RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN J. CAPESTRO

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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G. Kurt Piehler: This begins an interview with Stephen Capestro on August 17, 1994, in Edison, New Jersey, with Kurt Piehler. I would like to begin by talking a little bit about your parents. You mentioned that your father was an immigrant from Italy.

Steve Capestro: [My] father and mother [were] from Italy, a small, mountain village near the City of Genoa, the home of Christopher Columbus. He was born in a small house, a side-by-side, two-family type, with, like, a barn underneath where the cows went in. It was actually a mountain village, with a magnificent view from the top of the mountain. My dad was in the bedroom the morning that my mother was born. So, he saw his wife [being born] and actually knew her from birth. They married when she was fifteen and immigrated to the United States of America.

KP: Why did they immigrate?

SC: Actually, I've reflected in my mind many times about that, because, in my childhood, we used to meet with my uncles and aunts from different parts of Jersey and how they got there was an oddity. It was just [their] ambition to improve themselves and their lifestyle and their life. I guess the talk of everybody in the world in those days was America. I guess that the immigration was open quite freely for the Italians at that time and they took advantage of it. My father, mother and three or four brothers and brothers-in-law migrated to Brooklyn.

KP: Did they all come over together?

SC: Basically, [at] the same time, close to the same time.

KP: Did other members of their community in Italy come over also?

SC: Yes. The community was only a community of about a hundred people, but another half a mile's another small community of a hundred people. So, it's actually the same community, but like towns in a county, for example, all the small ones, but, mostly, some type of farming, yes, because there were no streets or cars or anything to get to the City of Genoa. Actually, it was impossible. I guess most of it was farming. They took it to a village down the mountain and whoever was going to purchase [the produce] would meet them down there and they would distribute their tomatoes or whatever it was [that] they were distributing to those people. They came to Brooklyn by boat, naturally, and settled in Brooklyn.

KP: It must have been quite a change for them to move from a small farming community in Italy to Brooklyn.

SC: Oh, it was amazing. My dad and uncles were telling me, they weren't here two months and they all lived, like, four couples in one house and four couples in another house, two or three-family townhouses in Brooklyn. They went to work in the wholesale fruit and vegetable markets, driving teams of horses to deliver the fruits and vegetables to the retail stores, and that's how they started. Then, they'd sit and talk about their dreams at night, after work, and discuss their future, how they were going to do something, and they did.

KP: What did your father end up doing?

SC: Well, the story I heard, they all got together one night and decided [that] they're going to move and, being from the City of Genoa, or near it, I guess there's an attraction for the water. They found out about the Jersey Shore and got a map and they drew straws and each one picked the town [that] they're going to settle in. My dad picked Avon-by-the-Sea, one uncle picked Belmar, the next town, one picked Bradley Beach, one picked Point Pleasant, etc., and they moved down. My dad started with a small fruit and vegetable store. My uncle in Point Pleasant did the same. One in Manasquan started with a small luncheonette. Most of them, actually, went into that kind of business for themselves. My mother's brother stayed in Jamaica, Long Island, kept working up there in the fruit and vegetable wholesale [business]. He started acquiring lots, a lot of fifty-by-fifty. He never married until later on in life. He bought a lot for fifty-by-a-hundred, twenty-five-by-a-hundred. He would buy one lot and save money and buy another one. So, he acquired …

KP: Real estate.

SC: Real estate, and kept working, and then, retired at an early age. He used to spend weekends with us, a lot of it, and help my dad around the store. My dad acquired a type of luncheonette/newspaper stand, also in Avon-by-the-Sea, and that's how they started out and expanded, went to (Superettes?), eventually.

KP: Your family made a conscious decision to spread out along the Jersey Shore.

SC: Yes, and the Genoans, I learned later, are actually merchants. I guess, coming from Genoa, you get into actually trading and that's an instinct within you, I guess. It came out, later on. No education--none of them went past the, I guess, fourth or fifth grade, but they became avid readers. When the Depression hit, my dad--well, we had gone to Europe for nine months as a child. My dad took us to Europe when I was about nine years old or seven years old, to the hometown, with my mother, my brother and I. The town was (Trensasco?). They had a little schoolroom, one-room school, and they said to me, "Why don't you go?" "All right." I had learned their dialect as a child, not thoroughly, but I learned the dialect, but they say, "Going to the school, you'll really learn your Italian." I did that and half the people couldn't understand me. [laughter] One day in school, the kids were ribbing me, bad, about my Italian. So, I went home that night and I was furious. I told my mother, "I want to take an English book to school," one of my schoolbooks, "to class," and I did. I think, if I remember correctly, Professor, the kindergarten and the first grade were in the same room, the third grade, they're all in the same room, probably, yes.

KP: Yes.

SC: They were giving me the heat again, and so, I took my book out and I said, "Here, read this." [laughter] That was the end of the harassment, I think. It became--it was a friendly thing and it gave me an insight, of immigrants coming here, when I went back to that town. When we landed, when I got back, my dad said, "Hey, Depression hit us." I didn't know what a depression was, and he lost everything.

KP: Your father was really hurt by the Depression.

SC: Oh, yes. My dad had done well. As I said, he had the two stores in Avon-by-the-Sea. He had sold the two of them and we moved--one, he sold the business and kept the store. It was a store with an apartment upstairs. One, he sold the building and he sold the house he acquired in Avon-by-the-Sea. He had bought land in Bradley Beach and Neptune and he bought the house and the business in Toms River and we moved to Toms River. Then, we got wiped out by the Depression. That's before we went to Italy and he told us this. I can remember my dad telling us, "We're wiped out." My dad always said to me--I used to clean fruits and vegetables when I was ten, eleven years old, in the back of the store--he made me read the *Wall Street Journal* every day.

KP: Really?

SC: And made me do the *New York Times* every day.

KP: As an eleven-year-old?

SC: As an eleven-year-old.

KP: Why was he so insistent?

SC: Well, I guess because he didn't have the option to learn that I would have and he saw what it meant to learn something about business and the stock market. He would make me read the stock prices every day, the stock [that] he bought, and tell him if he was making money or losing money. [laughter] I still do that, every day. I still watch Channel 35 and get the stock market reports and stuff. I own no stock today, but I did it. When he lost everything--keep going?

KP: Yes.

SC: He lost everything. He had saved, as I said before, the one building back in Avon-by-the-Sea. I was a freshman, just went to Rutgers as a freshman. That's when my mother cried, oh. Vinnie Utz used to go down with me and became like a son to my mother. His picture always hung over my father and mother's bed. We went back to Avon-by-the-Sea, [where we] had the apartment upstairs and my brother, who was single, started a little bit of a luncheonette. My dad went out and bought a used truck and went to the market every morning and bought the best fruits and vegetables you could buy and went door-to-door. Those people used to go to our store, looked for his fresh vegetables. He developed a trade. At age sixty or better, I guess, he was going door-to-door, [selling] fruits and vegetables and helping my brother in the store. So, he bounced back. He wasn't rich, but he didn't go on welfare. He made his way. That's the way his bringing up was, I guess. So, from then on, they got older and older and my mother kept helping my brother and that was it.

KP: Did your mother work in the store?

SC: Oh, yes. In fact, during the war, when my brother got drafted, my mother ran that store. She might have been in her sixties. She ran that store seven days a week and never took a penny. Everything went [to my brother]; well, didn't get rich, don't misunderstand me. When my brother came back, it was all there waiting for him there.

KP: Did your brother stay in the business?

SC: He stayed in the business until my father died. My mother used to help him. Then, my mother passed away and my brother was single. I said to Joe, "Joe, what are you going to do here by yourself, seven days a week, sixteen hours a day, seventeen hours a day, apartment upstairs? How are you going to do it?" So, I got him a job, actually, in Monmouth County, janitorial. We sold the building. I wanted to buy it, frankly, because there was the three of us and my wife said, "No way. That's three ways, get rid of it. I don't want them to say you took advantage of them."

KP: Yes.

SC: A cousin I had opened a restaurant in Bradley Beach, had an apartment upstairs. So, he saw me once, said, "What's Joe going to do?" and I told him, said, "Tell Joe to come down here, live in the apartment upstairs. He can give me a hand in the tavern." So, that's what he did. He lived a life of joy until he passed away. My other brother was in Spring Lake Heights. That's pretty much my childhood and my Rutgers days.

KP: How old were you when you were living in Brooklyn?

SC: Oh, I moved out of there when I was three years old.

KP: You do not really remember Brooklyn.

SC: No.

KP: Your earliest memories are probably of growing up in Avon-by-the-Sea.

SC: No, my memories of Brooklyn, where we lived as a child, we'd go to visit [my] uncle in Point Pleasant, like [on a] Sunday afternoon--didn't have TV--families got together and BS-ed and you hear the same story about Italy, I guess, every Sunday. [laughter] That's how I learned about my childhood in Brooklyn.

KP: Were there many other Italians in Avon-by-the-Sea?

SC: Avon, yes, more Italians than Bradley Beach and Asbury Park. Of course, they were bigger towns. Avon's a town of about seven or eight square blocks. Avon was basically Irish-Italian, but, [among] the merchants, there were several Italians, I think. For a small town, that was a lot, yes. There were a lot of Italians when we went to Toms River, a lot of Italians there in the farmland. That was a small town, too, surrounded by a lot of farms. A lot of those were Italians,

chicken farms, a lot of Italians in that community, yes. Lakewood was Jewish. Ever hear of the town of Lakewood?

KP: Yes.

SC: That was Jewish.

KP: Did you ever have any problems with the Ku Klux Klan?

SC: We did. Well, they had it in Avon-by-the-Sea. I can remember the Klan's march on Main Street and giving the finger to my father when they passed his business, and he gave it back to them pretty good. [laughter] In fact, he did more than that, almost, but never around my brother. My older brother was about ten years younger than me. He almost got into a couple of scrapes over it, but my dad told him, he said, "They're going to walk by here and it's all over in five minutes, but we'll get even," and he used to tell them, "Take your mask off, so, we can see who you are." [laughter] They wouldn't do that.

KP: Did you know who was in the Klan?

SC: No, I wouldn't know.

KP: Do you think that your father knew?

SC: I doubt it.

KP: Yes.

SC: I doubt it.

KP: What was your school like in Avon-by-the-Sea? How big was it?

SC: Well, it was a grammar school. There was a grammar school there, that's all.

KP: Yes.

SC: Whatever grammar school there was, because I moved out of there--I think I was [in] seventh or eighth grade.

KP: When you moved out of Avon-by-the-Sea?

SC: [To] Toms River, yes, and Toms River was small. Toms River, in those days, was five thousand people, I think. It's actually Dover Township, but, now, it's fifty, sixty thousand, like everything else. It was a beautiful country area, oh, God, and I'd hitchhike to the beach. Seaside [Heights] was about seven miles away. Who had cars? the wealthy. [laughter] It was a good family childhood, yes. When my brothers passed away, it changed my life quite a bit, not going down [to] the Shore and stuff. I then got closer to my wife's family. My wife's of Italian

heritage and they were Italian immigrants, both of them. My life became oriented in this area, when I went to Rutgers.

KP: Yes, that would happen.

SC: When I went to the service, then, when I came back from the service, we settled here. I wanted to go down to the Shore, but my wife won the battle, like other ones. She's won all of them. [laughter]

KP: When did you know that you wanted to go to college? Did your family encourage you?

SC: Oh, they always encouraged me. I knew I wanted to go to college in high school, when I played football, really. I knew it before that. In high school, Kurt, I made the varsity football team, I made the varsity track team, I made the varsity baseball team and I made the varsity basketball team. So, in one year, I was in four sports, I got letters, and that was an accomplishment. I might have been the second one [to do this] and it was a good high school. I would say, in Toms River High School, the ratio of going to college was high, Pennsylvania University, Franklin & Marshall College. I went to Franklin & Marshall Academy for a year, on a football scholarship. Then, from there, I went to Rutgers. I always wanted to go to college, I guess.

KP: Your family also encouraged you a lot.

SC: Oh, strong, strong, my mother and my brothers. I'll tell you, with Depression time, when I left Avon-by-the-Sea, I used to hitchhike back to New Brunswick. Of course, in those days, everybody picked you up. There was no violent crime in the streets. They'd get me two or three blocks. That was a hell of a start to the week. Vinnie Utz used to hitchhike down with me, once in a while, Otto Hill. They used to come down. We had some good times together.

KP: What was your major?

SC: Business Administration.

KP: What did you think that you would do after you graduated?

SC: Oh, I wanted to go in business. Fruits and vegetables, that's what I wanted; didn't turn out [that way, but] that's what I wanted. I don't mean this with any criticism of my wife, [but] money wasn't a big thing for her. She just wanted me to get a job someplace and work eight or nine hours and come home. Now, when you start a business, you don't do that. I did actually work in a grocery store with her uncle for a period of time. I wanted to go back to the Shore. I had an opportunity. My Uncle Steve, from Point Pleasant, and my dad found a restaurant that was for sale, with a liquor license, in Neptune, right over the bridge from Toms River, up from Avon. We went there, my wife and I, on a Sunday afternoon, [went] into the store, with my Uncle Steve and my dad. The man had a personal problem with his two sons, became gamblers and it was hurting their business, financially, because they're losing money. My uncle said, "Buy

it. It's going to be great." We could have bought, believe it or not, the building and the business, going way back, and the liquor license, for 35,000 dollars, if my memory's right.

KP: Do you remember, roughly, what year it was?

SC: I would say, probably, when I first came out of college, or when I came home from the service, '44, maybe. It was still the Depression, to a degree. My wife was an only child. Her mother developed cancer, so, then, she said, "My job is home." So, I said, "My job's to be with you," and we didn't buy it, but a certain person in Edison Township, maybe seven or eight years later, nine years later, came to me, said, "Steve, do you know this place in Neptune?" [laughter] I said, "Yes." He said, "I'm interested in that place. Find out about it." I said, "What do you want?" He said, "400,000 dollars." [The] 35,000 purchase price went to 400,000. I still go there, once in a while, stop and have a drink and I get mad at my wife, [laughter] but that's the past. I always wanted to be in business, never worked out that way, but I wanted to be in business. I think the Genoans, people in the City of Genoa, are called merchants, as I said before, I think, and I could see why, because it's a harbor. It was the largest port in Europe, at that time, historically. You became a trader; a lot of Jewish people in the City of Genoa, the merchants, and they call us "the Italian Jews." [laughter] I mean that in a complimentary way, when I use the word "Jewish."

KP: Yes. Who was your favorite professor?

SC: I got very close to Ray Pane. I became very friendly with several professors, hard to remember some of the names today, but I got involved closely with Pane because I took a course in Italian. I wanted to learn the Italian grammatically. With Depression time, I think under a federal program, he got me a job. [Editor's Note: Mr. Capestro is referring to the National Youth Administration (NYA).] I think it was [for] fifty cents an hour, because I was stoking furnaces at six o'clock in the morning in the house, the room I had in the house. I had to work in a restaurant [for] breakfast at seven o'clock in the morning, and [then], go to school, about six or seven hours.

KP: You also had to go to football practice during the season.

SC: Oh, yes. Well, when I made the team, that helped me out, because, after practice, you have the meal and that was a free meal. A couple of merchants helped me get a little job downtown in New Brunswick, because it was like a family city then. It was a small city, at that time, and the football did help me, no doubt about that, but that's one thing about Rutgers, boy, if you didn't pass your courses …

KP: There were no free rides for the football players.

SC: Oh, no, oh, no. Sometimes, I think it was backwards. I think, sometimes, they …

KP: They wanted to make a point.

SC: Ray Pane did with me.

KP: He made that clear.

SC: Oh. [laughter] I know he went to the games, I know this, and hollered, in broken English, "Go, Steve. Go, Steve," *Stefano* in Italian. "*Stefano, vai, vai*," [which] means, "Go, go," but, when I went in that class, if I hadn't done my work, [there would be trouble]. I got involved in doing a couple of Italian plays under Ray Pane, which was interesting, yes, [to] perform. Of course, my Italian ego helped, I think. [laughter]

KP: In the late 1930s and early 1940s, what did you think about the worsening situation overseas? Were you able to see the oncoming conflict?

SC: I had a burning--it affected my life. I didn't care about school anymore, to this degree, that I wanted to go in the service, and friends and Rutgers and such [were not as important]. I started to quit going to classes, quite frankly, and it affected me that way. I became bitter about not being in the service when some of the guys were in the service. My time finally came and I went in. I felt free; I really did. Having gone to Rutgers and having the two years of ROTC was really a big help when I got in the service, no doubt about that, no doubt about it, but I was a bitter guy about not being there. I felt guilty that I was having some fun in the Corner Tavern, the Old Time Tavern. I was wrong. I even went to work, that helped, at the Raritan Arsenal. When I was a senior, I got a job at nights. I overdid it. I started missing classes and stuff. I mean, I became a confused young guy for a period of time and I was wrong there. I was wrong. I should have, at that stage, finished my [studies], do what I was supposed to do.

KP: Most Americans forget that we were also at war with Italy. You had strong ties to Italy through your family and your trips there before the war. Did you feel ambivalent towards fighting against the Italians?

SC: No, no. I felt bad, but I was mad. I got mad at Italy and the Italians, except I know what I was, and my dad and mother were pro-America so strongly, about the Italian thing, very, very angry at the Italian government, very, very angry. In fact, going back for a second, when I was there as a child, [in] the mountain village, Mussolini, of course, ran Italy. They got me, the school did, to go to a little parade, I guess in the village. I had the Italian shorts, like Mussolini wore, the green shirt. My dad saw me march. He was furious.

KP: Really?

SC: Oh, yes, he was furious that I was wearing [the uniform], oh, man, but it was a lesson, an experience.

KP: Your father did not like Mussolini from the very beginning.

SC: Oh, no. In fact, do you know what it taught me, though? The kids that I was marching with, they didn't know what it was. They really didn't understand. That was their country and that was their home area. They didn't understand the philosophy of governments, a democracy versus a dictatorship. They knew all they saw in the paper and radio was Benito Mussolini, who

stood up there on his [balcony]. I get mad thinking of him. No, I had no qualms about fighting the Italians, necessary. The funny part about it [was, the reason I got into] the OSS was because I knew Italian. I guess that's how I got there. [Editor's Note: The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was a United States intelligence agency formed under Colonel William "Wild Bill" Donovan during World War II from 1942 to 1945.]

KP: Did you live on campus or did you rent a room?

SC: As a student?

KP: Yes.

SC: Oh, when I first went to Rutgers, they helped me get a room on Hamilton Avenue, off of Easton, Easton and Hamilton. I think I lived on the third floor, like the attic, with a boy from Perth Amboy and a Jewish, young guy, who I [have] loved all my life, from North Jersey, I think Morris County. He was a football nut and, because I made the freshman team, I was like a hero to him and he was my right arm to me. I could lean on him. I'd get up six o'clock in the morning, five o'clock, and I stoked the furnace. In those days, it was a coal-burning furnace and that helped me pay for the room. I said I'd go to the luncheonette and I'd work at six o'clock on tables for my breakfast. When I made the team and got on track and schedule, the merchants helped me get a couple part-time jobs, as I said before, but that was a great experience. You learned what a depression was. We learned.

KP: Did you ever live on campus?

SC: On campus? No, I never lived on campus.

KP: You never lived in Winants.

SC: No. From there, then, I got a room in the Albany Hotel on Albany Street, where J&J is now, around that area. Again, I lived in a room up in the top, but, there, I would sit in the office. I could study, but, if people came in to rent a room, I was available, and that helped me pay for my room. That fellow really did it to help me out. He did me a favor and we became friends, ever since, still are.

KP: Did you ever think of trying to join a fraternity?

SC: No. Number one, I couldn't afford it. Vinnie Utz did. He belonged to a fraternity. Vinnie was a little better off, economically, than I was. Otto Hill belonged to a fraternity. He and Vinnie belonged to the same one. You know Otto, right?

KP: No.

SC: Otto Hill, [you] haven't done him?

KP: Not yet.

SC: Oh, Otto Hill worked for the Athletic Department until about three years ago. He was a center on the football team, with Ralph Schmidt. Otto Hill, he was a center, Ralph Schmidt was a blocking back, Vinnie Utz was a fullback and I was a tailback. Vinnie and I got very close, but they belonged to the fraternity. I was allowed to go in the fraternity any time I wanted to. I think I could have become a member, no problem at all, but I knew the fraternity life well because of Vinnie Utz and Otto Hill. So, I was down there [a lot].

KP: You were there when you wanted to be there.

SC: Oh, yes, good parties and stuff, yes.

KP: Did you see any divisions on campus when you were there?

SC: Now, we had a club--I don't know who started it, a professor [maybe]--was called the Hilt Club, H-I-L-T, I think it was. Whoever put it together was very clever. Everybody couldn't join the club. You were asked to join. Let's assume I had a problem, whether that be financially or family or as a student. When you walked down College Avenue, if you went like this, [Mr. Capestro makes a motion], "to the hilt," that meant you had to sit and talk and that meant there was a meeting. So, I'd say, "Let's meet at the Corner Tavern," or something and we'd meet and discuss our problems. [laughter] Psychologically, I don't know who started it, but they did a hell of a job and those little things [were present]. Of course, that was a much smaller college. The whole campus was on College Avenue, I guess. The fraternity houses and the rooming houses, individual homes, [were all on College Avenue]--that probably paid a lot of mortgages off, having the college students living in their house--and the taverns downtown, of course, the Corner Tavern, some of them are gone, Jimmy Wright's Log Cabin, but the merchants of New Brunswick were very, very kind to us, I thought, understanding.

KP: You were not the only one to get favors from the merchants.

SC: Oh, no. Favors were small, but they'd help you earn something. You knew the guy from the milk company, he'd help you get a part-time job at the milk company. That's what I meant by favor.

KP: Yes.

SC: Not outright gifts of any kind.

KP: No, but, in terms of getting a job during the Depression, they helped.

SC: Oh, sure, oh, yes, and Rutgers would help you, [too]. They'd have those special programs. There were boys of wealth; I know there were several kids [that] had cars. Man, I looked up to them. Of course, when I made the football team, they'd give me a ride around [to] class. They'd ask you, "You want a ride, Steve?" I felt like a hero then, talk about a hero, [laughter] stick my arm out that window, "Here I am."

KP: Car ownership, for you, was something where, when you finally owned a car, you felt you really made it.

SC: Oh, yes. My dad had a car and a truck in his little business there. My brother, Joe, had a car. My brother, John, had a car, but they were used cars, not cars of any means, but, during the summer, if I could use it, man, I was [in heaven]. I drove a truck during the summer, brick company, door-to-door, house-to-house, which is a great experience, and I was a hero driving that truck. I thought I was somebody. [laughter]

KP: What did you think of Dean Metzger?

SC: I thought a lot of Dean Metzger. I thought a lot. I thought he was a good guy. In fact, I would say the leadership of Rutgers, the deans that I knew in my days and after, I really respected and highly admired. Now, maybe I didn't know enough not to, but I did. I really saw, I think, a school that I was proud of, a college that I was proud of, and I think I saw it was the college of the future. I really do. I think I saw a college of the future. Of course, you saw Douglass at that time and they were nice over there, pretty girls over there, and they went through the same Depression. [laughter] Dean Metzger, he gave me some good advice at times. He really did and he meant it sincerely, I know. I didn't take it personally. If he thought I was a wacko, he told me that.

KP: How did you meet your wife? Was it while you were at Rutgers?

SC: How I met my wife--yes, she had gone to football games on several occasions, I guess the [local high] schools took students to the Rutgers games, probably got tickets in the high schools, and saw my picture in the program book. This is what I was told later and, now, one girl said, "Look at this guy," and she stupidly said, "Look at him." She saw me and Vinnie Utz, my wife. I got a part-time job at the Arsenal at night in my senior year and I met her, met my wife. I didn't know who she was. I thought she was a Hungarian girl from Perth Amboy or New Brunswick, but, then, I got the name and I recognized the name. Then, I was drafted and I went to Fort Knox and one of her girlfriends wrote me a letter [that] my future wife was sick, saying, "Why don't you drop her a note?" I did and that started our correspondence.

KP: You corresponded during the war.

SC: Yes, through the whole war.

KP: Did you save your correspondence?

SC: No, she did.

KP: Good.

SC: In the Army, how could I save it?

KP: Yes.

SC: That's how I met her and that's how it came about.

KP: You met at the Arsenal. What was she working as at the Arsenal?

SC: We met at the Arsenal at night. She was working at the Arsenal at night. She was a high school student, just graduated high school. I was six years older than my wife, and then, she came from a very, very strict Italian family, especially the father. I don't think he was happy that she'd met a soldier. [laughter]

KP: Soldiers, until World War II, really did not have a good name.

SC: No.

KP: Especially in civilian armies.

SC: But, he forgot [that] he was one in World War I. Yes, you're right, didn't have a good name. After the war, we did, though. During the war, I guess, the opinion of the public on the soldiers [changed], but, being ROTC helped me, no doubt about it. That's how I met her, at the Raritan Arsenal, and that was a fun couple of months. I got paid every two weeks, man, and I'd go right to the Corner Tavern, meet Vinnie Utz.

KP: Was the Corner Tavern where it is now?

SC: Yes.

KP: It has always been in that spot.

SC: [The] same exact spot. That was one tavern. The other tavern was Jimmy Wright's Log Cabin. That was downtown. If you came down to Rutgers on--what's the main street, George Street?

KP: Yes.

SC: You made a left to go to J&J, that new strip of stores? It was around the corner down there where Jimmy Wright's Log Cabin was and Jimmy Wright's sister was a singer with Tommy Dorsey. That was our weekend [hangout], or during the week. Because there were a lot of students [with] a better income, they'd buy you a drink. Of course, we'd work, actually, sometimes, in that tavern. I'd go down there and help clean up and carry out cases of booze and stuff. We'd build up a little credit for three or four or five drinks. [laughter] It was amazing, [when] you look back, how you survived the Depression time there. I don't mean the word "survive;" no, it didn't become a stigma on you. It didn't [on] me. I didn't blame anybody, during the whole Depression.

KP: At the Arsenal, how many women were working there?

SC: A lot. That's a good question. Looking back, I think that was the start of the women in the workplace, although, in the inner cities, where the hat factories were, like Perth Amboy or New Brunswick, a lot of women worked there. The husbands worked in the industrial plants, like California Oil, whatever. There were women who worked there and that helped [to] put their kids through school, but I think that World War II really was a turning point in the women going to work, and justifiably so. I thought the woman should be home, but that's not [what happened].

KP: Were you surprised when you saw so many women at work in the Arsenal?

SC: Yes, yes.

KP: What kind of jobs were they doing?

SC: Secretarial, a lot of them, but menial, too. Well, between the draft and the boom in jobs, there was a need for women to go to work, absolute need. I look back, there's no doubt in my mind about that, because everybody had a [job]; that got us out of the Depression, really. That's what changed it, the war. I think the war changed the Depression. They were good days. Every day is a good day.

KP: You were drafted from which draft board?

SC: Down the Shore, Asbury Park.

KP: Which service were you drafted into?

SC: Army. I tried to volunteer.

KP: You did?

SC: Oh, yes, and the Dean's telling me, "Don't do it. There's time. Finish up what you're doing," but I had a burning desire. When I got drafted, I was a happy guy. I really was. Maybe it was ego, I really don't know. I don't know if it was ego. I thought I belonged there.

KP: What service did you want to enlist in?

SC: Army, anything--Army, really, and that's where I ended up, in the Army. I felt free. That's the craziest thing to say. I really felt free. My mother didn't, my father didn't.

KP: They were not pleased.

SC: No, no. Well, hey, I was their son, but they understood. My dad understood more than my mother. My dad really understood, I guess. He had never been in the service. His brother was, in World War I, but he understood. So, I went in, April '42.

KP: Where did you do your basic training?

SC: Fort Knox. I was in an armored division. I think it was the Eighth Armored Division.

KP: You did your basic.

SC: I did my basic at Fort Knox and, from Fort Knox, before I finished, I went to another camp--I can't think of the name of it--in Kentucky and I finished my basic there. When I was down there--oh, I got a call from my battalion commander, [who] was a West Point colonel, a West Point graduate. He called me in to talk, said, "Steve, there's a program," and, Kurt, I can't remember what it was called, "to send people back to school, in service, and I'd like to have you go." I said, "I don't want to go. I want to go overseas, I want to go overseas with my guys." He said, "I need you here for training," because I had that damn Rutgers two years in ROTC. That helped, by the way, not [in terms of] stripes or anything, right away, but I became a leader. So, anyway, he convinced me. [Editor's Note: The Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), established in 1942, was an officer training program that serviced over two hundred thousand enlisted men in several specialties, including engineering, medicine and dentistry, psychology and foreign languages, at 227 colleges and universities.] I went to Ohio State University and, at Ohio State, I became a cadet battalion commander. We'd all line up in the morning outside. They all saluted me and, boy, I felt, "Hey, I'm a big man." I didn't have one stripe yet, [laughter] but I became a sergeant fast. When I was in Ohio State, I got called by my superior officer and I went in and he said--oh, I was a sergeant, yes, I'm sorry--he said, "Sergeant, people want to interview you." I said, "For what?" He said, "I don't know, but they want to interview you. You're to go downtown in;" what the hell city is Ohio State in?

KP: Columbus.

SC: Yes, Columbus, Ohio, "Go down to such-and-such an office building. Go to the fourth floor," let's say, "and just sit in the lobby. Just sit there." What the hell is this? Well, I went down. I went in the lobby, sat, and I sat--I think it was on purpose, to test you out a little bit--I sat and I sat and I sat and I saw no one going in and no one going out. I started to get, now, a little hot under the collar and I don't have an Italian temper by nature, but I was getting hot under the collar. I sat and sat and sat. Finally, the guy came out. He was a colonel. He said, "Come inside, Sergeant." So, I went in, a little office like this, just [from] memory, right now, boy, I remember, a tiny desk, and he had his jacket off. He said, "You're here to be interviewed. I'm going to ask you three questions and you're to answer the three questions without any questions. Simply answer the question, yes or no. Now, the third question, think hard before you answer, yes or no. It's the most important question, for you and for us." Don't forget now, I had a little bit of a college kid ego, "I'll show them all." [laughter] The first question was, "Would you go overseas?" and that's what I always wanted to do. I said, "Yes, sir." Second question is, "Would you do work behind enemy lines?" Well, I didn't answer quite as fast, but I thought about it. I said, "Yes, sir." Third question [was], "Before you answer the third question, think it out for five minutes. Would you work behind the enemy lines in civilian clothes? You have to understand now, if you say yes and you're apprehended, you can be put to death, because you're in civilian clothes. If you're not in civilian clothes, if you're in uniform …

KP: Prisoner of war.

SC: Prisoner of war." I thought--I had to take the five minutes, I did--and I said, "Yes, I will." I don't know if I said yes out of intelligence or yes out of machismo or egoism. I think I meant it though, Kurt. He said, "Okay, that's it." I left, I went back and did my daily duties and got a call one day, "You're going to go to Cornell University." I went to Cornell and I think I spent six to eight weeks there and went through a pretty trying time.

KP: I think I need to turn the tape over.

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

KP: You mentioned you went to Cornell for training.

SC: Yes, and I started meeting some other fellows there.

KP: Did you know what this training was for when you were sent to Cornell?

SC: No.

KP: They just sent you orders for Cornell.

SC: You wore nothing but your uniform every day--I'm sorry, there, yes, I'm sorry, civilian clothes. You got a pair of pants and a couple shirts.

KP: You were not in uniform at that point.

SC: At that point, for there, and everybody wore the same thing. So, you didn't know what the other guy was, what branch he belonged to, what his rank was, and we basically went to a typical college classroom. One of them, one classroom, I remember a little bit of--I guess it wasn't a classroom, it was some kind of a meeting room with a little bit of, like, a balcony, if my memory's right, but I know we were separated from the person running the so-called course. They were reading something about history and geography and I couldn't figure where the hell they're going.

KP: What history were you studying, German?

SC: It was just European in general.

KP: Just European in general, nothing specific.

SC: Yes. Well, you'd wind up with the countries involved in the war, countries in general, and, [in] the third or fourth class day, I started to hear derogatory remarks about the United States of America, I say derogatory, and I listened. We got into some damn good arguments. I finally got mad, I think [on] the fifth or sixth day, and I stood up and I said, "I'm not going to sit here--I will not stay here and take this about my country." I started getting support and we said, "We're going to walk out if this continues." It started a bit of a turmoil. I found out, seventy-five percent of it was training, but there really was one guy in there who didn't belong there. He was

really an opponent, philosophically. I don't know if he was American or what he was, but it started a hell of a turmoil. I was there for, I guess, eight, nine weeks and I got called in again and saw I was going to be sent to Washington, DC. They give me an address, give me a building number and where I was to report. I wore my uniform; I got my uniform back. So, I got a hold of my girlfriend; maybe a phone call then was thirty-five cents to Edison Township, I don't know. I was getting my fifty bucks a month or whatever it was, a lot of money. So, I told her what, I said, "I'm going to get off the train in Perth Amboy. I'll stop and see you." I did. I didn't have a car, but I got off the train in Perth Amboy and I spent overnight at her uncle's house. I don't think I was supposed to. I think I was supposed to be there the same day, very frankly. I spent overnight at her uncle's house in Perth Amboy and they took me out that night, typical date, a bar [that] served sandwiches, didn't have restaurants like today, but we did that. The next day, I took the train back down to Washington, went to the building and reported upstairs and sat there for four hours, sat there for four hours--when I say four hours, maybe it was three hours and twenty minutes.

KP: It was a long sit.

SC: So, then, I got called in and I was told, very frankly, they were too busy to see me today, "Here is maybe forty, maybe fifty dollars." I got enough money for a hotel room. When I say a hotel room, now, Kurt, I mean, it wasn't the greatest hotel in the world. [laughter]

KP: It stuck in your memory. [laughter]

SC: Yes, enough money for a pair of pants, two pairs of pants, two shirts, and [I was told], "Wear your civilian clothes." I did that and I had maybe ten dollars left over, plus, I had a couple bucks of my own money, out of my paycheck. I went [to] Downtown Washington and everybody's in uniform.

KP: Had you been to Washington before?

SC: No.

KP: What did you think of it?

SC: Oh, I thought I was in hell. Everyone had a uniform but me and people looked at me because I was in civilian clothes.

KP: Like you were a "slacker."

SC: That's right. Nobody would say hello to me. When I went to get a drink in a place, I didn't think they were going to serve me, Kurt. I mean it. [laughter] So, I went back and put my damn uniform on in the hotel and went out again. Of course, if I was being trailed, I [would have] got in trouble. Anyhow, I went back the next day and I went in again to the office and they said to me, "You'll be picked up in twenty minutes here and you're going to go someplace for some training." "All right," and I waited. I had brought the stuff with me they told me to [buy], two pairs of pants and shirts. I didn't care if I lost them. I got in a van. It was a covered van. Oh, let

me get this straight now--they told me to go home for two days and they gave me sealed instructions in an envelope and they told me to read them. I sat there to open it and I read them and she said, "Give it back to me." I said, "What do you mean, 'Give it back to you?'" "Well, you read it." I said, "Well, supposing I forget what I read?"

[TAPE PAUSED]

SC: She said, "Oh, that's what you're here for, to do those kinds of things. That's why we picked you." I said, "Can I read it again?" I did and I wanted to make a note.

KP: Where were you supposed to report? What did those instructions say?

SC: So, I went home for a day-and-a-half, came back to Washington and the report was to meet on the corner of so-and-so and I would be picked up. That's all it said. So, I went down, [to] Downtown Washington, at the corner of so-and-so. Finally, a nice car, a nice car, pulled up and a guy got out, in a chauffeur's uniform. I said, "This ain't bad." [laughter] So, I asked him a question. "Sorry, no answers." So, they took me--I got in the van--he drove me to an estate in Virginia. Kurt, it was magnificent. I didn't know--it was OSS Headquarters. I didn't know that. [laughter] So, I go there and I went through a process, again, and she said, "Leave all your personal stuff with us." I think it was that one, I think so; no, no, just, "You're going to have a ride now someplace." Okay, they transferred me now to a van. The van was covered, like a tent cover, you know what I'm talking about?

KP: Yes.

SC: Which they used in those kind of days, and I got in the back. There were four other guys in the back of the van and we sat there. They closed the back, so [that] you couldn't see where you were or where you're going. The six of us or seven of us, whatever it was, sat in the back. All we did was look at each other.

KP: You did not talk to each other.

SC: I'm wondering who in the hell they are and they're wondering who in the hell that guy is. We're afraid to talk. So, anyway, we're driving and driving. Finally, [I said], "Hi." That's as far as I got. We said, "Hi," and nobody said, "I'm Pete," "I'm Joe," nobody said that. We finally arrived at a heavily wooded area and there were tents, but there were cabins, I saw. The guy says, "Get out." We're standing there, standing there and standing there. Everything is a test of patience, I guess. Finally, somebody came over and said, "Follow us." We went inside and guy told us, "You're here now. Give us all of your personal possessions, driver's license, whatever you've got," and we did. He said, "You're Steve A-37, you're that, you're that, you're that." Now, we all had to change into the same Army uniform. We had uniforms on. Everything you had on was changed and I say we all had a name, A-37 or B-22, whatever it was, and assigned you to a barracks. That's how we started and we started training. I tell you, when I say training …

KP: You had been through basic.

SC: Oh, yes, but this was hell, in a way.

KP: What did you learn?

SC: Well, everything from learning how to kill somebody with a knife, to how to do something, a bad thing, with a weapon, how to sit someplace and keep your mouth shut and be quiet, exercised very, very heavily. "Break into this office," and, when you broke in, all of a sudden, gas would start popping, how you reacted to that, taught how to pick a lock--not all in the same day.

KP: Yes.

SC: I was taken, one day, down by a stream and asked to go out and sit on a rock, in the center of the stream, and to be observant and watch, "In case the enemies come near the place, you can shoot your rifle and warn people." So, I sat on that rock and I sat and I sat and I sat. The goddamn water started coming up and up and up. That was the tide changing. It got to me, the water got to me, and I got out of there. I got holy hell when I got back. I left without [permission]. I really got a lecture, but I did it, and then, as I say, you'd learn how to break into a building and pick a lock. You learned how to start using codes. You would have classes every day. You would learn how, if you're going to send a letter, a note, to someone in code--and you were told that any letter you wrote, to a friend, etc., your name would be crossed off--there would be a return address, but not truly where you were; if you signed your [name], censor our name, every letter would be read, so [that] you weren't sending things that were …

KP: Confidential.

SC: … Confidential or about your training program, which would be a giveaway.

KP: No one knew what you were doing at this point, when you were just training.

SC: Oh, no, and then, we would sit in a roundtable at night, maybe eight or nine people at this table and eight or nine people at that table. One given day, I'd see a face was missing, wasn't there anymore. So, you'd ask, "What happened to G-22?" He'd say, "Well, he got caught divulging who he was or what he was doing and he'll be at work on the runway of the airport at the end for the rest of the war. He'll never leave the airport and never be allowed to go out."

KP: Out of the camp?

SC: Out of the camp.

KP: You knew that, if you washed out of this, you would be stuck.

SC: Oh, yes, yes. So, that made you stronger and stronger, because you still had a desire to do what you wanted to do. Then, I was told, finally, that I was to report to, I believe, Norfolk, Virginia. I was taken there and I got down there and I got on the docks where the ship was.

KP: Who were your trainers? Did you know anything about them?

SC: No. They were in uniform. They're basic, plain uniforms. They all wore the same uniform there.

KP: You do not know anything about their background.

SC: Oh, no.

KP: You never found out.

SC: They might have been Mafia. What the hell do I know? [laughter]

KP: They really did keep themselves very mysterious.

SC: Oh, yes. They might have been Marines in one uniform who were experts in one field, because we did codes there, Kurt, and we went through a lot of training programs, as I'm saying, deciphering, how to ask questions, how to answer questions, target practice. As I say, at the roundtable, we were really asked difficult questions and that's where guys would disappear. I guess they could see that they're starting to crack a little bit.

KP: How many people did not make it?

SC: I'd never know.

KP: You could not really tell why people were leaving.

SC: And there weren't that many trained at one time. It's not like starting a new division of soldiers. They only selected a few.

KP: How many were in your group?

SC: In my group, I started out with about eighteen, twenty, I guess. I would say mostly Italian, and a few others.

KP: Mostly Italians.

SC: A few Germans, there were a few English, I could tell by the brogue a little bit, who maybe knew a language, maybe knew French or something, a couple French. I spoke French, not well, but I did it. I was good in languages. I found that out. I had had French in high school, I never forgot it. Language was probably my strength. So, anyway, I went down to the ship and nobody asked any questions. I said to the guy, "Excuse me, sir."

[TAPE PAUSED]

KP: You were waiting for something, but you did not know what.

SC: So, finally, somebody came down, said, "Get aboard." I got aboard. So, I got on the ship and some guy said to me, "That's where you're staying." I swear to God, the room wasn't much wider than that door. There was two cots, one up, one above. Another guy came in, he was in uniform. "My name's Steve." That's all I said. He said his name was Jerry, whatever he said. We did find out, well, obviously, he's Jerry, so, I said, "I'm 38, Steve A-38."

KP: You were both agents.

SC: Yes, yes, and we just sat on the ship and landed in Casablanca. I think it was Christmas Day, in the rain, cold, the most miserable day I think I ever spent in my life. Nobody would tell me what the hell I'm doing there. Some guy just says, "Follow me," and the other guy. We got to a tent and there's two cots there, water all over the goddamn place. He said, "You're going to spend the night here." I said, "Where do we eat?" "You'll find out." [laughter] Now, it's getting a little testy, temper-wise. The other guy said, "Son of a bitch." [laughter] So, we got through the night and, the next day, we went to the same tent for breakfast. The guy said, "You'll be leaving," at what time. I said, "Where am I going?" He said, "You'll be leaving." So, they got us to the right train station, Casablanca. "That's your train." I said, "Where am I going?" He said, "That's your train." I didn't have much choice, because they're going to leave us just to stand there. So, we got on the train. A guy came by, didn't even ask us for tickets, nothing. So, we said, "There's something going on here." Anyway, now, I'm trying to make it short, we end up in Algiers. The guy come back, that just walked by, he said, "Follow me." [laughter] I was getting tired of, "Follow me." So, we got in the truck and they took us to a camp and that's where we camped and started, really, overseas training. We went through a very great training program, day and night. You were free in the daytime. On your free day, you could go to Algiers, do what you want to do, but no doubt in my mind, you were watched. I don't mean somebody tailing you all day. I'm not being overdramatic.

KP: What did you learn in your training overseas?

SC: Well, there, we start--for example, on a given day, it started out by just simply driving you out into the fields, outside the city, and drop you off and [you had to] get back to Point B. It was good. That wasn't hard, daytime--in fact, it was nice, sometimes--but you're out, you don't know who you're with when you're out there. If you go through a little village, you don't know if they're friends, you don't know if they're enemies. I can remember a lot of times, they were booing us--you could hear it--because we're in uniform. You could hear. You knew some French, the other guy knew some French, we could understand some nasty things were being said.

KP: Why were they booing you?

SC: Well, they were probably on the Nazi side. Of course, now, in the camp, there are more guys in this camp. So, we started [with] that simple thing. Then, we start doing nights, start going into the field in teams, teams of three or four, and told, "You'll be dropped off here and

we'll be waiting for you to arrive over here." Over here might have been six or seven miles away, had no flashlights and no weapons.

KP: Did you have a compass?

SC: Yes, no weapons, a compass, a little bit of a paper map. I can remember, one given night, I finally ended up going out alone. You start off with a team of four, five or six, ended up going alone at night. I took things pretty much for granted. I didn't become a nut of studying and reading the training program and stuff. So, I was told, "You're going to start there, end up here." All of a sudden, Kurt, I came to a wall, about six, seven, eight-foot high, made out of block, and I had to get on the other side of it. The compass says, "Go this way," right. How do I get there? I guess they knew there's a way to get over that wall and I found a way to get over the wall. Now, it's getting dusk, darker and darker. I get on top of the wall and, all of a sudden, I hear barking and I see two dogs down there, barking. I'm sitting on top of the wall, I say, "What do I do? How the hell do I …

KP: Yes.

SC: I don't have anything to work with or anything. So, I sat there and really gathered my [courage]--my heart was now beating pretty good. I finally said, "I've got to get down and I've got to go that way." There's a time limit it takes to get to where you're supposed to go to. I got down. When I got down, the dogs ran away. They were just curious. I was upsetting their area, I guess. Now, I followed the compass and I hit a mountain. Actually, the mountain was terraced, like they are in Europe a lot, the way they form. I had to go up. I'm by myself, with nobody I can turn around and talk to. You say to yourself, "Geez, if I pull a boo-boo, where am I going to wind up?" Anyway, I kept going, going, going, going. I came to a road. I think I misused my compass and I was screwed up then. I was screwed up. I walked and I walked and I walked and I walked. When I finally got to where I was supposed to be, that wasn't even with the compass. I got organized and I walked and I walked and I walked. Kurt, I don't know how far I walked and it's pitch dark, no moon. All of a sudden, I walk, I see a truck and it was them. It was my guys. They said, "You're a little late." [laughter] I think they did, they had a truck parked here and a truck parked over there, maybe five miles up, in the wrong direction. They know you're going to make a mistake. It was a hell of an experience, took me back to camp and I was absolutely physically exhausted, intense. I get up the next morning, six o'clock, and go through my normal things. So, I get up the next morning and I'm saying, "I'm beat, physically beat, mentally depressed and I feel like telling everybody to go to hell, give me twenty years." Now, what do you think happens? Life is funny. Into the camp, we have a bonfire like thing there. I see a dog walking in that had been beaten--no doubt about the dog was being beat--but all the guys went out, the guys in the same program. Now, at this camp, maybe it's thirty guys. The dog walks in. I went over to the dog. I'm an animal lover, I said, "Hi-ya, Spot," or whatever I called him. He's bobbing back and forth; he doesn't know American or doesn't understand the inflection of English. So, he's not responding, but he went down by the fire and he was soaking wet. So, all the guys are like, "Jesus Christ, we've got to do something." Well, I picked the dog up and I took him to my tent. I put him on the ground. The ground was dry under the tent and I took--I don't know what the hell it was--we got an old blanket from someplace, an extra blanket, and we covered the dog. He went out like a light, like a light, I went out like a light. I was

sleeping, [laughter] woke up the next morning, I felt better, the dog felt better. We fed him, cleaned him off. The guys cleaned him off and I named him "4-F." He beat the draft. Do you know what 4-F is?

KP: Yes.

SC: 4-F became our guy. All right, they called another meeting, "Okay, those who care about paratrooper training, report to Tent C." I said, "I'll do it," oh, yes, because you got an extra twenty-five dollars a month, too, if you did paratrooper training. I think it was twenty-five a month, took you to seventy-five. So, I went in. The guy said, "Why are you taking it?" I said, "Twenty-five dollars is twenty-five dollars." [laughter] He said, "At least you're honest about it." I said, "No, it might be necessary." So, we were driven by truck, those who said yes, from that area to a little community on the Mediterranean called (Giet?) Village, very, very small. There, on the beach sand, was a half of a C-47. We were told what to do, walk to the plane, how to put a parachute on, how to pull the ripcord for the parachute to open. We go up to the plane. They had a set of steps there. He said, "Step in." So, I stepped on the plane--I felt like a jackass--walked to the back of the plane, stand up …

KP: Had that been your first time in a plane?

SC: Oh, yes, "Sit." So, I sit down. A guy said, "Now, I'm going to tell you how you're going to jump. You're going to stand up. Now, stand up," stand up. He told us how to link the ripcord to the wire. So, okay, you're supposed to stand up, you get in line, you walked through the plane. The guy said, "Now, hold your hands on the doors and look out." Then, he said, "Jump." So, you jumped to the beach sand, which is about two feet down. [laughter] We did that for two days, twice a day. On the third and fourth day, we had to jump.

KP: How was that?

SC: Had to do four jumps. Well, we had guys landing on cows in the farmland. We weren't prepared. Guys would come down upside-down. I came out of it all right, by luck.

KP: Did anyone get injured?

SC: Oh, yes, yes, nothing serious, sprained ankles, twisted knees, but it was a thrill, too. The thing that happened to me--I don't know how to jump out properly--that prop blast really twirls you around. When that chute opened, you're like, "Yea!" Now, you think you're a hero. We did our paratrooper training. Then, they took us, from there, to a mountain village, to a secluded area in a mountain village, then, start doing some really final training programs, up the mountains, down the mountains. I met there, and I can't remember his name, one of the great authors in our history.

KP: Is he living now?

SC: No.

KP: John Dos Passos?

SC: No, I'll think of it. If I don't think of it now, I'll think of it later. His son was there. He wasn't in the OSS. There was a tavern about a mile away. When you had some free time, you'd go there and have a drink. We met him there. Oh, Christ, what's his name? He wrote a story about Africa, I think, couple stories.

KP: Ernest Hemingway?

SC: Ernest Hemingway.

KP: You met Ernest Hemingway.

SC: His son.

KP: His son. [Editor's Note: First Lieutenant Jack Hemingway served in the OSS.]

SC: Yes, I met there some people that obviously were--there, we're in a cabin. It was nice. We took 4-F with us, by the way. When I'd get up and walk guard at night, 4-F'd get up with me, would walk guard. Now, he had a good life there, because we'd be out all day. We're busy. He would have the camp to be in. He had the workers, whoever worked for the service area, cooks and cleanup people. We did some serious things, some serious training then, more extensive radio contacts, more explicit in what we should expect if we're behind the lines, that type of thing. Then, we did some basic, easy things, like taking a couple of prisoners, our prisoners, who were being sent out, went to Italy and took two guys who were going to go to Greece. We took them by a van, a van-truck, into Bari, Italy, which is on the other side, not the east coast, the west coast, and had to get back by ourselves from the airport. We got them there. It was a good experience. It really was a good experience. When we got rid of them, I went to the airport with one guy. We had to get back there to Naples. We talked our way into a ride back to Naples. It was a hell of an experience, because, at that time, Mount Etna [Mount Vesuvius] was half eruption. The guy flew us over it. We spent some time in Naples and we were doing some work there, one of the battles or something like that, and then, back to Africa. Then, I became in charge of the group in Africa. In that time span, I think thirteen or fourteen of our guys were captured in Italy, in uniform--should have been prisoners of war. They were executed. That general became the first guy punished after World War II, for violating the code. [Editor's Note: In Operation: GINNY II, OSS forces attempted to blow up railway tunnels behind German lines on March 22, 1944. The mission failed when the team was captured two days later. On March 26th, General Anton Dostler had the OSS personnel, who had been wearing proper uniforms, executed, which resulted in his postwar trial and execution.] I'd just choose things out of there, until the night I broke my neck. The report was that some Germans were operating--we're in Africa now--and infiltrating, for their purpose, for information, etc.--and if I would handle the situation. So, I said, "I'm not going to send somebody else out," except I'm responsible, so, I picked a guy, like you, to drive me out there. We found a road and the direction on the compass. It was an elevated road, Kurt, [like] they would have in Europe, that's dirt, and got in the van. It's pouring rain, pouring rain, and the guy is driving. I'm sitting by him, looking, if I can hear, see anything, any signs of anything. All of a sudden, the road caved in.

[TAPE PAUSED]

KP: The road caved in.

SC: The road caved in and there was the [gas] tank up there. It was a two-seat in the front, like individual seats, and a backseat, two people, and, actually, a canvas type roof, not enclosed, an open type vehicle. We landed on the roof, upside-down now. Well, I started hearing screaming. It was my friend, the driver. I got out from--the front seats are like this, where you step in, so, when you're turned over, it's like this. It was pouring rain. I was able to crawl out. I don't know how I did it. I got up and I tried to turn this thing over, stupid. I made a serious mistake, not knowing. Anyway, so, I went down. When I went down, Kurt, he must have lost consciousness and I went down. He had my hand and he was screaming. When I say screaming, I mean screaming. All of a sudden, he's quiet, like that. Now, I couldn't get up. I don't know why I couldn't get up, but I couldn't get up. So, I'm lying there, face down, and he's there, dead, with my hand in his hand. I didn't realize right away he's dead, but, then, I knew when the hand went limp, like this. So, I just laid there. I laid there, laid there, laid there, laid there, I don't know how long, but the follow-up system prevailed. When you're not back, they send someone out and they found me. I couldn't stand up or anything. They put me in a vehicle, a van, and drove us back. They, then, finally, got me to Algiers, to a hospital, service Army hospital. I had a broken neck and I don't know how I lived. God kept me alive, because it was a fractured dislocation--I didn't know that day. I had the two vertebrae and, if the vertebrae snaps completely, you're totally paralyzed instead. It was like this, that close, a thousandth of an inch maybe. They put me in traction. I was there for, I guess, twenty-one days or so. I had officers come in, interviewed me. I said, "I know the OSS is going to convert to," we heard the report, "to the CIA and I'd like to volunteer for the CIA." The guy says, "Don't you think you ought to get out of here first." [laughter] Oh, it happens--you can turn that off a minute.

[TAPE PAUSED]

KP: When did you leave the military?

SC: '45.

KP: 1945. Did breaking your neck …

SC: Yes, I was very fortunate, because they didn't have the ability to treat you then like they do today. I had a plaster cast. I'll tell you a little funny story, if you've got a second.

KP: Yes.

SC: They put a plaster cast on me, from here up.

KP: Almost like in the movies.

SC: Yes, and solid plaster--not today, today, you have the basic leather thing--my whole body, chest down to my waistline. Well, I never moved my head or anything. I was nine months with that cast on.

KP: It must have gotten very uncomfortable.

SC: I ended up in a hospital in Florida. Again, an OSS member came to see me and told me, "Your career is finished," very, very nice. I told him, "I'd like to join the CIA." The guy said to me, "Steve," now, they called me Steve Capestro, "no, that's not going to happen." Anyway, I went to the hospital in Pennsylvania then and contacted my family and my two brothers would come to see me from Avon-by-the-Sea. So, my future wife said, "I'd like to go see Steve, too." So, they drove up and I was talking to the doctor. I said, "Doctor, I have two brothers coming to see me and my girlfriend. Couldn't you just cut this cast a little bit here by my lip? You know, I'm going to see my girlfriend." So, he said, "All right." So, he drew a pencil mark.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SC: When he left, I erased it and I lowered the line. [laughter]

KP: Your future wife saw you in the whole cast.

SC: Oh, yes. I got married when they took the [cast off]. I had the cast for about six-and-a-half months, I guess. That was it. That's Steve Capestro.

KP: Spy movies are an incredible genre. Even in the 1940s, there were all of these movies with secret agents.

SC: *OSS*, do you remember the movie *OSS*?

KP: I have probably seen it on TV.

SC: I think it was James Cagney. That was actually good, actually fair. [Editor's Note: *OSS* was released in 1946 and starred Alan Ladd.]

KP: What was real and what was not?

SC: I would say *OSS* was pretty much true. Of course, in retrospect, now, we all thought that "Wild Bill" Donovan was God.

KP: You sensed that the organization felt that way.

SC: Oh, he was. Well, he was, I guess, known throughout the country with the OSS. Nobody knew what OSS was. That movie, I would say, was pretty good.

KP: Close to your experiences.

SC: Close, I think really honest, because the people can see. It didn't exaggerate to the Nth degree. Everything's exaggerated a little bit, to make a guy a big hero, but it was basically down-to-Earth, not using the right names, all that stuff. Most of the ones I saw at World War II time were pretty damn good.

KP: What parts of these movies are inaccurate? What myths do people have?

SC: I think overplaying what you really go through, to a degree. Some of the stuff I talked about, some of it's basic. The difference is, for example, taking the training overseas, behind lines that are not friendly lines or doing the training in Camp Kilmer or West Virginia, there's a hell of a difference. If you get out on a highway in West Virginia, you hitchhike home, no problem.

KP: Yes, not in North Africa.

SC: Getting over that fence that I talked about [with] the dog, I don't know, if people came out, if they'd have been the enemies. They could have robbed me, personally or out of hate for the Americans. Of course, I saw that many nights on training sessions in Africa, and, also, a little bit in Italy, I saw it there. More in Africa, there were. Their soldiers would see us, Americans, and, talking French, I could see they were saying nasty, nasty things. It concerned me, sometimes, on training missions that, if they found you alone, what would the result be, would have been hijacked wallets and stuff? I don't know.

KP: Did you have much contact with people in Algeria and other parts of North Africa?

SC: No, not really. You're so busy training and stuff, you didn't. In Algiers, specifically, we'd get to town. If we got there one night a week, we're lucky, but you didn't go all night, because you've got to hitchhike back. [laughter] That's taking your life in your hands, too. So, no, in Italy, a little bit more; around the City of Naples, we saw some, but I saw anti-American there, but I didn't see them with a vengeance. I'd guess, too, that a lot of Italians had family over here. So, there was a mixed reaction. I think, also, a lot of them thought we were trying to help them, sincerely, because everybody didn't like Mussolini, everybody didn't like Fascist leaders. The Italian people are artistic in nature. I think Hungary's the same. There would be both, for example, but you can enjoy a night out in Italy. I knew the language and I could talk it. One night in Italy, though, I think I was being followed. I used a routine. I'd start with the guy, the person behind me, me and my friend, we're walking, a guy, and, if the fellow's walking that way, you'd boost your paces up. Now, when you felt the guy in the back was boosting his paces up, then, you'd slow your paces down. He slowed his down, you stop him.

KP: You did that.

SC: Yes, that's part of your training. I'm being followed. You'd get to a corner, you turn, run like hell, and then, he didn't know which direction you're going in. You'd lose him. I did that more than once. That's it.

KP: Did you stay in touch with any of the people you met in the OSS?

SC: Oh, yes, I'm sorry about that, yes. The guys I finished my training with and the guys I saw after I'd broken my neck--finally, the worst is over now, we're starting to loosen up a little bit, you're not going to go on any more missions, got to know each other then, [as] Steve Capestro. When I got married, Vivian and I had our honeymoon in Boston, specifically because two or three of the guys came to my wedding and we had fallen in love with each other again, because we could sit down and talk for hours. We met them when we went to Boston on our honeymoon.

KP: Where did you stay?

SC: I forgot the name of the hotel; took the train, didn't have a lot of money, because I just came out of the service. Well, when I got married, I was still in the service when I got married. I got married in uniform. I started sending part of my check home to Vivian when I got married. So, we had some money for our honeymoon. Of course, it was cheap to go to Boston. [laughter]

KP: It still is.

SC: How much could a train cost? So, I met them then. We kept in touch for a period of time, didn't talk, but, then, we opened up to each other.

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

Reviewed by Linda Lasko 4/1/96
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 9/22/14
Reviewed by David Campion 10/21/14
Reviewed by Molly Graham 10/27/10