from and my first recollections, really, it was during the Depression. As soon as repeal of Prohibition came, my dad opened a bar in Plainfield and my mom, I think I was about four, my mom would sit me down on the bar as he was closing and I would count the pennies. [laughter] I remember seeing things outside. One of these was [a poster for the] National Recovery Act, with the eagle, and any history of that era--the Supreme Court disallowed that. That's one of Roosevelt's programs. I just remember that very vividly. [Editor's Note: The

National Recovery Administration (NRA), created by the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) in 1933 and struck down as unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court in 1935, encouraged businesses to create fair competition and instituted rights for workers, such as maximum hours and minimum wages.] So, the question was, where were we going to live? My Uncle Ralph, who was the youngest brother …

SH: Of your mother?

GB: Yes. He was a really--I hate to use the word "gay" anymore [laughter]--but what we'd called a "gay bachelor." I mean, he used to go to the Cotton Club in Harlem and things like that and his two older brothers ran Berse Brothers Service Station in Westfield. He got engaged to be married and he bought a house on Summit Avenue in Westfield, a very nice neighborhood, and something happened to the engagement and, there he was, a bachelor with a house. So, he brought my mother in to keep house, and that included my dad and me, and my sister came along a little later. She claims we were both accidents. [laughter] So, that was our house, though. It was a multi-generation household, with Grandma, my parents and my Uncle Ralph. So, my dad was looking for something, somehow, to get a job, work some money. Once in a while, he'd work for Berse Brothers and he said, "They treat me like a slave. I don't want to work for them." So, he came up with all kinds of things and he sold the first motor scooters, the Cushman Auto-Glide. He sold the first hearing aids, because he was deaf. He sold the first doughnuts with icing on them. I'm trying to remember all of the things that he came up with to make a living. We wanted to get out of the house, wanted to get out of the house. One of the things I remember about it is that everybody liked music and we had a baby grand piano. When the folks decided to have a party, my Uncle Ralph was a great drummer, he'd drum on the radiator and my mother would play the piano. Everybody would have a good time and it was a nice household. We had a garden in the back and always a dog. So, yes, my childhood there started off really well, and then, we lived a block from Lincoln School. So, then, I remember, that's when I started. My mom would walk me to school when I was in kindergarten or whatever. Pretty soon, it was very easy just to go back and forth from Summit Avenue to Lincoln School. So, my early recollection there, I was considered nervous and they had a little rooftop porch with cots. During the lunch period, I was asked to go up and take a nap or whatever. It was always chilly and I might want to interject now that it was apparent that I was ADD [attention deficit disorder] and I always consider that very fortunate, because, even though it held me back academically, I was always scooting around on seats and whatever, it made me a superior pilot.

SH: However, you did not know that at the time.

GB: No.

SH: Your sister is how many years younger than you?

GB: Eight.

SH: Was your father ever successful in moving out of the house?

GB: Oh, yes, yes. Well, that's after grade school, I guess--quite. Really, it was 1939. There was a small service station in what went for a mini-ghetto--Italians in Westfield--for sale and my dad borrowed 350 dollars from his father and bought the gas station. My father was an excellent mechanic also, extremely honest [in] the way he treated his customers and people. He got a very good reputation, and then, when the war started, there're no more cars sold, no more tires sold, except for war workers, all kinds of rationing of automobile parts. As things started failing, my father figured out ways to fix them and he bought equipment in vulcanizing and retreading and taking batteries apart. He was just very good at it and it thrived. Just about '43 or '44, we bought, he bought, a house in a lovely part of town, at Tudor Oval, and we had nice cars [laughter] and he was on his way. I'll have to leave him there until I get into the military. Around third grade, I think it was, he changed the family name to Berke [pronounced "Berk"] and I remember, my Uncle Leo was part of this. Well, my dad tried to get a job in General Motors and he said to Uncle Leo, he says, "They ask what my religion is," and Leo says, "Tell them you're a Unitarian--you believe in one God." [laughter] So, all of a sudden, everybody had [asked], "What happened to your name?" and all this kind of stuff, in grade school. So, it made it a little difficult in certain ways. However, I shortly became friends with people who were Anglo-Saxons from way back. They had old money. They were frugal, they were honest and I became part of their crowd, my good friends. This stood me in very good stead all the way through junior high and high school.

SH: Just to verify, your father's name was Jerome.

GB: Yes.

SH: Berkowitz.

GB: Yes.

SH: Before he changed it to Berke.

GB: Yes.

SH: Do you say Berke [pronounced "Berk-e"] or Berke [pronounced "Berk"]?

GB: Well, we liked Berke [pronounced "Berk"], yes.

SH: Berke, yes.

GB: Yes.

SH: Did it quickly come to that or was that something that you came to over time with this new name, when it changed to Berke?

GB: Well, as far as I know, it was instantaneous, as far as I was concerned, yes.

SH: Okay. I thought maybe you pronounced it Berke ["Berk-e"] to begin with.

GB: Well, sometimes I do, when I want people to spell it right. [laughter]

SH: I can understand that.

GB: Otherwise, I get the Irish spelling. Just a note, too, I forgot to talk about my dad and his [education]. He studied architecture and, back then, a high school graduate was at least in the same sense as a college graduate today. He got a job as an architecture man, but [his] Dad said, "No, no, no, I want you to come back and run beer for me," and, of course, my mother never forgave him for that one, either. [laughter] So, he was also very talented in--I was told that he was a great pianist, but probably forcefully so, because he gave a recital someplace in New York--I know it wasn't Carnegie Hall--but he gave a recital and, when he closed the piano, he never played again. I never knew this, because I was taking piano lessons, and my sister, and we never knew that Dad was, at one time, a great pianist. This kind of thwarted life really hurt my dad until he managed to climb out, but, yes, the Depression didn't help.

SH: The timeframe he grew up in was tough all around. Did he have brothers and sisters?

GB: Yes. He had two sisters and they both married well, that we used to visit grandparents at [their home]. My grandparents lived with their daughter, Jean, and her husband, Sam. He was a drug salesman. I don't know what firm he worked for, but he was quite successful. My Aunt (Annette?) lived on West something, Riverside Drive or something, in New York City, always a pleasure to visit her. We always had a standing rib roast. [laughter]

SH: How did your mother and father meet? Did they ever tell you that story?

GB: Yes. In fact, I have it on tape, but I can't quite remember it. It had something to do with an ambulance and my dad knew my mother's brothers. The Jewish community in Plainfield, at that time, wasn't that big. I mean, you knew people. No, I can't recall, but they were married until they died.

SH: How many brothers and sisters did your mother have?

GB: She had the three brothers.

SH: The three brothers, okay.

GB: Yes.

SH: Her name was Martha.

GB: Yes.

SH: Berse.

GB: Yes, Martha Berse, right. We were such a part of Westfield. My uncle's service station, and, later, after the war, they were dealers with Plymouth and Chrysler, was nothing like it anywhere, that I know, at the time, and there's really, really nothing like it today. Well, of course, here in New Jersey, you still get your gas pumped for you, [laughter] but they did …

SH: We like that, by the way.

GB: Yes. They did everything in that station. They did absolutely everything you could do to a car there, no matter what it was.

SH: Did you have afterschool jobs growing up?

GB: Yes, yes. First of all, yes, my dad wanted me, as soon as school was over, to come help in his gas station and I didn't like that at all. All my friends, my wealthy friends, my best friend Jack Norris, Jack Barry Norris, by the way, from Admiral Barry of the Revolutionary War, both his parents were millionaires, at the time, millionaires, both, in their own right, yes, Malcolm's were. Mr. Malcolm was a Wall Street He was a Wall Street lawyer, Child's was Chief Chemist at Esso [now ExxonMobil], yes, substantial people, but the boys got an allowance. That was it, they got an allowance. So, I said, "If I'm going to work here, I want twenty-five cents an hour," and it was a big bust-up. [laughter]

SH: Really?

GB: Big bust-up. Dad: "No, no," I worked for my dad, and then, my dad would buy me a car and do this for me and do that for me. I said, "No, I want twenty-five cents an hour. You don't have to buy me a car or anything." Well, with my twenty-five cents an hour, I was on a financial level with my rich friends, yes. When we'd go to New York, and this, that and the other thing, I was right there with them and that really worked for me.

SH: How soon did you get involved in school activities, in junior high or more into high school?

GB: School activities, well, our school activity in junior high was watching the trains. Our junior high was near the railroad tracks and, at lunchtime, we'd go down there and we'd put coins on the track and watch them get mashed and all. [laughter] We'd see the steam trains come by and we'd see the new streamliners come by. There was a young, I'd call him black now, kid in our class and his father worked for the railroad. He would know when the *Royal Blue* was coming through, with the diesels, and so, that was great, too. [Editor's Note: The *Royal Blue* served as the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad's flagship passenger train on the Washington, DC to New York City run from the late nineteenth century until the First World War. In 1935, B&O reestablished the *Royal Blue* train and its route.] We made sure we were down there seeing this new type of engine come by. That's all I can remember.

SH: Did you have a hobby as a young boy?

GB: Oh, yes, model trains--thank you for that. My Uncle Ralph is the one who had money and, every Christmas, he would buy me the Lionel trainset that I desired. Sometime around '43,

Lionel came out with O gauge, instead of the larger ones, and their initial trains were very much scale. Jack Norris had a large house with a huge basement and he had a trainset down there and I said, "Well, why don't we work together?" So, Jack and I became partners and we started. At that time, it was very easy to go to other boys and say, "Do you have any trains?" "Oh, yes, I don't play with this anymore," they smoke a cigarette and all that kind of stuff. So, we'd take everybody else's toy trains and we'd paint them like real trains and everything. We had this huge layout and trains running in every which direction. Our senior year, we sold it. At that time, I got a hundred and some dollars as my share and that's when I started taking flying lessons. [laughter] Selling my trains is when I started flying.

SH: How old were you when you started to fly?

GB: Seventeen, yes.

SH: Had you graduated from high school yet?

GB: No.

SH: What was the fascination with planes? What started that?

GB: Trains?

SH: Planes.

GB: Oh, planes.

SH: We got the trains. [laughter]

GB: Well, we're jumping ahead a little bit.

SH: Okay.

GB: But, there was nothing to it. One of the Wilder kids, one of our professor's sons, said, "I was out to the airport. They've got [Piper] Cubs. It's snowing and we've got skis. It's real fun." Well, me and my buddy, Allan Malcolm, said, "Well, let's go out and try it." The first time I took off, that was it. I suddenly knew I was doing something that, to this day, hardly anybody does or does well. So, I continued when the United States Air Force came through in 1944. Now, this was, of course, just before the Battle of the Bulge, but they thought the war was pretty much won in November of '44. [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.] So, they were still recruiting for pilots and I remember the recruiter saying, "We used to take the cream of the crop, but, now, we just take the top half." Of course, most people don't even know what he's talking about--homogenized milk, you don't have cream. [laughter] So, I signed up and my first enlistment was in November of 1944, the first part of my senior year, but, before that, definitely, the kids were involved in the

war effort. In fact, everybody in Westfield, that I know of, was involved in the war. We're collecting pots and pans to be melted down, paper drives. We did recycling back then, before anybody knew what to call it. [laughter] I was a courier and we had an armband and there were air raid sirens. They ran off compressed air, so, they hooked up air raid sirens to the compressor , like in my dad's gas station, there. They would have blackouts. I would report to the school and they would give you a message to take to someplace in the dark, on our bikes.

SH: So exciting.

GB: Yes.

SH: How soon after Pearl Harbor were you, as a community, doing this kind of thing?

GB: Very soon.

SH: Really?

GB: See, the whole idea was, the Japs were going to attack California, right, and the Germans were going to attack here, though neither had any capability to do that. Those Japs with their big submarines could launch balloons or maybe an airplane. The Germans certainly had nothing that would reach this country, but we acted like they could. We had observers. I think it was pure propaganda on the part of the government, to get people to do these things and pull together, that we were threatened. Well, it was no joke that the submarines were off the coast and the Navy had no idea what to do. I'd been down at the beach and you see the ships burning out there.

SH: Really?

GB: Yes, and the way the world was shrinking and the way the Germans and Japs were taking it over, it was very frightening.

SH: When were you first aware of what was going on? Was it before Pearl Harbor?

GB: Yes, definitely. I was part of a little group, older boys. My cousin, Gerson Berse, he was a year ahead of me, because of the way the schools started. There was a fellow named Bob Bogart and he was one of these young men who looked mature. There are boys like that. He had maps set up in his house and, during what is known as the Phony War in the '40s, Bob would have us over and he says, "The French are going to fold." This is a high school kid--nobody else had that. Certainly, the English had no idea the French were going to fold. He says, "They're going to fold," and he had all the reasons, the different airplanes, the different tanks, things like that. This is before we were even in Pearl Harbor. My social studies teacher in high school, when we had our 20th reunion, she was quite an elderly lady. She looked at me and you should see her face. She said, "George, you were the best student I ever had." I was subscribing to *Time* Magazine and the *New Yorker* when I was in high school. [laughter] I was always interested in what was going on, okay and it was just the way I was. So, to answer your question, yes, I was very aware of it. Now, let me tell you about Pearl Harbor; I was alone in my dad's gas station on that Sunday, December, and it was nasty, winds blowing, papers flying. I was listening to radio.

My dad was out on a call and I looked around, looked around, looked around. I said, "Oh, nobody's around." I knew, to make a few bucks, he sold little dirty books, and so, I opened the drawer. [laughter] There's this little dirty book and I was about to start looking and [heard], "Oh, we interrupt this program with this announcement--the Japanese just attacked Pearl Harbor." I shut the drawer and I went outside and I walked around going, "Oh, God, oh, God, what's going to happen now? Everything's changed, everything has changed," right then and there. Then, we were very fortunate that Hitler declared war on us. Most people don't know that--they think Roosevelt, you hear all these stories, "Roosevelt plotted to get us into the war." Well, we didn't declare war on Germany, Germany declared war on us, as a favor to Japan, because they thought, "We were no good, we would fold, our guys wouldn't fight." This is Hitler at his worst, I guess you could say, for the German people. [Editor's Note: Japanese forces attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, thrusting the United States into the Second World War. Nazi Germany declared war on the United States on December 11, 1941.] So, that really put us all together and, of course, everybody that could was volunteering. So, it was the brothers of ours--not mine, I didn't have a brother, but the other people that were friends--it was the brothers who got into World War II first, because anybody who was able-bodied wanted in. It was so kind of disgraceful to be a 4-F, that is, physically unfit. People went out of their way to do something else, to be conscientious objectors or be in first aid or something, because, really, only the people of no character, who became black marketers and outside the law sorts of things. So, it's a kind of situation I don't think could be repeated; I hope wouldn't.

SH: Before Pearl Harbor, the draft was instituted. Did you just assume, at some point, you would be in the military because of the draft? [Editor's Note: The Selective Service Act of 1940 required all twenty-one to thirty-five-year-old males to register for the draft. These age parameters were expanded to eighteen to forty-five years of age after the United States entered the war.]

GB: Oh, you bring out a wonderful point; this is Glenn Miller. [laughter] The draft passed the House by one vote and the boys drafted were, really, the vanguard of our forces in either theater, like my cousin Harold. So, Glenn Miller was a Midwesterner, a real patriot, and this is before Pearl Harbor. When he was in New York at the Café Rouge, he would have USO days, Saturdays, and it was for the benefit of the USO. Any kid could come and you gave a quarter and they stamped your hand, with a ultraviolet light, and you got next to the bandstand, and then, you could lift your feet off the floor, you see. You were right there at the band and he'd play requests and everything else, and then, during breaks, the boys would all come down and we'd give them, say, "Oh, have a cigarette." They just mixed with us. I remember, Glenn Miller, some girl offered him candy; he took the candy and ate it. Today, can you imagine such a thing? [laughter] So, that was one way that we were very aware of that and another way was that, besides the trains, there were quite a few of us, we were collecting English-built English soldiers that came in sets of eight, five cavalry or eight infantry, all hand-painted, gorgeous. So, we started doing maneuvers with those and, by the time we were seniors, we had hundreds of them and we had very elaborate war games, with rules, what you could do and what you couldn't do kind of thing, spread out all over a backyard. [laughter] Besides that, during this time, we were all very interested in being ready. I got a rifle when I was twelve years old from my Uncle Ralph. Jack Norris had a shooting gallery in his basement his father'd rigged up with him, where we could put up targets and shoot and check them and come back, put up new targets, that sort of

thing. So, besides the trains in the basement, we would be shooting and there was plenty of woods around the area. We would buy the cheap soldiers and build forts and everything, and then, shoot them. [laughter] Besides that, then, I don't know how I did it, I got hold of tech orders for a lot of the airplanes. I knew how to run a turret in a B-17 and I knew how to run a turret in a B-29. I was a Sea Scout for a while--I could do semaphore, I could do Morse code at quite a good clip. I can't remember all the things I learned to be ready, and that did not include my studies in high school. [laughter]

SH: Was there anyone talking about isolationism? Were there any conversations around the dinner table, so-to-speak?

GB: Well …

SH: At the gas station?

GB: Thankfully, in Westfield, we didn't have much of that. Certainly, the German-American *Bund* was very prominent and Lindbergh and the rallies in Madison Square Garden. [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. The America First Committee, founded by R. Douglas Stuart, Jr., then a Yale Law student, in September 1940 became the most prominent of the isolationist organizations in the pre-Pearl Harbor period, due to the stature of its spokesperson, famed aviator Charles A. Lindbergh, an outspoken isolationist.]

SH: Do you remember those?

GB: Just vaguely, because Philip Roth has projected what would happen, but, at that time, they were not seen as a threat. [Editor's Note: Pulitzer Prize-winning author Philip Roth often draws upon his background in Newark's Jewish community in his works. Colonel Berke is referring specifically to his 2004 novel *The Plot Against America*, which details an alternate history where Charles Lindbergh becomes President in 1940.]

SH: Okay.

GB: And not even to the Jews, and so, Newark, for example, in Weequahic Park--you ever read any Philip Roth, he's big about that--that was a wonderful place. There was a special restaurant there, The Tavern, that had coconut cream pie. I remember that, because that was a treat. [laughter] Another reason--you asked me about flying and I neglected--during the Depression, how did we spend our Sundays? "Well, let's go to Newark Airport," and Newark Airport, at that time, was a meadow, [laughter] a beautiful, green meadow, and the first airplanes there were, actually biplanes, and then, when the Douglas DC-3, shiny, came in, with United and American Airlines, that was a gorgeous thing. The steps would come down and these gorgeous people would come out. You did …

SH: Dressed to the nines.

GB: You did, you were dressed to the nines to fly, and then, my dad would say, "Well, let's go to the chinks," which was his term for the Chinatown in Newark, no disrespect. We would get chicken chow mein or chop suey and I think it was twenty-five cents. That's when I got my first taste of Asian food and it was part of our Sundays that didn't cost anything, so-to-speak. So, that had to be part of my aviation experience, too, to see that and what you could do with that.

SH: Just for the record, you are wearing a really cool t-shirt that says, "52nd Street."

GB: Now, we'd get into …

SH: You were just a freshman in high school when Pearl Harbor happened.

GB: Yes.

SH: Is that correct?

GB: Yes.

SH: Okay, you talked about being in the gas station. Did you close the gas station? Did you leave it open? What did you do then?

GB: No, no, I mean, this is how my dad made his money.

SH: Okay, you stayed there.

GB: Yes.

SH: Did anyone come in and talk about the attack or what they thought this was going to be?

GB: Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't get you. No, I mean, there was nothing there, just the wind blowing. It's not like anybody came into the gas station. Everybody, anybody who was listening to the radio, knew about this and maybe eighty percent of the people weren't listening to the radio and it took awhile to get around. It was unbelievable, "How could they do that? How could they? What were we thinking?" The story, the whole story, didn't come out. It was inconceivable that the Japanese, who only made tin toys that you cut your fingers [on]--yes, this was a complete flip. Suddenly, from four-eyed people, can't see, can't make anything that works, are shooting down our airplanes, sinking our ships. I mean, that was a shock that I don't know we could duplicate. I hope we never could, because it was just, "How could *they* do that?" It wasn't even a racial thing at that point. It was just what we knew about the Japanese didn't seem to fit with what happened to us.

SH: How observant was your family?

GB: Oh, non.

SH: Okay.

GB: Not until the '50s did we start a temple in Westfield and my parents were charter members of that, but I have to say--I'm trying to think if we ever had a seder. The thing about the Nazis and the concentration camps and the death camps, things like that, didn't make you very religious. You're kind of like, "Well, hmm, who's up there?" [Editor's Note: Colonel Berke makes a raspberry noise.] Yes, really, seriously, I mean, that affected a lot of people. It was only until when it was all over that my parents got into it, and then, of course, we were the only Jewish families, the Berses, and there was a butcher and there was a drug store person. When I was in grade school and junior high, we were the only Jewish families in Westfield. The funny part was that my Gentile [non-Jewish] friends were always talking about "the Jews," but they were talking about the Italians. That was a part of our little Italian ghetto. They did the garbage and the things like that. I kept saying, "Why do you call them Jews? They're Catholics." "Well, they got big noses," and so, [laughter] I could never get Mrs. Norris, lovely as she was, to stop calling Italians Jews. [laughter]

SH: After Pearl Harbor, what was the reaction at school? How did your teachers explain it? Was it part of what you talked about the next day, that Monday?

GB: I'm sorry, you've got me there. I have no recollection of that at all.

SH: Okay.

GB: Nope.

SH: I just wondered if there had been a convocation or anything that you remember.

GB: Oh, yes, we listened to the President on the radio, "A day that will live in infamy," that sort of thing. I have to plead ignorance on that.

SH: Okay, it was a long time ago. You were a very young man at that point.

GB: It didn't show up, but, certainly, as soon as it was possible to do something, including being a bicycle courier, we did that. We're very proud of that, because I was a Sea Scout, also.

SH: Where did you serve as a Sea Scout? Was that in lieu of being a Boy Scout?

GB: Yes, that was after Boy Scouts, yes, in fact, right here. We had a broken-down boat with a Buick engine right on the Raritan River. [laughter]

SH: When you were in college here?

GB: No, no, when I was in …

SH: When you were in high school.

GB: In high school, yes.

SH: Really?

GB: Yes, that was our boat. Westfield Sea Scout boat was here on the Raritan, someplace, yes.

SH: Do you remember any of the other Sea Scouts you served with?

GB: Oh, yes, it was my cousin and just about [all my friends], (Allan Malcolm?).

SH: Do you remember who your leader was?

GB: He was Irv, yes--I can't remember, he was a really handsome guy--and he had some kind of a Navy or Coast Guard background. Yes, I was a boatswain--I could blow the whistle. [laughter] We took this all very seriously, of course, because there was the end in sight, which is we were going to be doing something with this.

SH: Had you been a Boy Scout? Did I misunderstand?

GB: Yes, I had been a Boy Scout also, but I went from there to the Sea Scouts.

SH: Had you been involved in athletics at all?

GB: I was very uncoordinated in athletics and I tried out once for the baseball team and we didn't have a proper diamond or anything at the high school for the tryouts. In fact, there was rocks and the ball hit the rock and hit me in the face and I decided I wasn't going to do that. [laughter] Just to skip, that's one of the reasons I got into crew, because that was something I could do.

SH: When you were in high school, were you planning to go to college?

GB: Yes, definitely. Well, I was very good in English. In fact, in one of our high school reunions, one of the women said, "George, you're the one that taught me to read." [laughter] I was completely flabbergasted by that, because I would bring Chaucer into the class, instead of *Silas Marner* [by George Eliot (1861)], [laughter] and the teacher would say, "What are you all laughing at?" [laughter]

SH: Oh, dear. When did music become …

GB: Oh, that, please, thank you, thank you. This is the wonderful part of what could never be repeated, so-to-speak, was the Big Bands. In New York City, there were at least three theaters that showed movies, and then, there'd be one of the Big Bands there as part of the total show. So, as I said, on the weekend, you could get from Westfield to New York for twenty-five cents. So, I remember, we were thirteen and there were three of us that wanted to go. Mr. Malcolm, the Wall Street lawyer, had us over and says, "Okay, I'm going to give you a plan. You get off the ferry and you walk up here and you take the subway up to," again, I can't remember, it was Chambers or Courtland, "That's the express. Then, you take the express to 42nd Street, and then,

you get in line at the Paramount." For example, Frank Sinatra was there, as his first time, really, and so, you'd go see the movie and listen to the band. Then, he had us go up to a restaurant that sold roast beef sandwiches, "Something of Sheepshead Bay," [laughter] and then, getting into the local, taking it down to 34th Street, get out at Macy's. At Macy's, we'd then go in and we'd look at these W. Britain English soldiers, the ones we had the money for and bought. We would do that, and then, we would go down, back the same way, and get on the ferry and come home. Well, by the time we were fourteen, [laughter] we were doing that or we'd stop at Jack Dempsey's and I was having Singapore Slings, for God's sakes. I can't believe it. [laughter] Then, in high school, I met John Fell and John said, "Well, you like Glenn Miller, but what do you know about jazz?" and I said, "Well, I like Woody Herman and Artie Shaw, yes." He says, "Well, that's not the real jazz." So, he introduced me to Nick's in Greenwich Village. It was a hangout for the Army Air Force pilots. That's how it got its reputation. It was a steakhouse, but there were a group of musicians there that were fronted by Eddie Condon. It was called "the Chicago school" and most of them were from the Austin High [Gang] in Chicago and they would jam all the time. I still have many, many records of it, and Condon started Carnegie Hall--I mean, excuse me, Town Hall--Concerts on Saturday, where he'd bring any musician from any band and these guys wanted to do this. If they played something with one of the Big Bands, they're there with Condon, they could jam. Duke Ellington had a Carnegie Hall concert and John Fell and I went to the Duke Ellington concert and I brought the program. We went back down to Nick's, where we're recognized, where we would hand out cigarettes, where we would buy drinks. This time, I was a junior, I believe. It was nice to walk into a place like that where the guys nod at you, they know who you are. That, the program, I had everybody there sign it. That was worth a couple of thousand dollars.

SH: I would think so.

GB: Tax deductible, when I gave it to Newark Jazz [the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers-Newark], yes. It's part of other things that I gave them, autographed records by Duke Ellington, Johnny Hodges, things like that. [laughter]

SH: Amazing.

GB: So, this was a golden time for this and for us. We felt we were really big guys and they accepted us, because we were business, anyway, and we thought we were really going to do it for our senior prom, Westfield Senior Prom. We had a local band of young guys and we had a hundred dollars. So, we took the hundred dollars into Nick's and we asked Bobby Hackett if he would come play at our senior prom. The young boys' band would do it for nothing, to play with Bobby Hackett, and he tried to arrange that. In fact, we were just holding our breath and [he said], "Yes, well, somebody had to take my place to do this," and he had to take his place to do that and all this kind of stuff. Hundred dollars, for a night, was pretty good money. So, I know he really tried, but that was one of the biggest disappointments of my young life at that point, that we couldn't get Bobby Hackett, but …

SH: You were that close.

GB: We were that close. [laughter] One of the things I did, I wanted to get my friends in the class hierarchy, and so, I made a couple of speeches. I said, "We've got to get rid of the cliques, the jocks and the cheerleaders and all this kind of stuff," and people bought it. I had another friend, Dick Burton, he was a very sophisticated young man and I guess in his family--had my first liquor, I think, in Dick's house, because he opened up his folks' cabinet. [laughter] When John and Dick and I would [get together], we would go to a DeMolay dance or something, on a Friday night, and sit around. We'd be smoking our Chesterfields and [say], "Oh, well, this is kind of boring. Let's go to Nick's." This was our thing--we'd go down to the train station, catch the next train, go to New York. [laughter] One of the interesting things was, my mother absolutely enjoyed this very much, that I was doing this. She trusted me and I would always manage to get home, sooner or later. [laughter] So, yes, it was really great. I've yet to find one of my colleagues who admits to this, [laughter] but, after the senior prom, with one of the top girls in my Model A Ford, I said, "Well, the one thing that I'm proud of here in Westfield was, I busted up the cliques," and she turned to me and said, "George, you were in the tightest clique in the school." [laughter] I can say I'll never forget that. Boy, that really drove it home.

SH: When was your senior prom? Where did you have your senior prom?

GB: Oh, dear; I'm sorry, I don't recall, must have been some local place there. I don't recall that.

SH: What about politics during World War II, while you were in high school? Was there any discussion about Roosevelt's ability to run for election again? Was your family political at all?

GB: Well, as far as the family goes, they were definitely [pro]-Roosevelt and, in fact, though, I don't think it was terribly borne out by history, but they had the impression that Roosevelt was good for the Jews. [laughter]

SH: You talked a bit about the NRA. Did you know of anyone who was involved in any of the New Deal programs, like the CCC camps?

GB: Not in Westfield.

SH: Westfield was immune from this.

GB: Absolutely, absolutely.

SH: WPA?

GB: Westfield would empty out in the train station for New York and to Wall Street. I don't know if it's still that way, but I know I live in Northern Virginia, very high house prices, but I can't move to Westfield. [laughter]

SH: Were people there affected by the stock market crash and the Depression in the 1930s?

GB: None of my friends. As I said, they were all very well-off and old money, never--Mrs. Norris would say, "Chevrolet's good enough for me, that's what I want." She would never buy

anything more than a Chevrolet. When you're around people like that, there's nothing wrong with my family, but to see how the wealthy lived back in those days, or at least the people I know, they were very thrifty. They didn't flaunt anything, and their kids, I had a car before they did. Jack used to have keys made and he used to steal his parents' cars and we'd drive around, after they were asleep, [laughter] but he didn't have a car; I had a car. So, it was a great way to grow up. I mean, I could walk into their houses. They never locked their doors. I'd just say, "Hey, I'm here, Mrs. Norris," and go down in the cellar, work on the trains. It was just an idealized kind of situation.

SH: With the war going on, were you limited in the kind of vacations you took? Did you take vacations? Owning a gas station, it might have been a little tough.

GB: No, like I said, my dad was making good money. Even though it was a small place, people came to him. If I may, I can talk about some of the things that really impressed me about my dad. There was a fellow, he had a still pretty much brand-new convertible. I remember it was a tomato red convertible. This was probably just maybe in '42 or so. He'd sent it in for an oil change and a grease job and one of the help put the door down on it and it creased the trunk. My dad, "Quick," there was a shop in Westfield run by, later, quite a famous guy, Walt Hansgen, in the racing world, "take it down to Hansgen's, quick," goes down to Hansgen's. Hansgen knows what to do, fixes it, paint matches absolutely. Car comes back, parked, "Hi, Jimmy, here." Jimmy never knew, and then, the next time, help drove in an old, beat-up car--I mean, it was as beat-up [as] you could, paint shot, everything else--and creased the fender bringing it into the lift; same thing, "Hansgen, get it down." He fixed the fender and matched the crappy paint absolutely and the guy came to pick up his car, "Hi, sure, here you go," never said a word, never knew a thing.

SH: Had your father been in World War I?

GB: He had been in uniform, like so many others, and he was at Camp Yaphank, [Camp Upton in Yaphank, Long Island, New York], when the war was over, yes. I had an uncle who was in the Navy. I don't know how far he got.

SH: I had forgotten to ask that before.

GB: Yes. So, my Uncle Ralph, we went out, moved out, but he was so upset about not being able to make a contribution. He fought and fought and fought to get into the Coast Guard and they finally gave him a petty officer, first class, rating and he went down to Long Branch. He was, by that time, married and had a child and all, but he wanted to contribute to the war effort. A side story to that is, you asked me about a vacation--me and some of my friends drove down, I'm trying to remember where exactly, it wasn't on the beach, but it was somewhere around Point Pleasant. We'd rented a cottage and I went out and my Model A wouldn't start. [laughter] "Oh, what are we going to do?" and I said, "Let's get a telephone." I called the Coast Guard station and I says, "Uncle Ralph, my car won't start." "I'll be right down," okay. So, everybody's going, "Oh, what are we going to do, what are we going to do?" can't get to the beach without a car and all this kind of stuff. Next thing you know, a jeep pulls up and Uncle Ralph comes out, lifts the

hood, fiddles around, points, something like that--car starts. My friends looked at me like, "Who is this guy? [laughter] He can get the Coast Guard to come fix his car."

SH: What did your mother do? Did she work outside the home? What kept her busy?

GB: Oh, she kept the books for my dad, yes, for everything he did, back in the bar and whatever. When he didn't have any money, she didn't do that, she kept house for my grandmother and my uncle and us, and my sister came along at the same time. So, she was quite busy, and then, she kept the books for the gas station. Then, when my dad went into the auto parts business, bought himself an auto parts store, she worked on that. So, my mom kept pretty busy. She was always a good homemaker, and so, here we are and it's graduation time.

SH: I was just going to say, you were getting ready to graduate. [laughter]

GB: I was going in--this was in May--I was going into New York City with Allan. He wanted to enlist in the Navy V-12 Program and there still is, I think, a recruiting station in Times Square. So, that's where we're going. Just about the time we got there, there was pandemonium all over the place and V-E Day had been declared. The war in Germany was over and the crowd went crazy. I swear I saw sailors kissing nurses, even though that picture is from V-J Day. [laughter] [Editor's Note: V-E Day was declared on May 8, 1945. V-J Day was declared on August 14, 1945, in the United States.] Some guy in the *Times* Building crawled out on a ledge and was doing Hitler, going like this. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Colonel Berke indicates that the man was imitating the Nazi salute, and then, indicating the death of the Nazis.]

SH: Really?

GB: Yes, I mean, and Allan says, "Well, I guess I'll come back and enlist some other day." [laughter] So, I got a letter from the Army Air Force and it said that, "Well, we really don't need pilots much anymore. You can resign right now or you can stay in as an Enlisted Reserve," whatever that meant. [laughter] I didn't see any sense in not continuing on. So, I stayed in the Enlisted Reserve, and so, the rule was, then, that graduate high school, plus eighteen years old, you reported down to Camp Dix. So, that's how I started that. I do want to mention, though, that I was flying Cubs around and I took great pride in the fact that I was still doing it when all my friends, that it was just a fad for them and I was flying around. There was this one cheerleader I really wanted to take to New York. [laughter] I wrote her a note and put it on a ribbon and I flew over her house and opened the door. She came out and I threw it down. So, I got the date. [laughter] I took her to see Count Basie at the Hotel Lincoln. So, I had made myself a reputation, already.

SH: Did you have to wear a tuxedo when you went into New York?

GB: Oh, goodness, no. I can't remember. We did dress, though.

SH: I was just curious. Some of the photographs we see are very formal.

GB: Well, not for us kids, I remember, [laughter] even though we were acting as adults. The result of that, for me, was that was one of these things that, "Oh, yes, been there and done that." When I came back out of the Army and came to Rutgers, I don't know if I went to New York more than a couple of times.

SH: Really?

GB: Yes.

SH: I thought you would have been the leader of the pack. [laughter]

GB: No.

SH: With all this experience.

GB: I don't see how, maybe self-consciously, I could ever get back to that situation, where it was so unusual to have us kids walk in there and just …

SH: Be recognized.

GB: Be recognized, yes.

SH: You had enlisted as a senior. You report to Fort Dix how soon after graduation?

GB: Well, it's right there--as long as you were eighteen and you graduated. 3 July, '45, was my induction.

SH: Okay, very soon after.

GB: Yes.

SH: This was actually before the war ended in the Pacific.

GB: Yes.

SH: With the Japanese surrender.

GB: Yes, it'd have to be.

SH: Did you have a sense that the war was almost over? What were your perceptions then?

GB: Well, my perception was that I wanted to be a fighter pilot. [laughter] Being Jewish and having the Germans taken care of took a lot of energy out of it, in that sense, but the Japanese, their conduct during the war, to anybody, the Chinese, to our people, to anybody they came up [against], was so brutal. It's so hard to imagine it, with today's Japan. I had a theory about this, which probably doesn't go over too well with people, but I said, "Who are our friends today?

The people we beat the crap out of, that's who," and this idea of collateral damage, "We killed one Afghan and the war is lost," I said, "We just slaughtered a hundred thousand Japs in Tokyo, we bombed Berlin and every German city--they're our friends now." So, I don't know, I just feel like we're going at all this the wrong way, frankly. [laughter] They're not looking at history, but, like I say, it's very hard now, especially with the Japs, excuse me, [laughter] Japanese. They're so peaceful, such peaceful people, you'd hardly get them to do anything. Well, they learned their lesson. Militarism didn't work for them, and so, they just stopped. I've had some really great times in Japan, but, still, that was the idea, was to be a pilot. It was obvious we're going to win the war. I mean, we were building ships so fast; imagine having twenty carriers in a taskforce, I mean, just phenomenal what we were able to do back then. Our industrial capacity, building a couple of bombers a day, thousands of fighter planes--this was a miracle--that Henry Kaiser, you got one ship a day down the line, down the ways. "We can build them faster than they can sink them," oh, it was the attitudes then. I mean, you talk about nostalgia, that's where it hits for me. Boy, it was so forceful to be part of that. You were part of that, and the women, too--the women went to work. They'd do the flying and some of them were flying fighters and bombers, to the dismay of the male pilots.

SH: That is true.

GB: So, everybody who could was in it. [laughter]

SH: What about rationing of sugar and things that would affect your mother's ability to run the household? Was that ever a problem or did you just adjust as it came along?

GB: [laughter] I don't know how to answer that. It wasn't anything that really bothered us, I can tell you that; maybe meat. Everything went for our boys and we didn't mind. Even in lovely Westfield, we were losing brothers. The Malcolms, their most handsome and gracious first son was killed, ran into a mountain flying a B-24. John Fell's brilliant brother was a navigator on a B-17 and he disappeared, that plane disappeared. John has been trying to find for years, and asked my help in finding out, what happened to his brother's plane. It was so secret, still, somehow, that he never did. His name is in the [Cambridge] American Cemetery in Madingley, England. I've seen it on the wall, but no remains or anything like that. In fact, there's a huge wall, if you've ever been there, full of names of people who went down and [were] never recovered.

SH: I saw it when I was younger.

GB: Yes, it's near Duxford and (Deptford?), too. [laughter] So, I think I've pretty much--any further questions about that?

SH: Were you at Fort Dix when the war finally ended?

GB: Oh, no, no ma'am.

SH: How long were you at Dix?

GB: No, no, let's see, soon as we got there, they give you all these clothes that don't fit and everything else.

SH: This is in 1945.

GB: Yes, and then, an Air Force pilot comes in his pinks and greens [officer's uniform] and says, "Well, you guys, you're in this Army, but we're going to get you down to an Air Force base, which is a really great place, Keesler Field, Biloxi, Mississippi." So, okay, we all pile on Pullman cars, we had then, and this was a levy from New Jersey and New York City, Brooklyn, whatever, a fair amount of Jewish kids that you wouldn't find in anyplace else, in that sense. So, we get on this train and it takes days in the heat and we get into Keesler Field and it is known as the hellhole of the South. It was specially advertised by the columnist Walter Winchell, whose son died of pneumonia down there. [Editor's Note: Radio personality and journalist Walter Winchell did criticize conditions at military facilities in World War II, but the death of his son at Kessler Field is an urban legend. His only son committed suicide in 1968.] It was--the only word you could call for--it was hellish. It was very hot and all of the buildings that, like, we ate in, was tarpaper shacks, black, black, black, and no such thing as air conditioning or even fans and the windows were way up top. We had these metal trays that you had your food on and what you learned is that the middle one was for sweat. [laughter] You didn't put your food in the middle one; you put your food around it. We were--it wasn't me particularly, but some of the other guys--kind of objected to the fact that all of our instructors were Southerners. Back then, the Civil War was still on. It was absolute and here they had all these "Yankees," and so, they were really hard on us. We fought back, and so, for example, any time we marched between classes, we had to put gas masks on. The thing about a rubber gas mask, when you're sweating, is that it burns your skin, everywhere we went. [laughter] So, this was war. Near the end of our training, we said, "Oh, no, we dropped some kind of a bomb on Japan." By this time--let me discuss my career as a pilot at that particular point--when we got there, we knew we had certain tests we took. One of them was a thing they called the Stanine and what it was, psychomotor skills, all kinds of different things you had to do, responding to lights and things and turntables that are off center and all this kind of stuff. They called it the Stanine because the top grade for any of these events was a nine. So, I did that and I could tell, looking at the sergeant who was running it, he said, "You've got a nine." This is my ADD coming into effect, my nerves--I was so damned fast. [laughter] I did everything absolutely correct, and so, I was still in line to go to flight school. It was shrinking, it was shrinking down, shrinking down. We were finally in just one barracks of us who were still considered qualified, even though the doctor told me I would be disqualified because I only weighed 110 pounds. I said, "You get me out of this place and I'll get some [food]." [laughter] Well, when V-J came, I know some of the guys were crying about this, because they knew they weren't going to be a fighter pilot. I didn't cry, because, by this time, I was so disgusted with [the way] things were that I just wanted to get out of there. So, are you ready for my enlisted career? [laughter]

SH: Sure, that is where we go next, right?

GB: Yes.

SH: On the base, when you knew the war was over, was there any celebration?

GB: Well, I was telling you, in my barracks, there was crying.

SH: Yes.

GB: Yes, because we were wanting to do something. This was the backlog of all this …

SH: Right.

GB: … build-up and, now, we weren't going to get a chance.

SH: Had anybody gone with you from Westfield? Was anyone else interested in the Air Corps?

GB: No.

SH: Okay.

GB: Everybody else was drafted, all my friends. Well, no, Allan went into the V-12 Program, that's true, he did, but I think everybody--John Fell was drafted, Jack Norris was drafted.

SH: You were still in this one barracks, set for flight school. What happens next?

GB: Well, what to do with us? I ended up in the flight records section on the base, where you added up pilots' flying time and you used the manual adding machines. I would be going, "Tick, tick, tick, shunk. Tick, tick, tick, shunk," and these women there were going [Colonel Berke makes adding machine noise at a much faster speed]. [laughter] They would look at me and just laugh--they knew, "What are we going to do with this guy?" Nobody knows what to do with anybody anymore, and so, then, I was shipped to Scott Field, Illinois. I was going to be a radio operator. They still needed radio operators and they had the radio school there and I was with an entirely new group of people. I made friends with Ed (Weird?) Armistead, and that's a famous name from Richmond, one of the FFVs. He told me about what an FFV was--First Families of Virginia--and Bill, I can't remember Bill's name. He was a football player from Naperville, [Illinois], and I visited his family up there in Naperville. So, I got into the Midwest for the first time and I was very pleased with the Midwest. We would go to St. Louis on our weekends off and we were so welcomed in St. Louis. You couldn't buy a beer; this is where Budweiser was before it went anywhere else. We would have a thing--we would go to the Catholic USO on Saturdays and they would have a dance, pretty girls and refreshments, and then, Sundays, we'd go to the Jewish USO and we had bagels and lox. [laughter] So, that was our rotation. When you were out of money, in Forest Park, St. Louis, it was full of very nice tents and, for twenty-five cents, you could get a tent, a soldier could get a tent.

SH: Really?

GB: Yes, and we loved St. Louis for that. One day, they said, "Berke, go look at the bulletin board," and here was the list of all of us and there was a big red line drawn under the last "C." "All A, B and C, report to the theater." This is selection, right. [laughter] I have to tell you,

anything you hear about this part of our Armed Forces would be disowned by anybody in there now, [laughter] but this was the end of the war, okay. We go in the theater and the officer says--well, I'll give you the history, I'm not exactly sure what he said--but [he said], "President Truman has been hit on by Congress, by mothers and everything, 'Bring the boys home. We want to start their life.' We need to get everybody out and that we are not set up to do that. So, we are starting a separation center here on Scott Field with an aim of processing 350 people a day, just for discharge. Now, all right, who wants to be a clerk? Who wants to be a medic?" I raise my hand, okay.

SH: You raised your hand to become a medic. [laughter]

GB: I raised my hand for medic. It's a little more, something more than clerks. [laughter] So, okay, we're going to start this. "Okay, now, George, you sit in this chair and you inspect penises. [laughter] Say, 'Milk it down.' If there's any drip, you send him off," and I did this day after day. I'd write home and they'd say, "Oh, George is a penis machinist." [laughter] Everybody's getting a big laugh out of this. Here I am, going to be a fighter pilot and, now, this is what I'm doing. [laughter] So, somebody takes pity on me and says, "Okay, all right, he's fine. We're going to move you up to urinalysis." So, I come to this place--I think the last guy probably committed suicide or something [laughter]--down the hall, men, and even women, holding bottles and what I have is a hotplate. Remember, this whole thing was just thrown together, right. I've got a hotplate and I've got a test tube rack with water in it. You put a sample and a reagent that comes, you put a drop of the reagent in, and you boil it for, like, five minutes. If there's any sugar, it turns red and you pull that person out. I don't know, it didn't take me the rest of the day and I said, "This is impossible. Everybody's looking at me out there, especially the women holding a bottle--oh, geez." So, I said to--we actually had some medical people in there--I said, "Really, do I have to just do one? Supposing I do three at a time and I keep them separate, so [that] if there is a red one, I know which ones it is." He says, "Sure." So, that was my first consulting job. I cleaned out the backlog, ta-da. [laughter] So, that took care of that. So, they rewarded me, "Now, you can go to blood." Well, here we are, everybody's eighteen and we are stabbing people, everybody, colonel nurses, whatever, no training, with the old, former stuff, nothing like we got today. You have a syringe and you have a needle, okay, and you have a stone to grind the needle, and you have sterilizing.

SH: Thank God. [laughter]

GB: Right. So, it goes like this--the person comes in, you tie them up, you know how that goes. You get a vein, you stick them. You have to use your pinkie to draw the blood out, or you untie it first, pull it out. Then, the needle comes out and goes in a sterilizer and, if you think it needs sharpening, sharpen it. The blood goes into a test tube with a label on it. Then, that comes apart, and then, each one goes into the sterilizer, okay. At some point around, it comes out and is reassembled. We looked at this and we were having problems--threading veins, hematomas, guys trying three or four times to stick somebody. We said, "Wait a minute, let's have a meeting. [laughter] Let's have a meeting and we are going to do an assembly line on this. Here, we're going to have rules. All right, we have rules, rules, rules. First of all, we're all going to rotate. So, you stick somebody, you go like that and ask for the next person, because that, somebody else does that part, and somebody else assembles, okay, just for a little while. Then, you switch,

all right. If you miss one vein, you can do the other arm, but, if you miss that, you're out, because you're nervous, they're nervous." Armistead, who was a little bigger, and, of course, he's real Southern and all, so, we made him a sergeant. So, if somebody had a problem, we said, "Wait a minute. Oh, Sergeant Armistead, will you please take care of this person?" [laughter] and they relaxed. I mean, this was fabulous stuff. We did it. We'd end the day completely covered in blood, but we were doing the job. I said, "Well, I remember Willie Sutton, when he wanted to rob a safe, [laughter] he used emery cloth on his fingers. Let's do that." [laughter] So, we would do emery cloth on our fingers and I could take the fattest person and get a pulse, and then, I'd come in and I could feel the difference between the needle when I hit the vein, then, come out. At the end of paydays, the rest of my career, I could get five or ten dollars by saying, "Let me show you how I can stick myself." That's what people did. They'll say, "You can't do that." I said, "Yes, I can," and I would, [laughter] but we became experts at it and it's one of the things to learn. You don't have to be a doctor.

SH: Just adaptable.

GB: Yes, I mean, you have to know maybe one thing, if you know how to do it well, and we did. As you can guess, this is great training in cooperation, leadership, things like that we took out of this. So, the next thing I know, I am now a qualified 858 medical laboratory technician, which was not the case, of course. [laughter] I was then sent to Buckley Field Regional Hospital, outside of Denver, Colorado. Of course, I know I'd been to St. Louis and we lived a year in Pittsfield, [Massachusetts], when my dad was looking for work and he had relatives up there. So, I'd been to Massachusetts and all that, but, of course, I'd never been any further West. I remember--we had Pullmans then--I remember waking up and the sun was coming up on Pikes Peak. I guess it's the most gorgeous thing I ever saw, and so, we were in a different world. Denver is what it is today because of the war, because a lot of people saw Denver, they wanted to come back. So, now, I was in a real lab. Let me talk a little bit just about Denver, first of all. There was a trolley line from Lowry Field, which we eventually moved to, all the way to Golden and Golden was off by itself. You could rent a horse in Larimer Street, Denver, and you could ride it out to Golden and, of course, we were in uniform then and you got a free beer. [laughter] This is how the legend of Coors was spread, because Coors was not known outside of that part of Colorado, but just everybody came back, we said, "Gee whiz, Coors, Coors." It took years for Coors to come this way, but people would buy it and put it in ice and bring it home and all this kind of stuff. So, that was part of the recreation there. So, they put me to work cleaning Petri dishes. Now, how you do Petri dishes, if you want this, how this is done, you go out with a big needle and you stick a sheep in the leg and you draw the sheep's blood. Then, you have a jelly and sheep's blood in the disk. Then, any bacteria that is evident, when you swab this and put it in an oven for a while, will grow. If it comes out clean, there's no bacteria. If there's bacteria in it, then, you identify the bacteria by certain characteristics of it. I had sinks full of this stuff. Day after day, I was scraping and cleaning, and cleaning and cleaning. [laughter] There were a lot of civilians there in this lab and, one day, I started throwing them into the sink. I was throwing them. I said, "Goddamn it, I'm supposed to be a lab technician and I want to be a lab technician. I'm not going to do this damn job anymore." [laughter] So, Lieutenant Katz came along, says, "Okay, okay, George, all right, please stop. So, all right, we're going to give you urine, urinalysis." He said, "You're going to be able to do that," and so, this is a little racy, I guess, but the person who did urine was Althea. She was quite a striking young woman and she was

slightly crippled, so, there was a sort of an air of mystery to her. So, she was teaching me how the things you do is, you take the sample and you spin it and you see what comes out the bottom and you do counts, white cell counts, things of that nature. We all used little clickers back then. I don't know what they--I'm sure they don't do that now. The thing about Althea was that she always broke in the virgins and it was my turn. [laughter] So, I was anxiously awaiting this and it turns out that she got engaged to the last guy who was doing this. [laughter] So, everybody was joking about me, "Oh, George, you missed it, sorry." So, anyway, then, the next thing was hematology and that was the one I liked the best. I'd go out in the wards and I'd stick people and I'd come back and we would separate the blood. We had various kind of [samples] with the microscope, and you'd look down and I learned to identify different cells--red, white, eosinophils, whatever--and you'd click, and then, you'd write down the ratios. This meant something to a doctor and, pretty soon, it meant something to me, too. Well, I talked about the dissolution of the Armed Forces. I was part of that at Scott, taking all these people out. Some of the first people to leave were the doctors. Most of the physicians were gone by the time I was a lab technician at Lowry and we had recent graduates. Some of them weren't even interns and we had an old man in the lab, Sergeant Moreland. He'd been there since the start of the war and he knew just about every diagnosis there was. What would happen was, the young doctors would come down to the lab with the slips we'd given them and say, "What do you think this is?" Almost every night, we would all sit around and, like, if Sergeant Moreland knew, he said, "Oh, well, when Doctor, when Major, So-and-So was here, this is what he said and this is what he said," but, otherwise, we'd all get together and work on it. I got so I could go out into a ward with some slips of people the doctors wanted tested and I could look at other people and I'd say to the nurse, and she was very grateful, "Give me a slip for this guy." I would do whatever I thought he needed. Most of the time, strep throats were really big out in Denver, probably still are, and I'd give them a swab, and then, come back. I knew just by looking after a while--you just got to know things like that. So, I was very proud of the work I was doing there.

SH: Were the patients trying to be discharged? Were they wounded?

GB: No, just sick. This is all sick, and deaths, auto accidents, whatever.

SH: However, they were all in the military.

GB: Yes.

SH: Were the young doctors coming out of civilian life or the military?

GB: Well, whatever they did to get a medical degree. They were residents, I guess you'd call them.

SH: They were in the military.

GB: Yes.

SH: Okay.

GB: But, that's all we had.

SH: Okay, I just wanted to be sure.

GB: There were a few surgeons around, because they wanted to stay in the military for various reasons, but we had people dying all the time, mishandled. It was very depressing. So, I got into blood chemistry, which wasn't quite as interesting. Then, one day, another corporal walked in and he said, "I don't like the job I have and I would like to be a lab technician." "So, what is your job?" He said, "Oh, I'm studio engineer at Armed Forces Radio." [laughter] He says, "But, somebody has to take my place." "You're a studio engineer at Armed Forces Radio? Lieutenant Katz, [laughter] this soldier wants to be a lab technician and I'd be willing to trade." "Sure, George," done. I report to the station. Now, I'm a studio engineer for Armed Forces Radio. So, back then, we didn't have LPs or anything like we got today. They're all shellac records. Sergeant Kuhnhousen, from the West Coast, was a great, avid classical devotee and he played classical music most of the day. What you did, you had two turntables and, of course, they still do this in studios, but, while one record's playing, you tune into this one and you get the first note and you back it off. Then, you get to know the symphonies, when that last note [plays] there, you let go and you keep going, and so, after a while, I got to be seamless. Nobody knew the records were playing until you come to the flipside. [laughter] Then, you'd push the button, say, "One moment, please," flip it. So, I was getting an education, really, because we were playing these most of the day. So, we'd gone through just any kind of [classical music], French, German, American, whatever. I still remember the lessons I learned there and I said, "Hey, I'd like to have a jazz program of my own." "Sure." So, we had a huge collection, V-Discs, they were called, every orchestra, performer, everything, gave to the military for free. This is all part of World War II. So, there were enormous selections of every artist you could think of, and then, they would do special holiday shows on a huge sixteen-inch, thirty-three-and-a-half [record], one thing, Bing Crosby, Bob Hope. They were always big with that sort of thing. So, I had a lot of material to work with to do a jazz show. Then, my mother wrote me and said, "Oh, my friend John Fell is at Lowry Field. He's a private." He was drafted and nobody knew what to do with anybody back then. I mean, what are you going to do? So, I found him and I said, "Oh, well, this is Corporal Berke, Armed Forces Radio. I'd like to have Private Fell come over a couple of times a week." I gave him a schedule. Here comes my buddy from Westfield, [laughter] who introduced me to jazz, and so, then, we would have a great time doing jazz shows.

SH: You would introduce them and talk about them.

GB: Oh, yes.

SH: What was the format?

GB: What was the format? Well, just the same as you would get from any other disc jockey, really. We'd play the music and, if there was something interesting about it, then, you would call attention to it, in a sense.

SH: Did you have a schedule that you followed? Were you on in the evening or morning?

GB: Yes, yes. I couldn't tell you what it was. I think it was afternoon, afternoon. I don't remember working nights; I'm not sure we even were on then or we went to some canned sort of thing. The Sergeant and his classical [music], he would talk about the music and the composer and that sort of thing, and then, I would try to do the same thing with jazz.

SH: Where was this broadcast, just in that area?

GB: Yes, yes, just in …

SH: Was it recorded for other places?

GB: No, we never got past Lowry Field. I mean, that was the kind of station it was. It was for morale.

SH: Where were you housed at Lowry?

GB: Oh, we're in barracks, the regular wooden barracks everybody had. It was very interesting, I mean, all kinds of people, especially in the labs, and a lot of cooperation, because we had alcohol, and so, we could get anything we wanted. Sergeant (Mooreland?) had it worked out with the ambulance people. So, for X amount of alcohol, they would go into town and buy steaks and bring them back. I remember, for some reason, we did Russian dances and we made up our own lyrics, "Onward to Iran, we want Iraq and Turkey, too," [laughter] because it became very obvious, after the war, that the Russians were no longer our friends. They were going to gobble up anything they could gobble up. I mean, it just happened instantaneously, just about. So, that was one of the things we did. We were still all kids; I mean, I'd have to emphasize that.

SH: How long was your enlistment at this point?

GB: It was eighteen months, and so, it got around to December and they froze everybody. They said, "Gee, we can't afford to let anybody go. We're just so short of people here at the hospital." So, well, this is my first experience with non-commissioned officers, who know just about everything. They said, "I'll get you out." What's he going to do? So, the oldest non-commissioned officer, with the most kids and the most service, it was Christmas leave and the commander of the hospital left the hospital in charge of a second lieutenant. So, the Sergeant gave his hard luck story and [the Lieutenant said], "Oh, well, sure," signed him off; next in line, another sergeant, whatever, not quite as much, but next in line. By the end of the day, everybody was in line and off we went. My buddy at that time--when I think about it now, I wish I'd looked him up--his name was John Maxim Lee and his forebear, one of his forebears, invented the first machine-gun, the Maxim machine-gun. He was a buck sergeant, I was a corporal. The reason I was a corporal was because I was always out of uniform. Every time the Colonel would go by and I was in a T-shirt, he would note this, and so, I never made sergeant, even though I was doing a sergeant's job, but that was okay with me. I would just say, "Oh, here comes the Colonel again and I'm in my T-shirt." [laughter] So, John had a beautiful Model A and we used to go into town with it and have dates and things like that. It was really in good shape and he says, "Well, you're kind of a mechanic. You've worked in service stations and everything. Let's drive this to New Jersey and I'll go up to Connecticut," and I said, "Sure." So, we strapped on a couple

of gallons of antifreeze and a couple of gallons of oil. It was wintertime in Colorado, [laughter] There was no heat, and we had sleeping bags. So, the guy that wasn't driving was in his sleeping bag and we took off and it was so brilliant and so cold. You could see a town hours away. [laughter] We floored that car. It never came off full power. So, we were going about sixty miles an hour and daylight came when we were in Kansas and things started failing. We started putting in extra antifreeze and extra oil and we kept flogging that car across Kansas and into Missouri and, by that time, we'd lost our electrics. So, we realized that we could not drive at night anymore. We pulled into Hannibal, Missouri, Mark Twain's home, [laughter] and we got to the train station and it was just like a horse with John. He says, "Would you please take my car and put it someplace?" He didn't want to know what happened to it. [laughter] So, I found an empty lot, parked it, and we got on the train called *The Mark Twain*, the Burlington *Zephyr* [Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad], our first ride in a diesel train, down to St. Louis. It was really incredibly good, quite small, and the porters who were serving dinner and everything had to bend over, [laughter] but everybody was proud to be on this first streamliner, yes.

SH: You should have been terribly interested in that.

GB: I was, definitely, believe me.

SH: Loving trains as you did as a child.

GB: Yes, and I had one, a Lionel one. So, it was true, but you can't buy them now. Yes, they cost about six hundred dollars to get one. I keep looking for one that I could afford. So, we got to St. Louis and got on the train and came home, and so, that was the end of Corporal Berke's career. [laughter] They asked me if I wanted to stay in the Reserve and, for the first time in my life, including even now, I didn't volunteer. It was incredibly right at that time, because, in Korea, I would have been a medical lab technician, not a fighter pilot. I'd have been recalled right away, because it was a critical skill.

SH: Yes, I was going to ask how you avoided that, but, now, I see.

GB: Yes.

SH: This was in December of …

GB: '46.

SH: What were your plans then?

GB: Well, they didn't have half semesters. There was no flexibility in school. I had to wait until September. So, after you've been in the Army and shoveled coal and walked tours and did all kinds of stuff, going to work was no big thing. [laughter] So, I went out to the General Motors plant and I got a job as a checker in the bearings. The guys would bring their bearings to me and I would check them over and write them a pay slip for it. The fact that I would be rejecting bearings didn't work too well with me and the labor, and so, I decided I wanted to get out of there. [laughter] Then, I got a job as a paper tester. This is the day when there was industry all

over this country, even in Westfield. This was in Garwood, just down the road from Westfield, and here was this factory that made paper for wallboard, virgin paper for the white side and newspapers for the dark side. My job was, after the rolls were done, to check it, how tight it was, and then, the chemical composition. I had a little lab and this all worked and that's how I got the job. It was very pleasant and the poor guys that were doing this stuff, they had burns all over them and it was just a terrible job, but I was management, so-to-speak. Especially on the night shift, they had huge piles of waste paper, and we'd call it recycled today, I had a machine and I would go in there and I tipped them all over. I'd look for magazines and things I wanted to read for the night. [laughter] I mean, it was a fun job and the pay was good. So, the question was, where was I going to go to school? Well, Armistead told me I ought to go to Washington and Lee. So, my dad was very supportive and there's a two-lane road from Westfield to Staunton, Virginia. He drove me down there and they looked at my high school records and said, well, I didn't quite measure up to that. So, there it went. Then, I really wanted to go to Middlebury, because I wanted to be a writer, and Middlebury had the same opinion of my high school records. [laughter] However, veterans got to take all kinds of aptitude tests and, I'm trying to think, remember where it was, Chase, I think, somewhere in Hoboken, I went there. As usual, I'm a great test taker and this really nice woman, she looked at this and she said, "George, you're going to have to make up your mind about something." She said, "You got ninety-six percentile for English and you got ninety-six percentile for engineering. What do you want to do?" Well, I really liked engineering, but I said, "I would rather associate with English." [laughter] Okay, so, I was going to be an English major and my Uncle Ralph came to me one day, he says, "What about Rutgers?" "Oh, Rutgers, what about Rutgers?" Rutgers was just a little cow town with a church in the middle of it. [laughter] "Well, they're really expanding." "Is that so? Well," I said, "sure, I've got to go someplace, Uncle Ralph," and so, Uncle Ralph is pumping [the] gas of Senator Clifford Case, who's a customer. He says, "My nephew George is a veteran and he got very good scores on his aptitude test. I think he'd be a good student for you." The next thing you know, I'm accepted at Rutgers. There's still a chair here for Clifford Case and I would kiss his stone. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Clifford P. Case (1904-1982), a Republican, served as a Representative from New Jersey in the US House of Representatives from 1945 to 1953 and in the US Senate from 1955 to 1979.]

[TAPE PAUSED]

GB: Where I lived, okay.

SH: Now, we are at Rutgers.

GB: Okay, we're at Rutgers. I come in and I have the original Cushman motor scooter that my dad sold in the '30s. He found who had it and I had it. The Class of 1951 was housed at Camp Kilmer and I was back in the same barracks that I had left not a year before. [laughter] Here we all were, and most of us were vets anyway, double bunks, a footlocker, the whole thing. There were some desks, I think--I'm pretty sure they managed to get some desks, somehow--but that is where we lived and we would commute from Camp Kilmer to our classes. [Editor's Note: Rutgers utilized former prisoner-of-war barracks at nearby Raritan Arsenal (known colloquially as the Raritan Campus) to house students during the GI Bill era of the late 1940s, when housing was in short supply, as well as barracks at Camp Kilmer.] Now, our classes, many of them were

in temporary prefabs down by the river and the University bought, or sequestered, a lot of the homes along College Avenue that weren't fraternity houses and classes were held there. When I walked up the steps here, I was trying to think, "Well, did I ever have a class at this place?" [laughter] because this was it. All of a sudden, they were the State University of New Jersey and they had agreed to take any qualified veteran, as I recall, but where to house us and where to teach us was a question. I was driving my little scooter, everything was two-lane back then, and this big tanker came by me and forced me off the road. There was a crossroad and there was a ditch there. The next thing I knew, I hit the ground and my scooter flew over my head. [laughter] I said, "No, no, no. Dad, I need a car or I'm not going to make it." [laughter] So, things were really primitive and, if I jump ahead, this was another kind of activity that melded us all together, that we were going to make this work. So, the two courses I remember taking in my freshman year were "English I" and "Geology." That "Geology" was taught in such a way that it was a very interesting course, and maybe it still is, but it was not pedantic. We went through the various ages and where New Jersey stood in the scheme of things. That knowledge has never left me, because most of it is still current, in terms of what happened to the Earth. My freshman English class, I was always a bad speller back then, [laughter] and so, I would turn in papers, and the Rutgers grading system, then anyway, was one, two, three, four and six, I think, something like that. I should have brought them; that's one of the problems, too. [laughter] I still have those papers, with scrawl all over it, and [the professor said], "Somewhere in here, there's an idea," kind of thing. Here I was, flunking my major, and what in the world was I going to do with myself if this happened? Around about the midterms--well, my teacher was Professor Naiden. He was considered rather eccentric, because he commuted, I don't know from where, but people knew him on the train. He was always reciting Persian poetry. He was a man of incredible intellect and anybody who'd have somebody like him teaching freshman English was blessed, as I was. He asked me, he said, "George, why don't you take me to lunch?" [laughter] "All right," and I took him to lunch, and he said, "Let's talk about things." He said, "Do you have any luck with the girls?" and I said, "No." He says, "Understand something. If you get a job, that will go away," [laughter] and he said, "I think you have talent, but you have no way to show it. Here's what I would suggest you do--you find a typist and you turn in cleanly typed work to me. Here's the deal--if you can get ones from now on, I will give you a one for the course," whereas my average was about a four at that time. I've done this all through my life with my teaching, "Here's a contract." He gave me a contract, I found a typist. I mean, I was a vet, I was getting money. My father was so glad he didn't have to pay tuition and he was paying any incidental expenses, including rent. So, I got out of freshman English with a one. It's still in my record. [laughter] Dr. Naiden left, I think, after that year and he was the head of a Latin school in Washington State, I think, Seattle, but he was a brilliant man. [laughter]

SH: He recognized your talent.

GB: Yes.

SH: You said that the student body got together and figured out how to make this work. Was it difficult to be in class with vets who were older and students just coming out of high school?

GB: I don't notice that--the older guys were married, and so, we envied them, having a wife. [laughter] The camaraderie was something else. I mean, I remember the old school tradition,

where the seniors were walking down the street and they'd always say "hello", especially to freshmen. Now, that's never left me, the idea that that is part of the culture of this institution. Let me skip ahead to my Air Force [career] and it got me in trouble, Rutgers got me in trouble. I was with a class of West Pointers and Annapolis graduates and we were studying the radio that we used on the aircraft. They were passing notes around, all over the place, about the answers to the tests, which I thought was stupid in the first place, since it was equipment you're going to have to use. I said, "Wait a minute, you guys, don't you have an honor code?" They said, "Well, that was just when we're at the Point." I said, "Oh." I says, "Well, at Rutgers, we don't have an honor code. We just say that gentlemen don't cheat." I was a marked man after that. [laughter]

SH: I bet you were. [laughter]

GB: I hope, this is such a big school now, whether that sort of thing still goes on, but it's not something you forget, that people are going to help you, that you get together with your buddies and make this thing work. On one of our reunions--I can't remember, something like maybe the twentieth--Mason Gross talked to us and he said, "You guys are remarkable." He said, "Of all the classes we had, we thought you would never look back at this school. What you had to go through--Camp Kilmer and the temporaries and the houses and all that--you didn't have what you should have and, yet, you're the strongest class we have." [Editor's Note: Dr. Mason W. Gross served as Rutgers University President from 1959 to 1971.]

SH: Wonderful compliment.

GB: Yes, and I try to mention that to my grandkids and say, "You guys get everything handed to you. I don't know how you're going to make it in life." [laughter]

SH: Was it commonplace for professors to be so considerate of the well-being of their students?

GB: No, no, maybe it was an English Department thing. I mean, jumping ahead, in our junior and senior years, we had tea with the profs. Really, we just sat around and talked about things that interested us, outside of the class. This was a very cozy place then, of course.

SH: Were all of your classes here on College Avenue Campus?

GB: Yes. There was no other campus.

SH: Right. [laughter] The football stadium was across the river.

GB: I don't think so. Yes, I guess maybe it was, maybe it was.

SH: It was at Hillside Campus, where all the married veterans used to live.

GB: Yes, that's true. You've got that. You must've had interviews before, right. That's where they were, right.

SH: Was there a lot of building going on here because of this influx?

GB: No, no, I didn't see that at all. The first apartments that were on the river, I'm trying to think, you'd have to look up when they went up. I'm not sure it was while I was here at all. It could've been.

SH: Did they still have mixers with Douglass when you came in as a freshman in 1947?

GB: Mixers, I don't know. The girls at Douglass were considered "blue stockings" and too serious, though, several people dated and married them, but I don't know what to say about that. We were too busy--that's the only way I can put it, just comes out naturally. I'm trying to think, I did some dating in the summertime.

SH: Did you work between the semesters? Did you have a winter break?

GB: No, we didn't have winter breaks, straight through. My activity, most of the year, was crew.

SH: As a freshman, you started with the crew.

GB: Yes, and we would be on the water until, I'm trying to think, December, probably November or December. We didn't have any indoor equipment back then, and then, as soon as the ice was off the river, we'd start until pretty much the end of school. So, every afternoon, I was on the river and it was difficult, especially my sophomore year, when courses got harder and you'd come in by seven or eight o'clock and have to start studying.

SH: Your sophomore year, were you still at Camp Kilmer?

GB: No, not at Camp Kilmer. There was a rooming house across from Queens that I was in my first semester here and it was pretty terrible. I don't know what the lady was cooking, but we'd all get kind of sick from the fumes. So, we got out of there and I got a roommate, Herb Cohen, and we found an apartment, which we shared the kitchen with a young couple and they ate things like brains and stuff, [laughter] but Herb and I became pretty much restaurant gourmets. We toured New Brunswick, the different ethnic restaurants, and this was kind of an education for me that carried me through, just be interested and try it. There was a place that served wonderful Mulligatawny soup, that I've never had better, that with freshly baked bread, things like that. So, we survived the sophomore year and, as everybody knows, once you're a junior, things really smooth out. [laughter] You're accepted. I'm trying to think--I think we lost at least a third of our class. The idea was, you could get in, but it didn't mean you were going to stay and you had to meet certain standards, and so, things slimmed down. So, especially, we started majoring and really doing English, instead of other things. There's an incident I wanted to mention, however; my sophomore year, I went into second year of French. For some reason, my make up, I wasn't very good at languages and you had to take a language for a bachelor's degree. So, the first day of my French class, the instructor went around the class and [said], "You read this and read that. Keep reading, keep reading," and he came to me. After I got through, he said, "There's no way you're going to pass this class." [laughter] So, I went to see the Provost, Mason W. Gross. I knew Dr. Gross--A, he rowed at Cambridge and, since we only had one coach and we had three

boats, he would come down, occasionally, when he could, and help coaching. So, he knew me from crew and he knew me from his philosophy class, where I would fall asleep, but it didn't bother him, or maybe it was the rules of Rutgers that you don't bother sleeping students. [laughter] I told him that I wanted a transfer, that it just wasn't fair or correct that this is going to happen. So, he said, "Okay, let me work on this," and so, he called me back in a day or two later and he said, "The professor says that he's pretty sure that he can work with you and get you through the course," and I said, "I've got to make a decision on this myself. Am I going to stand on this or am I going to take this because he's got to pass me?" [laughter] I said, "Yes, sir, I will work with him," and I never, collegiately, ever got very good with French, but, when it skipped over to the next day or the day after tomorrow, when I got to France and I was sort of leading, my French was good enough to get a taxi and go to a restaurant with my fellow pilots. After a couple of bottles of wine, I was fluent, seriously. [laughter]

SH: Something must have stuck.

GB: Seriously fluent, no problem at all, yes, so, you never [know].

SH: Can you tell me the professor's name?

GB: I can't remember.

[TAPE PAUSED]

GB: Just get me started here.

SH: Before the war, there had been mandatory chapel, freshman initiation and other traditions. Had all of that gone by the wayside when you came in 1947?

GB: I would say, off the top, they were all gone.

SH: No wearing of the dinks. You did talk about seniors greeting the freshmen.

GB: I can't come up with anything at this juncture.

SH: Did you ever consider a fraternity? Was that of interest to a returning veteran like yourself?

GB: No, and I say that without the fact that nobody asked me or anything like that. I could certainly have joined the Jewish fraternity, I'm sure. I'm just not the frat person and it comes back to crew. The Dekes were the crew fraternity and I don't think they had any vets and there was only one training table and that was theirs. So, they were, in a sense, a little apart from the rest of us, even though the individuals, the individual crew members …

[TAPE PAUSED]

GB: Getting near closing time. [laughter]

SH: You talked about the Deke group basically having the training table. Where was the table?

GB: I mean, it was in the fraternity.

SH: In their fraternity?

GB: Yes. So, for example, we were racing at Princeton. I had the junior varsity, and I can talk about that at great length. We were racing at Lake Carnegie and, all of a sudden, I noticed the boat isn't going well. I was the coxswain, by the way--I haven't mentioned that--and I see something floating by and, obviously, my number five man is not doing very well. Of course, we're lagging behind, and so, after the race, I said, his name was Cresinski, I said, "What happened to you?" He says, "My lunch." I said, "What did you have for lunch before a race?" "Pork chops." [laughter] I said, "No wonder."

SH: Was there any great rivalry with other universities and their crew teams?

GB: Well, let me start from the beginning. Rutgers was in what was known as, and still is known as, the "Dad" Vail Conference and it was minor schools, not NCAA. From what I heard from other people, Chuck Logg had been a coach at Princeton and, as they said, he had eight perfect guys, and so, he thought he was a great coach. So, when he came to Rutgers, he immediately put Rutgers in NCAA. We had a situation on the Raritan. Of course, the Raritan was completely polluted back then. There was a warehouse that was apparently functional during the Canal days and it was on the water and it was quite a ways up. So, this is where we had our boats and we would hook the boats to slings and lower them down to the dock, and then, put them in the water and the same way coming back. Especially in the fall and the early spring, it was dark and this was really--we had no other training stuff at all. So, we didn't really belong in NCAA competition, with Princeton, Cornell and Penn, but that's what he wanted. So, I'm a freshman coxswain, I said--well, I didn't see it the way that I can speak it now--that I was used to teams and this worked just great for me, because I was still under 120 pounds. It used to be the limit--now, it's the limit, you have to be 120 pounds in coxswain--but I was just the right weight and I had enough moxie, or whatever you want to call it, to give orders. I had a really good feel for the boat right away. We had one schoolboy rower and he's the only one, whereas, like, Princeton might have ten or twelve. All the rest of us there had never rowed before, okay. So, he was the stroke and I was in competition with one other young man, who was a very nice fellow, certainly--he didn't have the fire I have. [laughter] So, I started getting in disagreements with the stroke about how the boat was going and he had a rule, that any time you started falling behind, he would say, "Take up the beat, take it up, take it up." Well, I says, "The boat is not going right now. It's going to go worse if we start stroking up." "Goddamn it, take it up." So, this went on for a couple of times. Well, here's the guy, the only rower that's got any experience, saying, "This coxswain's no good." So, that was the end of me, and so, I was a little annoyed about that, but we had three boats. We had the varsity boat, the junior varsity boat and the freshman boat. As it turned out, the next year, well, we still only had one coach and one launch and so, the coach paid attention to the freshmen and the varsity. I was still a coxswain. So, I got the junior varsity and that suited me just fine. [laughter] What I had, at various times, I had champion rowers, lightweights; Allan Borghard is still well-known throughout the rowing community. He stroked my boat a couple times; Ward Whitehorn, another champ. So, they

taught me; they taught me rowing and coaching. So, over the years, I developed ways--I would stand up on the seat, not for all eight, but for twos and fours, and I would critique them from where I was standing up and everything else. The only problem was, well, first of all, a lot of the boys were Aggies [College of Agriculture (located across New Brunswick) students], so, we were late. That's one of the reasons I'd get home late, and then, of course, anytime anybody got any good, the coach would switch him over to the varsity. Anyway, we were very proud of ourselves and we were very proud of the fact that we weren't coached by Chuck Logg. [laughter] We would go out and do our own thing, and so, this continued through the years and the coach always had the saying, "The fastest boat's the varsity. That's the way I view it, that's the way I do it." So, the last race of the season, we were up at Columbia and, unfortunately, I'm in a borrowed shell. We have a scrimmage that night and we beat the varsity handily. So, we said, "Well, we're going to be the varsity tomorrow, finally. Finally, we got it." No, no, the coach doesn't do that. He takes my five and six and takes the varsity five and six. So, now, we've got two boats that never rowed together--this is coaching--never rowed together, pissed off. My guys are pissed off, because they're going to a crew that's not as good as ours, and they're pissed off because they're not varsity anymore, they're junior varsity. It was a complete disaster, on the Harlem River, and then, after the third stroke, the rigger on one of my rower's oars broke. So, I had four on one side, three on the other. [laughter] In the Harlem River, I'm yelling at the referee, because it happened and, legally, you're supposed to stop the race. They just kept going. All these speedboats, I thought we were going to get drowned, and so, that was my last race and that--I don't know if you can call that a lesson--and I tell this to people. I tell them about how we worked and worked and worked and finally got it and everybody smiles. Then, I tell them what happened. [laughter] They said, "That's not a good story." I said, "Well, you learn to take things like that. That's all. It's all part of life."

SH: You have stayed involved in rowing.

GB: Yes.

SH: Okay.

GB: Yes, I did. Yes, I'm the commodore of the Occoquan Boat Club, a very famous club down our way in Virginia. I fix the boats, things like that. So, I've pretty much rowed in various clubs and I love coxswaining and I coached high school for a while down there. So, crew has been a real part of my life and I credit coxswaining for saving my life on more than one occasion flying, because, year after year like that, you get to feel things in even hard to understand ways, who's doing what in the boat. I can still do that, when I do, like, an alumni row. The last time I was out there, with Max Borghard, he was stroking, I said, "Max, number five is shooting." "I know." "Can't we do anything about it?" [laughter] [Editor's Note: Max Borghard, son of Allan Borghard, is the head coach of the Rutgers Women's Crew.] I can feel things in an airplane. I can tell when it's about to go and, maybe, later on, I'll describe some of those things, but I couldn't figure it out and I said, "Well, I know what it was--it was being in that boat all these years, feeling everything from my butt."

SH: To come back to Rutgers, and dry land, [laughter] there were many major Big Bands here at Rutgers in that era. Did you get to attend any of those concerts?

GB: Yes. Gee, I don't recall, I'm sorry.

SH: Did you go to dances? What were the social activities?

GB: Well, I would go home for Mom's cooking and laundry and my hobbies. I commuted most weekends.

SH: Okay.

GB: Yes, when I think about it, but there wasn't that much going on around here that I can think of.

SH: What did you do the summer between your freshman and sophomore year? Did you work?

GB: Oh, yes, sure. The only year that is distinctive was between junior and senior. Freshman and sophomore, I either worked at my uncle's dealership or I'm trying to think if my dad still had the station, but I always worked around cars, because I was good at that. I knew the things, what I was doing. I can still. In fact, sometimes, when I was consulting, when I wasn't doing anything, I would--what's the word? People say, "Well, my car's a mess." I said, "I'll fix it up for you." [laughter] Two hundred dollars, it'd be like new, because, see, what I would do for my uncle's was, when the cars came from the factory, I would prep them for the showroom.

SH: Detail them?

GB: That's the word, detailing, yes. In fact, we used Q-tips, finally, because around the window edges, you wanted to use Q-tips. I can turn a car out just like nothing now.

SH: What did you do between your junior and senior year that you remember so well?

GB: Oh, well, yes, it's very interesting. The car I had at that time was--they don't make anymore, it was called a salesman's special--it was a coupe with a huge trunk. I just happened to have that car and my buddy from grade school and high school, Tommy (Jenkins?), he had fallen in love with a girl whose father was a manager for what was then called S. J. Groves Construction, but you can still see shovels and things with the name Groves on it. They were building a new runway in St. Paul, Minnesota, and he, Dad, went and Hilda went. Tommy says, "I've got to go out to Minnesota. I'm in love with that girl, I want to marry her," and I said "Okay." He said, "Well, Dad'll give us jobs." "Great." So, we got in my car and drove out there and, at night, the trunk was so big, we'd put our sleeping bags in the trunk and we'd sleep down there. It was very comfortable. [laughter] So, we got out there, and so, first of all, we had to join the Hod Carriers Union. Then, we became common laborers and I was still under 120. [laughter] The guys there, most of them were Swedes or Norwegians, very earthy, very earthy, blue-collar guys and this was what they did every day. So, they looked at us like, "These kids, they aren't going to do it." So, we were hauling concrete forms, the metal forms that you [use], and especially after it would rain, everything was muddy and we'd be slopping around in the mud, taking them out, Tommy and I. He certainly didn't want to let his future father-in-law

know that he couldn't do it and [I said], "I was coxswain of the crew--I can do anything." [laughter] So, we persisted, and then, pretty soon, we were all in the same rooming house and the guys became friends with us and were telling us all these Swede stories; I wish I could remember them. [laughter] They were so damn funny. So, we became accepted and, the next thing I knew, they were giving me jobs like do the string line and things. So, they had accepted us and they saw that I was not one of these guys. So, they'd give me the easy jobs [laughter] and Tommy stayed out there and they eventually did get married. I came back by myself and had another friend that wanted to go out to Purdue and I drove out there with him, just for the trip. You do that when you're young. [laughter] You don't mind driving all over the place, right. I made some pretty good money doing that, also. So, after my junior year, the North Koreans started the Korean War and I think it was either just before school started or maybe the first week, the ROTC building, up the street here, I don't know if it's still there, the same one, but there was a sign out, "Flight school open." I just did a right flank and walked in. [laughter] "Well, this ROTC is four years. We can't take you unless you had prior military experience." I says, "I'm Corporal Berke," [laughter] signed up. So, now, I'm in ROTC for the last two semesters and just as my GI Bill is running out, now, I'm getting ROTC pay. I'm doing very well and I'm going to make Distinguished [Military] Graduate and I'm going to go to flight school and I'll stop worrying about trying to get a job working for *The New Yorker* or something like that. [laughter] I had a future and, when it came down to it, mid-semester, start of the second semester, the Air Force was so short of engineers and scientists, they opened ROTC for one semester to science and engineering majors. Then, when it was time, even though I was a Distinguished Graduate, I did not get a regular commission. That was given to the science and engineers, most of whom didn't stay in the Air Force. So, that was my first disappointment, not getting a regular commission right then and there.

SH: Who knows? [laughter]

GB: Yes.

SH: It seems strange, to say the least.

GB: Well, when there's a need--and, once again, when I reported to my first duty station, there was no room for us. [laughter]

SH: Before we go into the military, I do want to ask about the literary society. Did you also write for the magazine, *The Philosophian*?

GB: It wasn't a magazine; it was an honor society sort of thing.

SH: Did you publish a magazine as well? I thought I read that somewhere.

GB: Well, it slipped my mind then, I'm sorry. [laughter]

RS: The alumni papers said that you published a poem book or journal.

GB: Maybe so.

SH: Were you involved with WRSU here on campus?

GB: No.

SH: The radio station?

GB: No.

SH: I thought maybe you had taken your experience at Lowry and brought it East. [laughter]

GB: Well, the people in that, some of them made careers of this. I'm trying to think of Harvey Hauptmann, yes, Harvey; one of my classmates, he'd been on the radio in New Jersey for years and years and years.

SH: Were there any other favorite professors?

GB: Oh, yes, (Baker and Hamilton?) were--Hamilton was American lit, Baker was English lit. Yes, they had a little office down here and we were welcome in there and we were accepted as students of promise. I'm trying to think--see, my Chaucer professor had some interesting ideas about one of Chaucer's poems that no one else had. When I was studying Chaucer at Wisconsin, ten years later, I did a paper using his ideas. In fact, he was still here; I'd corresponded with him about it. My professor gave me a "B+" on it and I walked into the faculty club and I stood him against the wall and I said, "What are you doing?" I said, "All these 'time servers' you've got here, these kids, and you're giving me a 'B +?'" [laughter] I was a captain by then. He says, "Well, we save the 'B+' for interesting but unproven ideas."

SH: Oh, my. [laughter]

GB: And me corresponding with the Doctor; I wish I could remember his name right now. I have to apologize again--if I had a little more time, I'd have brought all that stuff. [laughter]

SH: That is all right, not to worry.

GB: I didn't. I was so focused on the military, I didn't think about my papers.

SH: Do you remember your graduation?

GB: I must have; [laughter] yes, sure.

SH: Some people will say, "I know I did, but that is it." [laughter]

GB: Well, by that time, it's not a surprise, right. [laughter]

SH: Were you commissioned then?

GB: Oh, yes.

SH: You had a commissioning ceremony just prior to graduation.

GB: Must have. I mean, I'd gone to Philadelphia, the best uniform shop, I got the best cap, the best. So, I was decked out. I was so proud of this, finally going to get it, finally going to get it, yes, yes, after all these years.

SH: Had you continued to fly?

GB: No.

SH: Okay.

GB: No, that's an interesting thing about that. I hadn't continued to fly. For one thing, it got more and more expensive.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Can you tell me what you did after graduation? You had a graduation party.

GB: Yes, at my house, yes, and it was a big deal for my folks, that I had done well and had a job. [laughter] Nobody said anything about that, but it was pretty evident, also, that I was very interested in going in the Air Force. So, my mom and dad threw a really good party at my house and my friend John Fell, who I mentioned before, about playing jazz together, everything, he was living in Greenwich Village. He had graduated from Hamilton [College]. I hadn't mentioned, I'd been up to Hamilton a couple of times. He had a jazz band there and I was studying guitar, so, I would be playing guitar for his jazz band. So, we were quite close and he was in the Village. Then, he brought this woman down to my party and she's difficult to describe. She was exotic, is the only word, though, she didn't dress that way or anything, but she was slightly crippled and she had a very nice cane. She had kind of a very sophisticated, lisping voice and extremely well-educated and a conversationalist. She used certain kinds of slang just to great effect and it's just mesmerizing to be around her. My dad fell in love right then and there, to the point where my mother had him in the kitchen. I could hear her berating him to stop drooling over this girl. [laughter] Yes, my dad was quite a ladies' man, and so, he was [laughter] and I had my lovely silver tans. The Air Force, at that time, had beautiful uniforms and this was silver tan and it's great, and my little yellow bars on it. My dad had sold me his year-old Hudson and Hudson's were a great car and were kind of the leader in the post-war design. They unfortunately went under, for reasons I'm not sure about, but the Hudson, the '49 Hudson, was a most advanced car. It was the first car that used the body as the main structure, rather than an X-frame underneath it. Today, all cars are built that way, only trucks have X-frames, but Hudson was the first one and this is a lovely car. So, I got my orders to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Dayton, Ohio, which is one of the largest and most influential bases in the Air Force. So, I got in my car and started driving. This is before the Penn Turnpike or anything else, but, even so, I made it by nightfall and checked in and I made my first mistake in the Air Force. I had a very nice pistol, which was a souvenir from World War II. My friend Jack (Norris'?) brother, who

was in the Third Army and landed on D-Day, he sold it to me for thirty-five dollars, which was good money back then. I turned it in to the Air Police for safekeeping; jumping ahead, I never saw it again. [laughter] I was told that there was no room on base, but they had arranged--now, this was, of course, in June--they had arranged that the Wittenberg Women's College had opened their dorms to us, since the girls were gone. So, there we were, not exactly Camp Kilmer, [laughter] but all of us new lieutenants were now in the girls' dorm. I remember, in lipstick on the mirror, "Good luck, boys," [laughter] that kind of thing. It was really nice. So, once again, I'm in a theater and they want to know who wants to do what, because the Air Force was ginning up flight schools as fast as they could, hiring civilian companies, hiring civilian instructors for the first phase of flight training, which they called basic. They used the T-six aircraft, which was the advanced trainer in World War II. We were going to learn to fly in it. So, here we were in the theater, we were all awaiting assignment to flight school, and so, what are they going to do with us? So, once again, they're listing things and [they said], "Who wants to go to fighter test?" because, at that time, Wright Field had the main test laboratories. They were just opening Edwards [Air Force Base], which they called Muroc Dry Lake at that time, and somebody got fighter test and I was disappointed. "Who wants bomber test?" No, somebody else got bomber test. "Who wants cargo trainer and miscellaneous flight test?" I go, "What? That sounds gooey, but it's something, it's something." Well, it's the best, that was another wonderful reason that I am blessed, somehow, because in fighter test, what was I going to do? watch the planes, and the same way for bomber test. Well, in cargo training and miscellaneous flight, they had all kinds of airplanes with seats in them. [laughter] So, I reported in to Lieutenant Colonel Walter A. Rosenfield. He was famous for several things. He had more C-47 World War II time than anybody in the world, which he flew all over all the combat areas. He was also a brilliant leader. The Air Force was just, at this particular time, developing new cargo aircraft. Helicopters were hardly known at all and there were all kinds of ideas for helicopters there sitting on the ramp also and there were two trainer projects. The T-6 itself had been modified enough for this business of training us and, somehow, the center of gravity had changed and people who put baggage in the baggage compartment got into spins they couldn't recover from. So, when that was figured out, the plane had to be flown for I forget how many hours, several hundred hours, to just make sure that it wasn't going to do that again. Then, the new trainer, the T-28A, was throwing crankshafts, which was not a good idea. So, that engine was modified and they had to fly that around for several hundred hours to test the engine before it could be put into use. So, here were the two training aircraft that I was going to fly, going up every day, flying around in circles, and nobody cared, especially the fact that, when they knew me a little bit, they always invited me along. So, I was flying with test pilots in the back seat of these airplanes and the best way I can describe it was, they didn't teach me to fly, they taught me what not to do. It was incredible, in looking back at things that I ran into in my flying career, the things that I didn't run into based on their teaching. So, I was kind of the mascot there and I was also the administrative officer. I learned another lesson--I was only there about a week, that's my only excuse and [they said], "Oh, yes, sir, you're the administrative officer. We need to fire this fellow." "Oh, well, what's he doing?" "Well, we think he's kind of a commie." "Wow, come on, what?" "Oh, the Colonel's already signed off on it. You're the last one that has to sign it." So, I signed it and I said, "Never going to do that again, ever, in my life." I wandered around the place and I became the eyes and ears of the Colonel. This is something else, that I don't know if I was born with this skill, but I certainly developed it there and it helped me in civilian life, I can walk into any outfit and look around and see something's wrong, "This is right, this is wrong," and I would report back to him,

"Do you know there's a big puddle down under the engine number four in that airplane?" "Oh, really? Thank you, George." [laughter] So, I was getting a lot of good experience, both as an officer and as a fledging pilot. One day, I was playing bridge out at Wittenberg and this, what you'd call "a tall drink of water," young man in khakis and a pair of wings, walks in and he says, "I'm a fighter pilot here," and he named the unit, "and fly F-86 Sabres. I'm looking for a roommate." "Oh, here you go, sir." So, his name was Dan Means, West Virginian, already divorced with a kid. He owned his own airplane and he flew fighters and I was going to be his roommate. So, he had a place in Dayton, and so, we were roommates. One of the things I was interested in, really, was getting a girlfriend. I hate to admit it publicly, but I was still a virgin and, today, that's impossible, but I was twenty-four. It was getting to me at this point anyway. So, Dan seemed to be somebody to tag along. So, we went out one night and, gee, whiz, he's very good. He got talking to a couple of really nice girls and said, "We'd like to go out with you," or go to this dance, and so, "We're going to go home and change." So, they, the girls left, to go home and change. He says, "Let's find some more." I said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute." "No, no, no, let's go find some more." This guy's kind of ruthless. I don't know what he's after, but he finally finds this girl who looks a little trampy [laughter] and he's talking her up and he said, "How about let's go out next weekend?" and she said, "Sure." He says, "Would you bring somebody for my roommate?" She said, "Sure." "So, okay, you're fixed up for next weekend." So, I'm looking forward to that. In the meantime, at the officers' club, I'm sitting there and a major comes over to me and he says, "I've got a niece here and she'd like to meet you." It was a really nice, curly-haired blonde girl and her father was an architect in Kentucky, just over the river, which wasn't close. So, we made a date for, I think, a couple of weeks and I was really excited about something like this, because Jim Naiden's prophecy was coming true here. [laughter]

SH: You got the job.

GB: Yes.

SH: There you go.

GB: [laughter] So, we shifted. This girl Mary worked at Stengers Ford and the only person she knew was the bookkeeper, Barbara. So, she asked Barbara if she'd like to go out with a couple of Air Force guys. Well, Barbara knew Mary was kind of fast, or whatever you want to call it back then, and she was trying to decide. Mary said, "Come on, they're Air Force officers." So, Barbara said, "Okay, give it a shot." [laughter] She was a daughter of working-class people, worked at General Motors, and she had gone to a cooperative high school and learned how to be a bookkeeper, along with her regular academic subjects. She had a trousseau--what would you call it back then?

SH: Hope chest?

GB: Hope chest, yes. She had a hope chest, she had a bedroom set. She was very serious about getting out of Dayton. [laughter] So, we met and, back in those days, the hotels had dancing. So, I can't remember if we had dinner, but we had some drinks and we were dancing. She's a nice girl and, oh, I got the idea right away that she was a nice girl. [laughter] So, we drove her

home in the Hudson, and then, we went to Mary's. So, they started making out in the back seat and I'm just going like this. [laughter] So, Mary gets out of the car and I don't know which one of us said, "Well, let's take a shortcut." We had to get back to the base. So, I'm driving down this road and it's kind of misty and I'm not going very fast at all. There's a car coming, with very bright headlights. So, I do what you're supposed to do--I look over to the side of the road, keep my lights down. The next thing you know, something has loomed up in front of me and I smash into this coal car, freight car, coal car, that was parked there and the track had a bump in it and the car that was waiting on the other side. Lights were underneath the car.

SH: Oh, my.

GB: And somebody had knocked down the railroad sign that evening. [laughter] Dan had on his regular cap, which had the insignia, so, when he hit the dashboard, he ripped his scalp pretty bad. So, he was bleeding. Of course, back in those days, the cars weren't built for accidents. [laughter] So, I had just gotten my foot on the brake and, when it hit, my knee was right under the dash and it shattered my kneecap, and then, this hand, this wrist was broken and my ribs were banged up. So, there we were, and then, the watchman with his lantern comes up--[laughter] he should've been at the road--looks in and he's got two fairly severely wounded kids there. So, they call an ambulance from the base and, of course, the train is stopped and that's why it was stopped, because something happened with the brake system. If you know trains, all the brakes have to link up. Well, something had busted. So, the thing couldn't move. So, they couldn't do it. So, then, they had to call another hospital, and so, we got into that hospital and they took Dan in first, because he had a head wound. I'm laying out there in the cart and this doctor comes along with a nurse and he says, "Hmm, shattered kneecap, huh?" He talks to the nurse, "He'll never walk again," goes away. This is '51.

SH: Oh, my.

GB: This is '51, this is not today; [laughter] yes, right in front of me. I finally get to Wright-Patterson and they ice my knee down. So, probably the next day, things start to happen. They're giving me penicillin, which I am allergic to, and, to go against the pain, they're giving me morphine, which, it turns out, I was also allergic to. I'm bursting out in hives and I can't stop the pain--it's a shattered kneecap and I've got all these pieces in there--and hard to breathe and this busted wrist here. I'm shot, I'm finished. After a while, they call my folks and they come in and, if anybody tried to sit on the bed, I would just come off it. Then, I developed pneumonia. So, I was kind of working my way out of life here, and so, everybody was quite worried about this. They finally figured out that I shouldn't take penicillin, and then, they found--the nurses really worked--they found another narcotic that worked. It was called panapon. I don't know if I'd ever heard of that before, again, but that sort of took the pain [away]. So, then, I was …

SH: You were in a military facility.

GB: Yes, oh, yes, I'm at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base hospital. So, finally, the doctors come in and they said, "Well, we'll operate on this here, as soon as you're able. We've got to ask you what you want--you want your leg straight or you want to be able to sit down?" That was what they could offer me at that point, and I think that's the point when I got pneumonia. See, I have

to try to get this straight, because the time dragged on and I was just hanging on and nothing was happening. I couldn't turn or do anything. I was just like this, with this thing here. They came in one day and they said, "Lieutenant, we want to ask you something. We know you're very uncomfortable, in a lot of pain, but, if you wait a couple of weeks, our surgeon's coming back from Korea. He's over there putting together pilots who've been hit by flak and creating--it's a German technique developed in World War II--they put steel down through your bone marrow and all these advanced techniques." Well, guess what I said? [laughter] I said, "Sure, I'll wait." This is Lieutenant Colonel Roy C. Rounds. I think he could've been the best knee surgeon in the world at that point, as far as I know. So, he came up and he says, "Well, yes, I think we can fix that." About this time, a ward boy came in and said, "Hey, look what happened to your friend." This is a Dayton paper--smoking aircraft. Dan had collided with his leader and the leader bailed out and Dan was killed.

SH: Oh, my.

GB: Of course, Barbara heard about that, too. Of course, it was in the newspaper. So, Dr. Rounds operated on me and he said, "I think you're going to be okay," and the usual pain, you start working on things. I got transferred out of that to a regular ward, a recovery ward, with the groans at night, every guy, guys with all kinds of huge injuries. Surgical wards, that's a terrible place to be. [laughter] One day, here comes this person, who's not wearing her glasses, walking in, looking, and she manages to find me and it's my date, Barbara. So, she visits, like we do, and then, she sort of became a regular. I don't know if you know nurses--Barbara would show up and this nurse would say, "Lieutenant, your cherry's coming." [laughter] It's embarrassing, but, by this time, I could get around and the enlisted men, as usual, they knew where the girls were and everything. So, I started going out and meeting girls and there was this one girl that she baked pies and she fell in love with me. So, in the meantime, as hard as I could work, I couldn't get more than this extension. The doctor would come around and these surgeons, he'd always see my wrist, "How's the wrist?" "Fine." He's about to turn around and the nurse would say, "Oh, the patellectomy, Doctor." "Oh, yes, oh, the patellectomy, oh, yes," and then, he'd start saying, "Lieutenant, I don't know. You're not making any progress here. I'm just afraid we're just going to have to let you go." So, I got the head of physical therapy, a lovely captain, I says, "You've got to convince that doctor that we have done everything and we still can't get extension." She says, "Yes, I will," and she did. He had to admit, that forced him to admit, that his didn't do a perfect job. So, he said, "Okay, surgery tomorrow." [laughter] So, all I know is--they definitely put you out--all I know is what the ward surgeon said. He said, "I almost got sick." [laughter]

SH: That is comforting.

GB: He said, "He put his hand under your knee, put his ear up to it, grabs your ankle and went," like that. [Editor's Note: Colonel Berke imitates cracking noises.] [laughter]

SH: In other words, he just cranked it back.

GB: Yes. He said, "He turned to me and said, 'I do good work.'" So, the next morning, the nurses were tasked with bending it for me, so that it wouldn't go back to adhesion, since it's what

I had, and they couldn't do it. It was all swollen, everything. I says, "Give me the goddamn thing." [Editor's Note: Colonel Berke imitates cracking noises.] [laughter] So, then, I got hospital leave. I went home. My mother had gone to the Y and it was, of course, with a heated pool, teach you how to swim and working the legs and all kinds of cooperation from everybody. So, I came back to the hospital and I was discharged and I went down to the flight surgeon's office. I said, "I want to get back on flying status," and he said, "Huh?" and I did a duck walk. He said, "No one'll believe this." I said, "Yes, but…" He says, "Look, give me a little [time]--come back in two months. I'll sign you off then, but I can't do it now. You just got out of the hospital. Nobody'll believe me, nobody will believe me." So, now, I had these German-style crutches and I could get free transportation. I was really feeling guilty about it, wounded pilot, all this kind of stuff. [laughter] I was courting my wife, Barbara, and, of course, losing Dan like that, as I say, it kind of forged us together. Then, folks at home had relatives and one of them was a lawyer in Dayton, and so, we started working on suing the railroad, but the case was thrown out, because B&O Railroad has right of way. "So, it doesn't matter if the sign was down, if the lantern wasn't there or anything else. They had a perfect right to be there, and so, you hit him." To cut the story, a year later, we appealed. We just felt so strongly that they were at fault. They were killing people and there are other people that ran into trains, because there are a lot of trains in Dayton and they all cross streets. This one colonel and the fellow with him, they were [hit], faces all banged up and things like that, but, at that point, the railroad had eminent domain. So, we never won anything, but it was contingency, was really nice. I didn't lose any money out of it, but we made friends with the lawyer and he was really nice. Then, I wanted to take Barbara home and her Mother says, "Not without a ring." [laughter] So, I said, "Mom, I need a ring." [laughter] So, I got a ring, and then, took Barbara home and I know my dad was disappointed that she wasn't a flashy girl, [laughter] but I said, "I want a fighter pilot's wife and that is someone who'll keep the home fires burning when I'm gone. When I'm doing this and that and the other thing, I'm not worried about where she's going to be and what she's doing or anything else, and is a woman who made her own way in life." Barbara later got in a special program at Syracuse and got herself an accounting degree, later in life, and did very well. She became the head accountant at (Reston Mobil?), which is quite an organization. It's building the town there. "So, is a woman of character," and so, we got married in March of '52, and then, I got orders to Hondo, Texas, for what they called basic flight training, which amounted to 125 hours of flight in a T-6, in preparation for jet training. So, we packed up our car and she'd never--she'd been out of Dayton once, had a trip to Canada. So, I've got a secondhand car from my uncle's [laughter] and we drove from Ohio down to Texas and we stopped at San Antonio. I don't know what it's like now, it was a lovely place then, really, and our first Latin experience, in a sense, because there was a lot of Mexican culture there. We got out to Hondo and, at Hondo, they had a sign, "Hondo, Population 500. Don't Drive Through Here Like Hell." [laughter] It was a two-lane road, and then, the Southern Pacific Railway came through there, and so, we were given a [billet]. I went out to the airport and you signed in and the chief flight instructor said, "I'm in a duplex. It'd be nice if you could come in the other side." I said, "Sure." So, it was, can't forget, (Lyn Weber?) owned the place. The walls were thin and I would get a hose and [laughter] hose down the side of the house as it faced the sun in the afternoon, but, back in the days, you got your pay on payday in cash. So, I went, we went, we needed furniture and an air conditioner. We got one of the first air conditioners, I think, room air conditioners, and they said, "Oh, you're out at the base? Fine, take whatever you want," no questions asked, no questions asked, and the whole town was like that. Barbara got herself a job at the Rural Electric

Company and I went for an introductory physical. There was a new doctor there, unfortunately, a strict Jewish doctor, and he had to be absolutely correct. So, he examines me and he says, "I'm sorry, Lieutenant, your liver's too big." "What?" [laughter] What if somebody told you that? "No, it's out of limits. Sorry, you've got to go to Lackland Hospital." So, we just get there, my wife's never been out of town, or her parents', and here goes her husband back to San Antonio. [laughter] What happened next can only be described as gruesome, really. So, all of a sudden, the doctor's there, they've got this very interesting case, so, "Hey, feel this, feel this, feel this." So, what you do is, they press in here and they ask you to take a breath and you can slide the liver. You can do that, anybody can do that, and, pretty soon, I got sick. I got really sick and I was having night sweats. Yes, they'd wake me up at four in the morning, everything's soaked and wet and nobody knew what to do. Oh, my, it was hopeless, a hopeless case. They said, "Okay, you're going to meet a board for discharge." Now, here I am, not going to flight school, not going to have a job, "What am I going to do? I've got a wife here." Well, I'm in the ward that has not only sick people but malingerers and, once again, the enlisted sergeants--I, of course, being enlisted myself, right--so, they accepted me there, the best I can say. They accepted me and they said, "Lieutenant, we've got to beat this," and he says, "We think we know how." They've had experience, right. [laughter] They said, "When you get to that board, whatever they say, you say you don't accept it, for the following reason--they are discharging you without a definition," what's the word I want?

SH: Diagnosis.

GB: Diagnosis, yes, "Without a diagnosis. When that sets them back, you give them an out. You say, 'Ah, I will accept a transfer to Brooke Army Medical Center,' a real hospital." Just like they said, to the letter, just like that--I said, "I won't accept 'no diagnosis,'" and I wasn't supposed to know that, apparently, "and I'll accept Brooke," and they signed it as fast as they could. Now, what they had done, and I have to tell you this, first of all, "Oh, well, we've got to take a biopsy of the liver." So, they stick a needle down through your ribs, at a certain place, so [that] they don't get your lungs. Oh, then, it's sternum marrow, "We've got to take sternum marrow here. Oh, we need to take a lymph node from here." So, I had three kinds of operations. I'm going through all this stuff. So, I get over to Brooke and [said], "Well, we've got to do the same thing." I don't think they did a liver biopsy, but I got another sternum marrow, but I was fine at this point. So, the assistant chief of medical services, Colonel Vivas--you don't forget people like him [laughter]--had me up to his office and he says, "Lieutenant," he says, "you're not completely well, I know that, but I know what you have. From my experience, and this is not accepted generally," he says, "in the first place, if you're suspected of having mononucleosis, you get what they call," I don't know what it is today, but, back then, "a heterophile antibody," which I knew about, because I was blood chemistry, "and, from your interview, you had mononucleosis in Denver and a positive heterophile, but," he said, "you can't get a positive heterophile twice." He says, "I think you've had mononucleosis and it may even be chronic, and so, here's what I want you to do. I want you to lead a life of moderation. You want to have a drink, that's fine, but not excess. I want you to have a good breakfast. You get three meals a day. I want you to get plenty of sleep, and you'll be all right." I said, "Well, can I get back on flight status?" "Sure," [laughter] an Army doctor signs me off for flight. Well, I come back to Hondo with this lieutenant colonel, chief of medical services, says I am qualified, and so, I started, finally, my flying career. [laughter]

SH: Talk about trials, my word. How much time transpired?

GB: Oh, it was a year.

SH: Unbelievable.

GB: Yes, isn't it?

SH: During all this time, was what was going on in Korea of interest to you? How do you think the war was reported, as compared to World War II?

GB: Well, it's called "the Forgotten War," but it really wasn't, especially, I mean, down at the Pusan Perimeter, almost being ready to be pushed into the Korean Straits, just a little place, if you look at the map, and then, busting out of that. Then, MacArthur at Inchon, that was a huge thing, and then, taking North Korea was a huge thing, and then, having the couple of million Chinese coming down and having to carry dead bodies down there. You're not going to leave anything behind, the terrible weather.

SH: That was all reported.

GB: Yes, yes. I was very aware of it, as a matter of fact. What the Air Force was doing there was very interesting, that they had B-29s. They're using B-29s to try to knock off certain dams or things like that. They were escorted by straight-wing F-84s, which is what I eventually [flew], that was the first plane I started flying, but, then, all of a sudden, these swept-wing MiGs came in. Nobody knew about them. That was a complete surprise and they were made to shoot down B-29s. They had a very heavy caliber cannon. It was slow firing, but, if it hit, it blew it up and that was a bit of a disadvantage flying against our aircraft, but it was made to shoot down bombers and they had to withdraw the B-29s. The F-84s couldn't hack it with the MiGs at altitude. So, this was all known, especially if you were interested, and then, sending the first F-86s over to Kimpo and Fourth [Fighter-Interceptor Wing].

SH: After this year, this is 1953, right?

GB: No, no. This is '52.

SH: Still 1952.

GB: Yes, see, '51, around to Hondo, and then, I entered, it must have been the early fall, I guess--I'd have to get my records. It's in my records here. We can check that, but, yes, in '53, I graduated. We were Class 53 Echo that was graduated in September of '53.

SH: How long did you stay at Hondo? Did you do all your training there?

GB: No, it was strictly in the T-6, as I say, 125 hours. We flew frequently, though. I think I'd have to say we were there maybe six months, but that was really the bulk of our training. Did I mention to the tape about my experience with the West Pointers?

SH: You have had more than one experience, I think, with the West Pointers.

GB: Yes. [laughter] Well, it was unfortunate. If I could've gotten in my regular class, which started in April, I believe, yes, it was in Charlie class, I'd have been with my contemporaries in terms of status, but this is before the Air Force Academy, so, midshipmen at Annapolis or cadets at West Point who wanted to fly, wanted to come to the Air Force, they would transfer to the Air Force. They all came in after graduation from West Point and Annapolis. They, of course, knew everything, right, but I had a year's date of rank on them. So, they put me in charge of the marching--[laughter] believe this, Rutgers--and, in my ROTC training, in our summer camp, I was trained by a highly decorated Marine who'd been in the Pacific. The Marines have a certain different cadence and calls and that's what I knew. So, certain numbers--some people enjoyed it, some people giggled--and others, especially generals' sons, were quite annoyed that this was happening and they were sure that I wouldn't last very long. Oh, they were sure of that, and so, they had this betting pool, when I was going to washout.

SH: My word.

GB: In the meantime, on the other hand, the instructor, Bill Mullen, had moved out and Bob Winger and his wife moved in next door. He was from Kansas City and is an officer and a gentleman in the best sense and nothing like some of his colleagues. So, we got along real fine, as I said. Even though we were together in Korea and I did some favors for him, he did an immense number of favors for me, but most of these, a lot of these, guys just couldn't take the fact, not only was I marching them around, but I had a beautiful wife, which I was going home to. [laughter] So, there were [tensions], and then, I accused them of cheating, so that the atmosphere there was not great, but we worked in tables of four and I had three other cadets back then. You could be eighteen and, as long as you're a high school graduate, you could go to pilot training and, eighteen-year-olds, if you've raised kids, they don't have a hell of a lot of judgment. [laughter] So, these are my companions, and so, I had a "grand old man," (Fred Atkinson?), and he was so Texan, you could cast him, [laughter] but he was very laid back and gracious and a very good instructor. When it came time for me to solo--I mean, this is not based on time, but, when he decided it was time for me to solo--he said, "Well, Lieutenant, I've seen you make every mistake you could make and still recover. So, I guess you can solo." [laughter] I tell that because that's how you learn. I'm a flight instructor and, even in the magazines, beware of the perfect pilot. So, the ranking, the way we were ranked at graduation was, the top man at the Annapolis Class of 1952, Bob Gay, was also the top graduate, and then, a French baron was second and a kid from Rutgers was third, beating all the West Pointers. So, Bob Gay is coming in on his last landing and has what we called a ground loop and breaks a wing--perfect guy. [laughter] As his last landing, he gets a major accident. So, I said, "That demotes him. So, I guess I came in second." [laughter] Yes, I was very proud of the fact that I was a very good pilot, in some ways; in other ways, I mean, I wasn't perfect at all, but, in especially my academics, give that to Rutgers or whatever, my academics were always perfect. So, we head off for jet training in Williams Air Force Base--it's no longer there--at Chandler, Arizona, on the

eastern side of Phoenix. So, we were driving up there and, as I get to the gate, the sky is clouded with Mustangs taking off, gone forever. The last class of [P-51] Mustangs had graduated and we came in there, no more Mustangs. I was so upset about that, really, really. I've always wanted to fly a Mustang and all through World War II, that's what you wanted to do, you wanted to fly a Mustang. They were there at Williams and, the minute I drive in the gate, they all leave. [laughter] So, now, they had the idea that this T-28, which is quite a large, beautiful airplane, but really slow, they had the idea that it would be a good transition to jets, because they put the levers and everything in the cockpit the same shape as the F-86, which is--I don't know, the Air Force got sold a bill of goods. So, we did forty hours of that and, in the hot weather, it was underpowered and it was really hard to stay in formation and stuff. I really didn't like it at all, but I came in one day and I was hot and tired and everything else. I just sort of slopped it down on the runway and the squadron officer was watching me and he called me in. "Berke," and I'm looking at this fairly large black man, he says, "you just let that airplane go. You need to fly that airplane into the chocks." "Yes, sir, Major." Now, years later, I'm giving a lecture at the Smithsonian facility in Washington, in Maryland, actually, and there's a black man there wearing sort of a deep pink coat. His name was Woody and he introduced himself as a Tuskegee Airman. I go, "Whoa. We had several black instructors at Willy, several," and I said, "Oh, my God," and I named the Major. I said, "He made a pilot out of me," and he said, "Well, he's dying of diabetes." I says, "Can I give you a letter for him?" and I listed all of the planes I had flown and my Distinguished Flying Cross and everything else. I said, "This is based on what you told me to do." So seldom you can get to finish something like that, isn't it?

SH: The story is beautiful.

GB: Yes, yes.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: You can tell us or not.

GB: Right, well, as I say, you'd be surprised what comes next.

SH: Okay, please.

GB: So, now, we're going to fly our first jet aircraft, where other people have flown jets before 1953, but we were the first class that trained in them, in the T-33. It was all-new and the plane had some characteristics that was killing people and the chief test pilot at Lockheed came to us and he said, "We call it 'The Thing.'" [laughter] This is the state of design of jet aircraft at the beginning of the jet age. People didn't know much. Our instructors were retreads from World War II and they had a few more hours than we did, nothing more than that. I don't know if they were recalled, whether they wanted to be or not, but, so, my instructor was Russ. He was in his thirties and a husband and father and a nice guy. Russ was a nice guy. So, we're going to go up for my first ride and we just go out and climb to altitude and do some things and stuff, and then, come in and shoot some landings. Well, I've read the book and whatever, but I hate this whole thing, because aviation gasoline smells good, the Merlin engines sound good--here, we had these planes, sounded like vacuum cleaners and the jet fuel stank. [laughter] We always had to open

this and check that it was full, but it was so hot there, any fuel they put in, it would always gush out. So, your gloves were always full of [fuel], still smelling. This was not what I wanted to do. I was really kind of, "All right;" you'd think it might be different, but I was so imbued with World War II aircraft and everything and, here, this thing was very ungainly, hard to steer. It's thirty seconds from idle to full power and that was killing people. If they misjudged their approach just a little bit, by the time they get the power in, boom. So, there was a lot to fear, also, in this thing. So, I get up on the runway and go to full power and all the gauges are fine, "Let's go." We take off, I take off, and I reached for the landing gear and it won't come up. You'd push a little button and you'd pull and I said, "Sir, I can't get the landing gear up." "Use the override, use it." [laughter] I'm just getting off the ground, see, and so, I tried this override. I said, "I tried it, didn't work." He says, "Goddamn it, goddamn it, I'll do it," won't come up--no apologies though, no apologies. [laughter] "Well, pull up the flaps. Goddamn it, put out the speed brakes. We're just going to have to get rid of this gas." Well, we fly around and burned the fuel out enough [to make it] light enough. Then, I come in, I made a half-way decent landing--it was flight number one. [laughter] Okay, on flight number two, I got a different guy. This guy is a real tiger. He's what we call a "bang-bang" kind of flyer, and I'm not. I am--well, I can say it, look at me, how long I've been flying--I'm very smooth, all right. So, we're going to go to another field for practice, which is done all the time, so that the people can go around and around and not disturb the normal base pattern. So, it's hot and high there in Arizona. So, the tip tanks, where most of the fuel is, aren't filled; they're just half full. So, take off, we're going out and we finally get over there and there's a crosswind from the left. So, I mean, when you turn like this to come in, the wind's going to blow you this way. So, you try to correct for that to line up, and so, my first pattern on this field, I'm coming around and my butt tells me, "Things aren't right." I look over and they have what they call electric trim and my trim is all the way up, as far as it'll go. He says, "Come on, pull it in, pull it in, pull it in." I says, "No, I think my tank's not feeding." "Goddamn it, just go around again." So, I go around, said to him, now, "I think that tank, on the inside of the turn, still, all the fuel's in it and I've got a heavy wing;" same thing happens the second time, "Pull it in, pull it in." I'm thinking, "Oh, no, no, I can't pull it in." [laughter] "Goddamn it, you son of a bitch, take her back to the field." Take it back to the field, I land, didn't have that kind of wind, and I get a pink slip; third flight, got Russ, take off, finally, climb to altitude, fly around, fly around, come in, do a landing. Now, that's it, crazy. You had three flights. You got three flights to solo. I said, "Russ, the first two," because I did--there was fuel in the tank, right? I got a pink for it, when I should've gotten a medal, and the gear won't come up because the mechanics found that some screw had fallen down in the mechanism. Nobody was going to get it up. I said, "I'm not ready to take this up myself. I haven't been trained." He says, "Well, George, you've got a choice. You can take it up or you can come in and resign." That's what they did. That's the God's honest truth. That's what they did, first time in a jet. So, I sat there and, once again, the same old thing, "Well, I've got a wife and, at least if I get killed, she gets insurance, [laughter] but, if I resign, what am I going to do?" So, I did. I hated it, but I took it up. [laughter] Then, just about the time we were going in formation phase, (Bob Winger?) and his wife, we were in the same [dwelling]--we were living in barracks, but they were modified for couples--and we saw some smoke come up. I don't know what got into us. I think we'd had a drink or two, "Let's go see that." That part of Arizona had lots of canals and everything, and so, we beat the fire trucks there and there, in front of us, was our plane, a T-33. It was the tail, and then, the engine, and then, the cockpit. It was burning and one of our classmates was still sitting in it, getting roasted. We stood there mesmerized and the fire trucks

came and sprayed it and they had grappling hooks with it. They do this, I won't say every day, but the attrition rate was really sad, because of one of the things I just mentioned, really not well trained. They pulled it apart and took the guy out and put him in a body bag. That had an effect on me, that I got nervous, "Do I really want to do this? I don't know, it's just not working out," and so, I guess, I can't remember what was upset, so, I went to the flight surgeon. Nobody'll believe what I'm going to tell you next. Now, he said, "First of all, have a shot of bourbon before your meals and, here, I'm going to give you some phenobarbital and take it with your meals." So, I was downing phenobarbital and flying. [laughter] I've mentioned how my nerves are, how quick I am, and my ADD and everything else. As I've told doctors this, years later, he says, "You can't do that. There's no way." I said, "It worked fine for me." [laughter] I said, "I got through the course," but, in the meantime, I had a dip in what my superiors felt about me. Also, some of the West Pointers had decided that, since I hadn't washed out, that I really shouldn't be in the Air Force somehow. Apparently, and I found out later, when I was at the Air Force Academy, somebody sort of blackballed me. It didn't stop me from getting promoted, but I never got a regular commission. Finally, one of our sections of our class graduated and I got a new instructor and this guy--Russ was always, "Oh, George, that's too bad," this and that and the other thing--this guy was "silent man." He was silent. He just said, "Do it," and my breakthrough was a flight up to Washington State from Arizona, have dinner, with phenobarbital, [laughter] and then, a night flight back. We lost communications between the two cockpits. So, it was really up to me--I had to do the clearance, I had to fly, I had to make all the radio calls. We landed outside of San Francisco. By the time I came back, I was perfect. I was with it--I was with the airplane, I was with the mission, I had all the confidence in the world. So, when the assignments came out, the top people in the class got F-86s at Nellis and I got Luke in Phoenix. The squadron commander was also a Tuskegee Airman and we had this drinking party at graduation and all. He brought me up in front of everybody, my class, and he put his arm around me, he said, "Berke is a great pilot, but he got the shits, I want everybody to know that." [laughter] So, that was the start of my career as a fighter-bomber pilot and, like I say, in my life, everything seems to work in my favor that I think is wrong. I went into the major who was administrative officer and I saluted him and I said, "Sir, I didn't join the Air Force to bomb gooks," and he said, "Get used to it," and he was exactly right, [laughter] but that was another little epiphany right there.

SH: This was …

GB: '53, yes, and then, I went to combat training at Luke. Luke was a real Darwinian experience, because we had NATO. We had Belgians and French, Dutch. The Dutch were pretty good with English, but the French and the Belgians and, let's see, we didn't have Germans at that time, and the original F-84 was underpowered. I can go into a lot of technical details here, but, like, one of our classmates just kept trying to take off and he finally went off the end of the runway and turned over and burned. He was in the hospital for a while, but he perished. It was something to be afraid of. While we were flying at Williams, we could see his black smoke coming up, because the instructor would sit us around the table and he'd brief these kids and say, "Any questions?" and nobody wanted to say, "What was that? [laughter] What did you really [say]?" or, "I didn't [get that]," because they're supposed to take a language test and, naturally, "Oh, we need pilots, we need jet pilots, so, go." It was obvious that some of them really didn't understand some of the techniques and this was, once again, the Tiger Program. I talked about

Bob Gay, who had got a wing [ripped off]. He was still a top guy and, at Nellis, they emphasized tight patterns, tight patterns, tight patterns. Well, Bob Gay'd get tight patterns and stalled out upside down and he was an extremely intelligent fellow. Instead of dying, he had enough air speed, he shoved the stick forward, upside down, and crash landed upside down. When the rescue came and they lifted the thing up and he crawled out, he resigned, became a physician. [laughter]

SH: Smart man.

GB: But, I mean, they would tell you, "Well, if you get killed here, you'd have been shot down in Korea." It was just absurd, but that was what everybody was supposed to do, and then, bang, bang, bang it around, but, of course, I said, "We've got to do something about this." When a friend of mine was in the class ahead, I says, "Let's invite (Clinton?) over for dinner," because we had an apartment there at Luke, because I always had my wife, okay. [laughter] So, he was telling me about, "See this finger? Well, it looks this way because it [is] so hard to pull out of the dive, and you've got to use two hands," and [I said], "Good grief, oh, wow." So, I studied as hard as I could. So, we'd schedule a flight of four, the instructor and three students, that morning, probably around six o'clock in the morning, sort of thing. So, after briefing, we all go out and I climb up in the ladder and the crew chief is helping me strap in and here comes the instructor, "Passed." [laughter] "Quick, quick, get the ladder off, quick. Let's start the engine," blah, blah, blah, and I just get out to the runway in time for the leader to take off. So, I'm rolling down the runway and I take off and I put the gear up and I can't believe it. This is a marvelous airplane, [laughter] just like that, a real fighter, smooth--I fell in love in one instant. I said, "I'll make this airplane mine," but, come up, I forget what we did the first mission, flying around, but, then, we're going to come back. So, we're stacking echelon and I'm number four, so, I'm down at the bottom of this echelon. He starts down and he starts down lower and lower and lower and I can see cactus. [laughter] He's trying to break me--this is what they do. I'm depending on number three, because we're almost down. [laughter] We're depending on each other and I didn't move, but that's what they did, "Take off," don't say, "Wait until you start, we'll all get together," no, no, just everything was just like that, and a terrible accident rate. So, after that, I felt very confident in the airplane and, I mean, I had some adventures. I had another episode where being a coxswain, I think, saved my life, that we were going to a really great gunnery range, where they had a bunch of old tanks and trucks sitting up there. You had two guns and you're going to shoot them up. Let's see, once again, I was number four. [laughter] As I rolled in--and there's no fuel gauges on these things--as I rolled in and started pulling up, I realized that this tank was full again and, if I tried to pull, it was going to go on me, okay, laws of physics. I could pull and crash or I can see what I got. I just nibbled it down and the instructor thought I'd crashed, because my shadow and me met, and he [says], "Berke, what are you doing?" I says, "Yes, sir, I'm sorry. [laughter] I think I got a tank. Request return to base." Once again, I say I think crew and coxing [helped] and I was able to feel that, that nibble out there. It was nibbling on me and I know what that meant, because, when you put an aileron up, you create more drag and it just aggravates whatever the condition is. That's one of the things I learned when I was flying around Wright Field with these guys, see. So, if anybody, I should be a very religious person with a personal God who's on my shoulder--I don't believe that, but you could.

SH: You were just able to not have to use the bourbon or the phenobarbital after this trip.

GB: Yes. Oh, I always had bourbon, every night in my life.

SH: Okay, I thought you gave it up. [laughter]

GB: One shot, one shot of bourbon. No, it's good for you. That's been proven. [laughter]

SH: You are walking proof, right? This is still all training.

GB: Yes.

SH: That must take a lot of that "coxswain moxie" to keep going.

GB: Until Vietnam, there wasn't much difference. Just to jump ahead, when I got to Korea, our loss rate was just about the same as it was in combat--lack of experience, no leadership, and I'll go into that--but we were losing jets, because I looked at the records. You had to take twenty-four-hour duty at the group headquarters. They had all the intelligence reports. I read about the whole war there and, for a time, my memory's a little gone, but I knew everything that had happened, because that's what I did, I studied that. I studied the loss rate and we were losing people from getting in the wrong situation.

SH: You talked about training with the pilots from France, Belgium and …

GB: Holland.

SH: Did they finally perfect enough English to survive, to be successful?

GB: Yes, but the percentage of them was not favorable. Then, I had to ascribe it not to any other reason [than] that, and especially when you're a fighter pilot, it's hard to ask questions. I've never bothered with that. I always asked questions. I've declared emergencies more than probably any three pilots. Whenever I think something's wrong, I declare an emergency and they say, "Oh, George, do it." I says, "Listen, I get medals from the fire department. They said, 'Sir, thank you for that, because we get a chance to practice.'" [laughter] Yes, getting into all this, I start feeling like I'm really blowing my horn, but I'm not making this up. [laughter]

SH: You are here; you are proof.

GB: I'm not making this up.

SH: Where did you go from Luke?

GB: That's where I went, directly to Korea.

SH: That would have been in 1955.

GB: Yes. Well, no, let's see, these trainings didn't take that long.

SH: Okay.

GB: Yes. I mean, so, I departed for Korea in December and I spent 1954 in Korea. I came back in December of 1954. I left in December of 1953.

SH: You got your wings in September 1953. Were you trained enough to go to Korea in three months?

GB: Yes, that was the idea. [laughter]

SH: Did your wife come back East or stay at Luke? Where did you house your dependents?

GB: Oh, no problem. We drove to Dayton, and then, we drove to New Jersey and my wife was going to stay in New Jersey for a while, and then, go home. My dad drove her home, but, by July, mid-July, shortly after I got over there, she said, "Oh, I'm pregnant." So, she stayed with my parents, and then, my dad drove her to Dayton and she had Jenny at the Dayton Air Force Hospital. So, that's what my wife did. She was very disappointed when I finally came back from Korea, after a year there, that I wasn't paying that much attention to my baby daughter, that I was paying attention to my wife, but that's a woman thing. "Sorry, I was really more interested in you." [laughter]

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: We will meet again tomorrow. I think this is a good place to break.

GB: Agreed.

SH: Thank you.

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

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 2/25/2015
Reviewed by Molly Graham 4/6/2015