

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH HERBERT DEGAN

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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CEDAR GROVE, NEW JERSEY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Joseph Dalessio: This begins an interview with Herbert Degan in Cedar Grove, New Jersey, with Sandra Stewart Holyoak and Joseph Dalessio. The date is March 9, 2010.

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: Just for the record, Mr. Degan ...

Herbert Degan: Herb.

SH: Thank you. [laughter] Could you tell us where and when you were born?

HD: It's in my biography.

SH: I know, but we would like you to state it for this recording.

HD: Oh, sure. I was born in New York City, at Sydenham Hospital, which no longer exists, on October 23, 1916.

SH: Thank you. We would like to talk a little bit about your family history.

HD: All right, and I don't know very much about it.

SH: Fair enough. We would just like you to talk a bit about your father first, and then, we will talk about your mother.

HD: Okay. My father was a schoolteacher who rose to the position of Assistant Superintendent of Schools in New York, a delightful man. I have a photo of him, very erudite and humorous. ... He passed, I would say, fifteen years ago. He was 103.

SH: Where was his family from? What was their background?

HD: He was from Manhattan, Kansas, and I have no knowledge of that whatsoever. [laughter] I know how to spell Kansas.

SH: Do you know how the family came live in New York City?

HD: I believe he took his teacher's exam while he was teaching out in Kansas, and then, he went to CCNY, now known as New York City University [City University of New York], was then [the] College of the City of New York, and got his baccalaureate. ... He really wanted to get his doctorate, but he never did. ... From there, he got his teaching job, took the exam in those days, and I think they made fifty-four hundred dollars a year as starting salary. I read in the paper yesterday that they start here in Cedar Grove at 125,000 dollars a year.

SH: I may have to rethink my career.

HD: [laughter] That's what it said. I was startled.

SH: Going back to your father's background, did he ever talk about World War I?

HD: He was not in World War I, but I have an early memory, really early, of him holding me in his arms and the troops ... marching up Fifth Avenue on their return. Now, if you'll recall, the war was 1917; [in] '16, I had just been born, so, he was exempt.

SH: Did he ever talk about any of his thoughts from that time? Some men went ahead and enlisted during World War I.

HD: No, he taught school, public school.

JD: For the record, could you state your father's name?

HD: Sure, Charles Harvey Degan.

JD: What about your mother?

HD: My mother was Isabel Alden Friend and she was from New Paltz, New York, and what I know about New Paltz is that my wife and I drove through it last summer, I think. She was a schoolteacher also, in the lower grades. She taught second and third grade in the New York public schools.

JD: Do you know much about her family background, where her family came from?

HD: ... No, I don't know where ... they came [from], they originated. New Paltz is an unlikely town for a new citizen. [laughter] ... New Paltz is still a tiny town, a block-and-a-half long, and so, the answer to that is no. ... By the way, my father was one of twelve. My mother, I don't know just how many of them there were, but I knew my Aunt Bertha, I knew several others, mostly girls, but I don't know how many I didn't know. [laughter] ... One of them migrated down here to New Jersey. His name was (Wilbur Hinchclift?) and he lived in East Orange and he was a conductor on the Lackawanna [Railroad].

SH: Interesting. We were interested to see that your mother had actually done graduate work.

HD: I honestly don't know. She had me when I was very young. [laughter]

SH: We will not ask how old she was. Growing up, with your parents both being educators, was it just assumed that you would go to college?

HD: I did, yes. I went to public school in New York, and then, I had rheumatic fever, and so, I was sent to a special school where you lived outdoors, in Darien, Connecticut, a school called Cherry Lawn School, and I did high school there. ... My father always wanted me to be a doctor, so, I applied to Johns Hopkins, got in and became an electrical engineer. [laughter]

SH: Do you remember when you had rheumatic fever?

HD: No, I was very young, again. I was carried upstairs. ... They thought that lack of muscle use would cure it in those days.

JD: Do you remember growing up in New York? Do you remember how the Depression affected your family?

HD: It didn't affect us at all. They were schoolteachers. Schoolteachers always get paid.

SH: There was no scrip [a substitute for money] issued.

HD: Well, there was, but not to the teachers.

SH: Okay. That is interesting to hear. How long were you in Darien, Connecticut? Did your father visit on weekends? How did that arrangement work?

HD: He was visiting on weekends, up to the school. Now, he would take the New Haven [Line] out of Grand Central [Station] and get off at Darien. It was a mile walk, uphill, [laughter] toward the school and he'd walk the mile and we'd spend the afternoon [together]. ... Everybody else's folks would drive up and take them all out for, you know, dinner. He ate dinner at the school with me, [laughter] and then, he would walk back to the station and take a train home, back to New York.

SH: Was your mother teaching at that time?

HD: At that time, they were separated, and my mother was teaching, yes.

SH: Was she near you in Darien?

HD: No, she was in New York. She was in New York City, a teacher also. That's why they had no Depression problems.

SH: How old were you when you went to Darien?

HD: I went up there for high school, so, I graduated in ... 1933; I must have been about eleven, ten or eleven, maybe less. It's long faded away and I never dreamt that anyone would ask me how old I was then. [laughter]

SH: How hard was this, for someone so young to suddenly be removed like that? It was not exactly like you made the choice to go.

HD: Oh, no. ... Apparently, my health made the choice.

SH: How were the arrangements there? You said you were living outdoors.

HD: ... Yes. The school itself is long closed, but a Dr. Fred Goldfrank founded this school because he thought that a progressive school should have very small classes, ... should eat

wonderful food and should be kept cold at all times, [laughter] and we were cold. I can remember, ... we dressed and undressed within heated rooms, and then, we would go out onto a porch, I would say about the size of this living room, with beds like Army beds, cots, and bring whatever blankets we wanted. ... We used to ... tie ourselves up with blanket pins and, oh, it was freezing cold. [Editor's Note: Cherry Lawn School was founded in 1915 and graduated its last class in 1972.]

SH: Where were your classes held, indoors?

HD: Outdoors. They were on porches. There was what they called "The Twins," which was an L-shaped building, and there'd be a room with books, and so forth, and then, a porch, and then, a room, and then, a porch, and the classes were held on the porch. They kept the books warm. [laughter]

SH: Was it a classical curriculum?

HD: ... It was college preparatory and very acceptable. I recently went to a reunion. The school has closed. I think in 1976 or '77, '78, it was just closed, didn't have enough students. Nobody wanted to be that cold, [laughter] and I went to a reunion and met a girl who was in my class and we've partly kept up with her. We email each other. We've seen her once and taken her out to dinner. ... She lives in Bridgeport, which is a pretty good commute from here. So, we don't go up there a lot, and there'd be no reason to, anyway--be a lot of do-you-remembers.

SH: It was a coed school.

HD: Yes. There was a girls' porch and a boys' porch. [laughter]

SH: Were you there during the summer as well?

HD: No. During the summer, I was split up between my father, and then, my mother, because they had split. ... For a month, I was with my mother, who went away. We went somewhere and stayed for a month. ... My dad built a little cabin up in Maine, sizeable cabin, and we went up there and stayed for a month.

SH: Did your parents ever talk about how they met?

HD: Not really. If they had, I would have been too young to understand. [laughter] You're talking about the very early 1900s now.

SH: I know, but I am delighting in asking. Growing up, did you have a hobby or a certain interest?

HD: Yes, Gilbert and Sullivan. I sang in their shows. I love, and I still today love, their trivia, which is what it all is. It's magnificent, to good, to reasonably good, music. I find myself waking up in the morning singing Gilbert and Sullivan. [laughter] It's not a pleasant sound, but I know what I'm doing.

SH: When did you first get interested in the theater?

HD: At Cherry Lawn School. They had a big show twice a year and other kids were in it and played all the parts.

SH: It sounds like you had a really wonderful education, though on the chilly side.

HD: Well, now that I think back on it, yes; hated it then.

SH: Did you?

HD: [laughter] It was cold.

SH: You went up there, I am assuming, for three or four years. Was this willingly?

HD: Oh, yes, yes. ... You just disliked school the way all kids dislike school. [laughter]

SH: Were you ever allowed off the campus at the school?

HD: ... As seniors, we were allowed to walk to New Canaan and buy an ice cream cone. That was up a freshly paved country road about two miles and that's how we were allowed off. If our parents came, they could take us out to dinner and something like that, you know.

SH: Did your mother come to visit?

HD: No, never. I visited her.

SH: You were allowed to leave for holidays and things like that.

HD: Yes, oh, yes. ... At those times, I would stay with my mother, who had an apartment in uptown New York.

SH: What was growing up in New York City like, before you went to Darien, Connecticut? What were your interests? What kept you busy?

HD: Stickball. [laughter] I remember, two sewers was a three bagger and three sewers was a homerun. [laughter] You'd play with a broomstick handle and a tennis ball. That, and then, you'll have to excuse this, but, before the Washington Bridge ... was built, there used to be a point down there, and there still is, and right under the Washington Bridge, on the New York side, there's a lighthouse. Not too many people know that, a little, red lighthouse, was made famous by a children's book [*The Little Red Lighthouse and the Great Gray Bridge* by Hildegard Swift and Lynd Ward], but it warns mariners of a point that comes out from the mainland. ... In behind that point, on the outlet side ... of the point, was a beach. Everything was washed away and it was a tiny, little edge. We used to go swimming down there--another cold experience. [laughter]

SH: You were pretty free to go and do things all over the city if you wanted.

HD: Oh, yes. I once had a nickel and got on the subway at 181st Street and rode to Coney Island, and then, I had to beg for a nickel to come back. [laughter]

SH: Think of how we protect our children these days.

HD: Yes. Well, I'd stand up in the front car and there was a handle on that car that you opened the door with. ... When it went to the left, the door with the latch was open. ... I would stand there and "drive the train" with that latch, never knowing that if I pulled it too far to the left, I'd have been under the train. [laughter] You could walk from car to car on a subway train. I guess the IRT [Interborough Rapid Transit Company subway line] still runs. ... We don't go to New York much anymore.

SH: What were your plans for after graduation from Darien, Connecticut?

HD: ... I was supposed to go to Johns Hopkins to become a doctor.

SH: What did you do that summer before you went to Johns Hopkins?

HD: ... I have no idea.

SH: Did you have a summer job?

HD: Oh, yes, yes, we did, I'm sorry. Some of us got together and formed a little orchestra, had, like, five pieces, and we got a gig up in [the] mountains where everybody would go for summer vacations. They'd pile ten people in a car and drive up to the mountains here.

SH: In the Catskills or the Adirondacks?

HD: Catskills, close. There was no [New Jersey] Turnpike or [New York State] Thruway, [laughter] and we got a job at a nightclub there and I did spend a summer there, playing.

SH: What did you play?

HD: At that time, I think I was playing the trumpet. I played the trumpet, I played string base, I played saxophone.

JD: Was that something you learned at Cherry Lawn?

HD: No. As a matter-of-fact, that was a secondary subject, music was a secondary subject, at NYU. I went for a master's at NYU. [Editor's Note: According to his pre-interview survey, Mr. Degan worked towards a master's in the Music Department of the School of Education at NYU from 1937 to 1940. At one point in his career, he also worked as a high school music teacher.]

SH: After you went to Johns Hopkins?

HD: Yes.

SH: When did you start playing these instruments?

HD: When they loaned them to me at NYU. ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Okay, go ahead. You said that the instruments were loaned to you by NYU.

HD: From NYU.

SH: Along with free admission ...

HD: ... If you would play in their marching band and march, at that time, [at] the Polo Grounds, where they played all their big games. ... I'd give the two tickets to my father and I'd see the game for [free] over a saxophone, [laughter] and we'd march during the halftime. ... They didn't have cheerleaders then, or, if they did, they wore long, white trousers. [laughter]

SH: Male cheerleaders were the norm.

HD: Yes.

SH: Did you play an instrument when you were in Cherry Lawn, in Connecticut?

HD: No, I sang there.

SH: Did you have an orchestra accompanying you for the plays that you did at Cherry Lawn?

HD: For the plays, I'm not sure; for the playing?

SH: Did you have an orchestra playing the Gilbert and Sullivan songs?

HD: Oh, no, it was a lady, the music teacher at Cherry Lawn. Her name was Mrs. (Haig?). I remember that.

SH: Very good.

HD: And she would coach [us]. She played the piano, and there was a piano accompanied to whatever we put on, no school band or orchestra.

SH: When you went off to Johns Hopkins, were you alone or did you have any classmates going to Johns Hopkins?

HD: No, I was alone. ... I made a very good friend down there, a fellow named Bill (Bourne?), who was immensely wealthy. He was really [wealthy]. You know, he couldn't count to the end of his money, and his father was president of Combustion Engineering. I have no idea what they did, except light fires of some sort, [laughter] I don't know, but they made a lot of money. There was a Combustion Engineering Building in New York on 40th Street and Park Avenue. ... He lived in Larchmont, in an estate that you couldn't see the end of, and they had a 110-foot yacht with a captain and four crew, and him, I made good friends with. [laughter]

SH: You would come home together.

HD: Yes, we'd [have] run of his cars. He had two cars in college, [laughter] and we would drive--I would drive one, he'd drive the other. We'd follow each other from Baltimore to Larchmont. He let me find my way home from Larchmont. [laughter]

SH: He needed to have a choice when he was home, right?

HD: Yes.

SH: What other activities did you engage in at Johns Hopkins? Did you immediately change your major to engineering?

HD: No, it was about a half a year, but the starting year was pretty much the same for everybody. The medical school was in Northwest Baltimore and the ... university is, the Homewood Campus is, north of Baltimore, at the north end of Baltimore.

SH: Was that a reason? Were you living on campus?

HD: The first six months, I lived in a dormitory. ... Then, I was asked to join and pledge to Sigma Phi Epsilon and I became a Sig Ep, and then, we lived at the house.

SH: Did any of those decisions influence your decision to change to engineering?

HD: I don't think so. ... As a matter-of-fact, the premed course was a lot easier than the electrical engineering course, pre-med. [laughter]

SH: Were your parents disappointed that you changed your major?

HD: I don't know. I think my father was. My mother was just happy I went to college.

SH: Had she been worried?

HD: No, but I know what she brought home with her, you know. She was a free woman.

SH: Do you want to elaborate on that?

HD: I have no way. I wasn't there.

SH: Okay. While you were at Johns Hopkins, you also played in the marching band.

HD: Yes.

SH: Did that allow you to travel?

HD: With the team. Yes, Johns Hopkins is not noted for its football teams.

SH: I wondered if perhaps they were then.

HD: No. As a matter-of-fact, interestingly enough, the school colors are black and blue.
[laughter] That's true.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: When you graduated from Johns Hopkins, in 1937, with a degree in; what was it?

HD: Electrical engineering.

SH: Where were you planning to go? What were your plans?

HD: I really didn't have much by way of plans--to look for a job. That's when the economy was starting to fail and jobs were few and far between. So, I met a girl and her father was an electrical contractor. So, I finagled a job from him and I became an electrician. ... [Editor's Note: According to his pre-interview survey, Mr. Degan worked as an electrical contractor from 1945 to 1960.]

SH: Was this in New York City?

HD: No, no. She lived in Newark. They lived in Newark, and I was an electrician. I lived at the Newark Athletic Club, which was not a real class place at that time, [laughter] and I worked for him until I got so tired of it. ... It was not my thing. So, I got together with a friend of mine and we started our own electrical contracting company, in competition with my father-in-law.

SH: You married the girl.

HD: Yes, and we did reasonably well. We did some large jobs, and then, the war came along.
...

JD: Going back to your days at Johns Hopkins, do you remember your experience in being in a fraternity? What was that like?

HD: Well, I thought it ... would be wonderful and free and everything would be okey-dokey. Actually, we had a housemother and she wouldn't even let us out of the house until all of our

homework was done, everything that we had to do was done. So, you know, it's a good thing we had her. [laughter] She wouldn't let girls in the house. ...

JD: How important were fraternities in influencing or running the university?

HD: I think they were important only to the brothers. I think Johns Hopkins ... could well have done without fraternities. I'm not a "knock 'em down, yell for 'em" fraternity brother now. I still belong to the fraternity. ... Once in awhile, I get a note. ... I'm probably [likely to] be the oldest fraternity member. [laughter]

SH: A distinction to be proud of.

HD: I don't know about that--happy about [it], maybe.

SH: Were there sororities at Johns Hopkins?

HD: Yes, there were.

SH: Was there a very active Greek society?

HD: ... Well, it was as active as the college let it be. They were all off campus, and I believe the last time we visited Baltimore, we went to Johns Hopkins to show Michele the campus, ... I think all the fraternities were on campus by that time. That's a few years ago.

SH: Did you have any interaction with the administration at Johns Hopkins?

HD: Me? no.

SH: To go back to when you started your electrical contracting firm, were you still based in Newark or had you moved to a different area?

HD: Well, we were based in Newark, on 14th Street, and this friend of mine was the son of a successful electrical contractor. He knew what he was doing, and so, we started the company under his name.

SH: Were you working primarily with private individuals or firms?

HD: Yes. Well, we did schools, we did firms, we did--what's the big department store out in Short Hills?--B. Altman Company, when they put up that building, and then, a lot of small contracts, too. [Editor's Note: The B. Altman Company department store expanded into Short Hills, New Jersey, in 1956.] It was a union firm.

SH: Were you keeping up with what was going on in world events?

HD: Not really, no. I was all upset with world events as they were. I was not happy with them.

SH: Were you politically active?

HD: No.

SH: Had your family been?

HD: No.

SH: How about any involvement with the Church?

HD: Yes, we have been and we are. We're more involved with the Church now, I am, than I had been. ... Because of the divorce--we're Roman Catholic--we had a lot of trouble getting married, but the Church finally raised the bars, and I remember the priest saying, "Well, just this one time."

SH: The gates opened, right?

HD: Yes.

JD: Did you continue to work up until the war started?

HD: Until a little after the war started, yes, until I saw what it was all about, yes.

JD: You mentioned that you attended NYU. Was that before or after the war?

HD: That was before.

SH: How did you attend NYU for music?

HD: I was living [laughter] at the Newark Athletic Club.

SH: That was when you got your master's in music there.

HD: Yes. I didn't get it; I worked for it. I never got it.

SH: You were working towards your music degree, and then, you decided to start the electrical engineering company.

HD: Yes, and then, when I got tired of that, while I was living at the Athletic Club, I went to Casey Jones School of Aeronautics, figuring that if I was going to get into the fray, I would get into it on a little higher level than everybody else. ... Do you know the great, big building right opposite Penn Station? It's a block long. ... That was Casey Jones School of Aeronautics.

SH: Really?

HD: Yes, and there were four or five airplanes in that and we worked on them. ... I did get what they called an A&E degree, aircraft and engine; ... don't fly in it, but I can fix an airplane, I can fix an engine. ... That's what got me into officer's training.

SH: You really were aware that there was the probability of an oncoming war then.

HD: Oh, yes, sure.

SH: What was the reaction among your friends and peers? Were they doing the same thing you were doing?

HD: I ... walked around so much that I really didn't have any peers. [laughter] When I lived, my very early life, in New York, very early, ... I lived in one place for a long while, eight, nine years. ... Then, I went away to school, but everybody at that school lived somewhere else, and, at college, everybody lived somewhere else. So, I really didn't make any good friends. Every once in a while, I'll call this girl that I've met, who was the only one that I've ever met that went to the school since, oh, I guess since well after, maybe in thirty years. ... We were at this reunion picnic and that's how we met. One interesting chap at the school was a boy by the name of [Robert] Sheldon Harte. ... He was a young Communist and he was a guardian for [Leon] Trotsky and, in a train in Mexico, he shot and killed Trotsky. I didn't know him then, but it's an interesting moment. I did know him. [Editor's Note: Robert Sheldon Harte served as a bodyguard and assistant to Leon Trotsky during his exile in Mexico, but also functioned as a Soviet operative, assisting Trotsky's rival, Joseph Stalin. In May 1940, he aided in a failed assassination attempt on Trotsky in his Mexican home, but was abducted and murdered by the Stalinist assassins after wavering in his resolve. Trotsky continued to believe Harte had been killed while protecting him and erected a plaque near the site where his body was recovered.]

SH: That will send us back to our reference books; interesting.

HD: Yes.

SH: Did you continue to play in a band?

HD: No, no. I had a piano at that time and I would sit down and doodle on the piano, but just doodle.

SH: Where were you and what do you remember about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

HD: I was in the studios at WAAT in Jersey City, doing an announcing gig.

SH: When did you start doing that?

HD: No, WAAT, I had mentioned, that was my first announcing job.

SH: When did you start working in radio?

HD: I don't know. ... If things are, gee, chronologically mixed up, it's because I am.

SH: That is okay.

HD: I would have to say about 1939, '38. ... I graduated from college in 1937, and so, looking for a job then was tough. ... I remember driving all over New England looking for a job, any job. ... I got a job at WBRY in Waterbury. It's up there. The picture's in that group of pictures, I think.

[TAPE PAUSED]

HD: And it was one of these "spin the record with a bunch of kids" [shows]. You know, like, they were very, very popular ... in the late '40s, that every radio station had a disc jockey. Well, I was WBRY's

SH: In the late 1930s?

HD: Yes, and that was in Waterbury. ... They picked me up from Waterbury and sent me to what was then WABC.

[TAPE PAUSED]

HD: Well, as I say, I was a radio announcer when Pearl Harbor happened and I heard about it. ... We had news tickers and [it] came up on the news ticker. I tore it off and read it.

SH: Did you read it right over the air?

HD: Yes. ... The news tickers, in radio [stations], they still ... come through in readable form. Most of the guys change them, but you don't have to, if you work in a low-price radio station. [laughter]

SH: Did you change any of what you were playing after you read that?

HD: Oh, God. ... You're asking a question of which I have no idea. [laughter]

SH: When you left the studio to head home, what were the discussions that you heard? What did you think?

HD: Didn't hear a thing. I was still living in New York then, ... I guess, and I took the train to New York, and then, the subway up to 100th, and I guess we were living up around 100th Street then, and went to bed.

SH: Okay. You had no idea how this would impact your life.

HD: It was nowhere near as serious as what's happening now, and people really don't have much idea or get enraged.

SH: We have interviewed people who, all of a sudden, decided to go out with a group of friends and try to enlist, something like that.

HD: Well, I didn't. See, I didn't want to be a GI. I wanted to be an officer. So, I took the officer track--took a little longer.

SH: In 1941, you were twenty-six already, right?

HD: Yes.

SH: What was your reaction, being a little older, mature?

HD: I was twenty-six. ... [laughter] I was older; I might not have been mature. ... I really didn't give it a lot of thought immediately. Well, you have to read and see what was actually happening.

SH: Were you aware of the America First group or people who were adamantly opposed to getting into the war?

HD: Lightly, yes. As a matter-of-fact, over here in New Jersey, it was a hotbed of "brown shirters."

SH: The German *Bund*.

HD: Yes.

SH: You were aware of that.

HD: Yes, but it didn't worry me much. I never saw them. [laughter] ... I kept going to the G.A.C., a restaurant in downtown Manhattan. [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. One of the largest *Bund* followings developed in New Jersey, based in Camp Nordland in Sussex County.]

SH: What were your plans after that, because things quickly started to change?

HD: Well, as things changed, I went to Casey Jones, ... figuring that that would get me into a position where I could become an officer.

SH: Did you investigate any of your options prior to going to Casey Jones?

HD: No, not really. I was distressed at having to leave the Big Bands.

SH: Were you? You were playing.

HD: No, no, announcing.

SH: Announcing them, okay.

HD: There's a book on our bookshelf up there called *The Big Bands*, which is signed by its author. It's a history of all of the bands.

SH: Did you go to the live performances often?

HD: Oh, when I was a radio announcer, that's part of what I used to do.

SH: Really?

HD: I would do three or four of them a night. They'd put us in a limo and take us to this hotel where that band was playing or that hotel where another band [was playing], and we would go from hotel to hotel.

SH: You were just riding along.

HD: I was just, "And, now, here's Hal Kemp, playing such-and-such," and he would play it.

SH: You were actually recording.

HD: Well, yes. As a matter-of-fact, my grandson, Michael, just asked me ... what my history at CBS was, because he's at CBS--not in an announcing situation, but some kind of a business job--and I wrote him. I haven't heard back from him on it yet. ... CBS has archives in New York, but he's in California.

SH: You would actually have some kind of recording equipment with you.

HD: I would take an engineer and the engineer did it. We were class operators--we didn't carry anything. There was P.A.E. equipment at each location.

SH: [laughter] Where you live?

HD: Yes.

SH: Was it taped?

HD: No, we were live. They didn't even have tape. [In] the picture of Douglas Edwards who is with me, in the picture he has a big thing on his back, a monstrous, big pack. That's a wire recorder. That's what they used to record on. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Mr. Degan is referring to a photograph taken during the period when he escorted CBS news reporter Douglas Edwards to various sites in postwar Germany.]

SH: I wondered if that was what you were using to record the Big Bands, but you were doing this live.

HD: ... I wasn't doing it at all. All I was doing was announcing, but the [engineers], ... actually, they came on every night and they left their equipment in each hotel dance room. They didn't set it up and take it down. ...

SH: Okay, the logistics of hitting that many spots a night.

HD: They would carry things that might be hooked [in], like a microphone, but, by and large, ... you could put everything they brought into an attaché case.

SH: Did you ever get up and dance?

HD: No. [laughter]

SH: How late would you work?

HD: One, two in the morning. The Big Bands worked all night. ... After awhile, they would put records on of them, but, as I say, that book over there, let me get it and bring it over.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: You signed up to join the Army Air Corps on Governor's Island in 1942. Were you put in the Reserves or did you report right for duty?

HD: Right to the Air Corps.

SH: You first reported to Fort Dix or Miami.

HD: No, somewhere out on Long Island.

SH: Did you? You did your basic training there.

HD: The basic training was done; [laughter] the real basic was done in Yale, at New Haven, taught us how to be officers. Then, we went to Sebring, Florida, to learn how to fly, and then, we went to Kelly Field. ... I may have this a little backwards; to Kelly Field, in outside San Antonio, to learn the B-17. Then, they gave each aircrew assignments, made one a pilot and one a copilot. I was a copilot, and added seven more men, nine men in a plane. ... We took off for Washington, where we did B-17 time, twenty hours, maybe twenty-five hours.

SH: Washington State or Washington, DC?

HD: No, Washington State, and then, from there, we flew to Langford Lodge in Ireland. ... From there, we didn't drop rocks anymore--we dropped bombs. [laughter] We dropped bombs,

but ... our basic mission was to get the submarine pens in Brest, France, and our flights were back and forth.

SH: How many missions?

HD: I was trying to count them. Somebody asked me that the other day. I think it was twenty-eight.

SH: Did you keep your logbook or any of that material?

HD: No.

SH: In your training ...

HD: I did, but God knows where it is. We had a bad situation here one time. We were down ... in, I don't know, Asbury Park or Union, and a faucet leaked and this whole house was [flooded with] water. So, what we lost in that, I have no idea.

SH: That is too bad. In your training, were there a lot of accidents?

HD: No, not really, sometimes, a flat tire. We lost a plane or two because it would tip over. The wingtip would break off, but they fixed that. The planes for training were made of wood ... and cloth, the wings and the fuselage.

SH: As a more mature, older gentlemen, were you flying with nineteen-year-old trainees?

HD: Some.

SH: Did they see you as a leader because of your age?

HD: No, not a bit, no. [laughter]

SH: Was it very competitive or were people supportive of each other?

HD: It was very competitive. They weren't supporting each other, but it was very competitive, because, if you washed out of training, you became a GI and were shipped to heaven only knows where.

SH: Where were you learning to do the bombing runs?

HD: Sebring, Florida.

SH: In Sebring?

HD: Yes.

SH: That was where you were dropping rocks instead of bombs. [laughter]

HD: Yes, that is right.

SH: Do you have any memorable moments that you remember from your training?

HD: Not really, never had an accident. ...

SH: Were you trained by regular Army personnel?

HD: Oh, yes, Army instructors. They were very good.

SH: Were they tough?

HD: Yes, yes. We lived in a hotel--I don't remember the name of it--in Florida, a resort town, Sebring, and we had to scrub the floors every morning with brushes and soap.

SH: You did that even as a cadet.

HD: Oh, even on the hotel floor. We must have scrubbed at least a quarter of an inch off those floors. [laughter]

SH: Were there people who could not adapt to the discipline in the military?

HD: No, they had a very [good group]. That's what the selective [nature resulted in], I guess, really, and it wasn't Selective Service, because that was the draft, but ... they were well selected. Whoever said, "Okay, you can do this," as long as it wasn't dishwashing or a cook or server, was probably in the right place.

SH: In Sebring and in Texas, how were you treated by the civilians?

HD: How were we treated? Oh, they loved us. We brought business there. You know, we made thirty dollars a day--once a month. [laughter]

SH: Were you having any thoughts that you might be sent to the Pacific?

HD: We had no idea.

SH: Did you have a preference?

HD: Not really, no. The Pacific ran very few bomb runs, because they would fly some from some northern [bases], from Sitka, I guess, Alaska, across the North Pacific to Japan and land somewhere in India, and they would fuel up and gas up and bomb up and fly back. We did pretty much the same thing, but, you know, if you've got to go on leave in ... India, who would you talk to? At least when we got our leaves, we went to London. [laughter]

SH: Was your bomb group stationed in England?

HD: Langford Lodge. We're stationed in Ireland.

SH: You were stationed in Ireland. You never moved to England.

HD: Well, we didn't have to, because we were bombing the French coast.

SH: That is true.

HD: ... As many planes as were there, they were real happy not to have to send some to the British airfields.

SH: How was living in Ireland, in Langford Lodge?

HD: Potatoes. [laughter] ...

SH: Potatoes, potatoes.

HD: No, ... actually, the C rations started to taste pretty good to us. [laughter]

SH: Not a good commentary. Were you allowed free reign of the base?

HD: Pretty much, yes, of the base and of the town, in Langford Lodge, Ireland, yes.

SH: Could you go to the Irish Republic?

HD: There was no Irish Republic. It was Ireland.

SH: Okay.

HD: They hadn't yet been divided into two countries. [Editor's Note: Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State (the Republic of Ireland after 1937) were partitioned in the early 1920s by the Anglo-Irish Treaty. During World War II, the Irish Republic remained neutral, though assisted the Allies to some degree.]

SH: They were allowing Americans to have bases there.

HD: Oh, yes. They were pleased to, because the Germans were coming over and bombing them. They weren't out of the war. ... I think they had actually declared; actually, they were still part of Great Britain.

[TAPE PAUSED]

HD: A B-17 was shipped to Langford Lodge and assembled there or flown, if it was in New York, this area, flown directly to Langford Lodge. It was a reception point for all B-17s in Europe.

SH: Was that where they put your bombsights in as well?

HD: Everything, oh, yes.

JD: Did you have any interaction with the Irish civilians? How did they feel about you?

HD: Nothing I'd like to talk about. [laughter]

SH: How did you like the Irish beer? [laughter]

HD: I still do.

SH: Do you remember which year you reported to Ireland?

HD: ... No, I honestly don't.

SH: Did you get to go anywhere else? Did you ever go to England for R&R?

HD: Yes. I had a leave to London.

SH: How was that?

HD: Magnificent, compared to Langford Lodge. It was like heaven. There was beer, girls, food, everything. [laughter]

JD: Good food?

HD: Well, British food.

SH: Did you have a USO at Langford?

HD: Yes, oh, there were USOs everywhere. They were the darlings of the American troops. They were just wonderful. ... They danced, they sang, they fraternized, they ate with us. They were very morale building.

SH: At Langford, did you have a large medical facility as well?

HD: Yes, sure.

SH: It was a full ...

HD: Well, I never really got into it, but it was a fair-sized building. [laughter]

SH: How often were you grounded because of weather?

HD: Frequently, frequently, but that was because we really hadn't done an awful lot of flying in a B-17 yet. ... We flew them in the States, but the weather in the States was much better. I don't think they grounded planes for weather. I really don't.

SH: When you flew to Brest, did you fly in formation? Were these formation bombings?

HD: In the US?

SH: No, when you flew from Langford to Brest.

HD: Oh, to Brest.

SH: Were you flying in formation?

HD: Sure. ... It was formation flying, but until you got there and they started shooting at you. So, then, you did what you could. Unfortunately, I never really did an awful lot of flying, because I had a guy sitting next to me who really knew what he was doing. [laughter]

SH: What was your pilot's name?

HD: (Zimmerman?). ...

SH: Where was he from?

HD: I don't have no idea. We called him Jimmy, and I remember, he always used to say, "Jeezy Peezy." So, we called him "Jeezy Peezy." [laughter]

SH: Where was the rest of your crew from?

HD: I've never kept up with any of them, truly, never gone to a reunion. A lot of people do, and I get the Eighth Air Force magazine and you see all these fellows with their arms around each other. I really hated that war. I really didn't care for it at all. [laughter]

JD: Did you ever experience any resistance from German aircraft, the *Luftwaffe*?

HD: Oh, sure, yes. That's what we had our side, front and bottom gunners for, tail gunners.

JD: Did you experience any combat with them?

HD: We've shot at them and got shot at. Fortunately, we never got hit.

SH: How bad was the flak, the antiaircraft?

HD: How fast was it?

SH: How bad, how intense, was it?

HD: Well, when we got over the Channel, the Germans were there, ... flying their missions, and so, we got a lot of air-to-air combat, very little flak--when we got over Brest, yes.

SH: How far did the fighters escort you?

HD: They didn't escort us at all.

SH: Not at all.

HD: ... We picked up any escorts from England that had flown across the Channel.

SH: Was there an officers' club at Langford?

HD: Always an officers' club, always. [laughter]

SH: What about the Big Bands?

HD: No. ... There was a band at Langford Lodge--an Army band, yes, Big Bands, no. Glenn Miller was there, made a stop.

SH: Did you see him?

HD: No; poor guy, fell into the Channel, I guess. [Editor's Note: American Big Band leader Glenn Miller, who served in the US Army Air Force as an orchestra leader, disappeared on December 15, 1944, on an airplane lost en route from Great Britain to Paris.]

SH: When did you hear about that?

HD: When I got home.

SH: You did not know about it until then.

HD: No.

SH: When did you come back to the States? When did you finish your missions?

HD: I came back to the States in '46, I guess, '46. The war was over in '45, and May of '46, and that's where that ID was [issued] at. Well, I can tell you exactly when I got back.

SH: He carries it in his wallet, just in case.

HD: "16th of January, 1945." This was the ID they gave me when I got back.

SH: You actually came back to the States before the war was over.

HD: Yes.

SH: What did they have you do after that, when you were stateside?

HD: They had me get discharged.

SH: Really? You were discharged before the war was over.

HD: Yes.

SH: Interesting.

HD: But, don't forget now, I was an old guy in the Air Corps. There was no Air Force. That's an interesting fact that almost nobody knows. It was the United States Army Air Corps. We were in the Army. The Air Corps was formed, I think, in ... 1949, 1950. [Editor's Note: The US Air Force was established as a separate branch of the US Armed Forces in 1947. Prior to that, it had been subordinate to the US Army as the US Army Air Forces and, prior to 1941, the US Army Corps. World War II era veterans tend to use all three terms interchangeably.]

SH: The Air Force.

HD: Yes, the Air Force, and I saw my first blue uniform. I wasn't in it, but I [saw one].
[laughter]

SH: You did not know about Glenn Miller until you came back in January.

HD: Yes.

SH: What was it like to come back while the worst of the war was still going on?

HD: We were winning the war very rapidly. I looked for a job and I got back into radio.

SH: There was no chance that you would have been sent to the Pacific.

HD: No. I am saying no; I don't think so.

SH: You did not stay in the Reserves.

HD: No, no. I got out of them as quick as I could. ... I came back as a first lieutenant. In order to get me to get into the Reserves, they gave me captain's bars, and then, I told them, "No, I'm not going to get into the Reserves." I spent a week at West Point, treated like a king, to get me to stay in, didn't work, stayed at the Hotel Thayer, ate like a king, ... everything.

SH: Was the Distinguished Flying Cross for the accumulation of your work?

HD: Yes, ... it's an accumulation. Everybody who flew fifteen minutes got a DFC, in combat.

SH: Do you remember your most memorable mission?

HD: They were all memorable, and the memory is that I got back. [laughter]

SH: Did you have complete faith in all of your crew?

HD: Yes. Oh, you had to. There was no option.

SH: Was there any interaction with the enlisted men on your crew?

HD: Well, ... we were all pretty good buddies while we were in the plane, while we were flying there. I don't know that there was ever any interaction with any of the other [crews]. I never interacted with any of them, never.

SH: Were there any little superstitions or rituals that you would do?

HD: No, but they all had a lot of them.

SH: Did they? What do you remember?

HD: Yes, ... you know, go up two rungs at a time. Yes, there's a ladder [that] comes out of the side of the B-17. They would go up two rungs at a side [time], one of them would go up backwards, anything that somebody would try, [laughter] anyone could dream up.

SH: Did you go to chapel often?

HD: Not really, no. [laughter] The "wing and a prayer" is not true.

SH: Tell us what the routine was for coming back from a mission.

HD: Well, we would get debriefed. One of the officers at the base would ask each of us [questions], all nine, and, in some instances, ten. They would send an observer along and they would debrief us. They would ask us to tell exactly what happened, and it was good, because ... it was fresh in our memory, and then, we got notice of when our next mission was going to be, which could be three days, five days, a week. ...

SH: You always just went to Brest, France.

HD: Yes, that was the only target, that we had, our ship.

SH: Did it have a name?

HD: You didn't notice? ...

SH: No. What was the name?

HD: The *Onerous Anus*.

SH: Who picked that name?

HD: Wasn't I. [laughter] Did you notice the name of the A-26 [Douglas A-26 Invader bomber] that we were standing next to?

SH: No, I did not. We are looking at photographs here. I did not notice the name at all.

[TAPE PAUSED]

HD: Yes. Can you see the name there?

SH: I cannot read the name.

HD: There's one where you can, [the] one Doug is in.

SH: *The Four Qs*?

HD: If you say that right. [laughter]

SH: Were there ever any discussions about changing the name?

HD: No, no. You could do anything you wanted. They figured nobody would ever see them anyway; they'd all get shot down. The thing that is absolutely amazing is the number of B-17s that were over there. Can you take a guess?

JD: A couple of thousand?

HD: Six thousand B-17s, and my wife and I, fairly recently, were in Kansas, Kansas City. I think it was there. We'll correct it, anyway, ... where they have hundreds and hundreds of airplanes all parked, all ...

SH: In Arizona.

HD: Arizona, right, okay.

SH: In Tucson, [Davis-Monthan Air Force Base].

HD: Yes, Tucson, that's right, ... and they're all parked. They have canvas all over them, tires are pumped and they're ready to go, anytime. [laughter] They are.

SH: Did you have the desire to get back in one?

HD: No. ... We did. I went to an air show, I guess out here in Caldwell Airport, and they brought a B-17, said [it was] one of the few flying still, and I went into that and sat in the seat.
...

SH: Were you well supplied while you were there? Was there ever any time when you did not have the right fuel or ammunition?

HD: No, we were always well supplied, but, don't forget, we were not in London, where there were bombs dropping all the time, I think.

SH: Were you writing back and forth? Were you getting letters and things from home?

HD: Occasionally, yes. The mail was good.

[TAPE PAUSED]

HD: I think the actual surrender was in; look in the book.

SH: Was it April 1945 or May 1945?

HD: Yes, sometime in there, yes. [Editor's Note: V-E Day was declared on May 8, 1945.]

SH: What about the death of Franklin Roosevelt? Did that impact the group?

HD: Yes, I think that was. I think everybody was saddened. [Editor's Note: President Franklin D. Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945.]

SH: If you were back in the States in January of 1945, how did you come to be at the Nuremburg Trials? [Editor's Note: Beginning in the Fall of 1945, Nazi war criminals were brought to justice in tribunals held by the Allied powers in Nuremburg, beginning with the International Military Tribunal, which tried the surviving leadership of the Third Reich.]

HD: Well, I hadn't gotten back to the States yet.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: We were just talking about some of the dates. You were discharged in December of 1944 as an Army enlisted person.

HD: Right.

SH: To receive your commission in the Army Air Corps. Then, you stayed in Europe and served with the public relations office in the headquarters for the United States Army Air Forces in Europe, as part as the federal service of the Army of the United States, until August 5, 1946.

HD: Yes.

SH: I just wanted to clarify some of those dates that we spoke about before.

HD: Sure.

SH: When you became a member of the public service, what were your duties? How did everything change for you?

HD: Public relations?

SH: Public relations.

HD: I was military.

SH: I know, but what were your duties? What were you asked to do?

HD: Oh, we were writing releases, basically, conducting reporters through to see what had happened. A group of twenty-six, I think, reporters came, and one of whom was (Gordon Gaskell?) and another was Douglas Edwards, and we were assigned to them, to do whatever they wanted us to do. We had a pass that was valid anywhere.

SH: Anywhere in Europe?

HD: Anywhere in the war zone, yes, anywhere that they wanted to go.

SH: What were some of the things that you saw in doing this, or experiences that you had, that were memorable for you? You were going to see things that, probably, the regular Army Air Force personnel did not.

HD: Well, what we saw were the devastated towns.

SH: Most pilots or air crews really never see that.

HD: They never got to see what you hit. ...

SH: That is what I think is so interesting and different about your oral history, that you then visited all these areas.

HD: Yes. Well, we started in Frankfurt and we drove south from Frankfurt. Again, I think I have it in the handout that I gave you, and we went to Augsburg and Munich and Nuremburg. ... [Editor's Note: (The following is taken from Mr. Degan's personal memoir.) One of our most exciting experiences was a one week visit to the Nuremburg Trials. There, because of Doug's importance as a broadcaster (at home he was CBS's "Douglas Edwards with the News" every evening at six o'clock), we gained admittance to the International Military Tribunal, where the

war criminals were on trial. Goering, Doenitz, Hess, Jodl, Raeder and the 20 or so others were in the prisoners' dock. There was a group of seven judges, each from a different Allied nation. Five were on the bench each time the Court was in session.

Seated in the balcony, so that we would be separated from the rest of the assigned press and active participants, we wore earphones through which we might choose to listen in English, French, German, or Italian. Even though they knew they were being tried for the atrocities they had committed, each of the prisoners insisted he had done nothing more than "follow orders"!

Every word spoken during the trial was translated by an individual fluent not only in German but also in one of the six other languages. Each was available through headphones to the audience. Records were kept in each language as well. There is a "Nuremburg Trials" site on the Internet's World War Web. It shows each of the criminals and tells with what each was charged, as well as what became their final fate. We stayed and spent five fascinating days watching and listening to what may have been the most important trial in history!

Behind the prisoners there was a line of fully armed U.S. Military Police. When the prisoners were not required in the courtroom they were escorted by the MPs to individual cells in another wing of the courthouse. We were given to understand that they were reasonable well-treated in all respects. I still have my pass on the trials. It's one of my most treasured belongings!]

SH: You had these two reporters with you.

HD: One.

SH: Just the one.

HD: I had Douglas Edwards.

SH: What were his comments? What were his reactions?

HD: I became a very dear and close friend of his after we both got out, and he hated it, just as I did. I can sum it up in two words, "Never again."

SH: Were you in the death camps?

HD: Not in them, but I was in south of Nuremburg--can't remember the name of the town, but, then, I'm Irish. [laughter]

SH: Munich?

HD: ... You're in a spot there where all the towns were ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Please, go ahead.

HD: Doug and I traveled from Frankfurt to Wiesbaden to Heidelberg to Stuttgart to Munich and to Nuremburg, and the reason for that was his importance as a reporter at that time. He and I, he was the reporter, I was assigned as the military person to travel with him.

SH: Was he traveling with anyone else, other than this pack with this huge wire recorder?

HD: No. There were twenty-six reporters sent over by--I'm not sure who sponsored that--but each reporter got one military assignee.

SH: How do you think you got picked for that?

HD: I have no [idea]. Well, I was a radio announcer.

SH: What was it like to see this? Although you never bombed that far into Germany--you stayed, as you said, up in Brest--were you shocked?

HD: Unbelievably shocked, yes. ... You can't picture what a total [bombed] town is, unless you see a wrecked building here, where they're tearing [it] down, and then, a whole town like that.

SH: What about the German population? Was there any interaction with them?

HD: They all were very respectful. That's all I can say. [laughter] I'm not sure how much they liked us.

SH: What kind of accommodations would you have as you traveled? Were you on post?

HD: Military accommodations, yes, always.

SH: At Nuremburg, were you in barracks or were you in a town center?

HD: At Wiesbaden--no, I'm sorry, at Frankfurt--we stayed ... at a home, a very wealthy German's home, and it was beautiful. It hadn't been touched and five or six officers were billeted there. They didn't have to build something. They adopted something.

SH: Did you only eat at the mess hall?

HD: Only at government [facilities], only government-issued food.

SH: What was the entertainment? What did you do for down time? Was there ever any?

HD: No, by that time, we slept. ... No, there wasn't a great deal. ... When I had a leave to Paris, there was plenty to do.

SH: Were you traveling by jeep as you went through Germany?

HD: Automobile. We had a driver and a car.

SH: What kind of a car?

HD: Plymouth convertible. Yes, that's it.

SH: You showed us a picture of this convertible. It was pretty jazzy. You said you painted on the numbers that were on it.

HD: That's right, yes.

SH: Did you have to turn this vehicle in when you left?

HD: Did I have to?

SH: Turn it in.

HD: Oh, sure.

SH: How did you get to Paris? Did you fly?

HD: Train. No, no, there was ...

SH: A train.

HD: Yes. There was a train from Hamburg, I think it was, to Paris. It was called *Der Fliegende Hamburger*. Really, that was the special train.

SH: Just for GIs?

HD: No, it was a commercial train. It was after the war. War was over.

SH: That quickly, they got something up and running then.

HD: Well, I guess they got a lot of prisoners for help. [laughter] You know, I don't know. That was a little out of my ken.

SH: Did you see the prisoners of war?

HD: Oh, sure. ... Do you mean the prisoners or the prisons?

SH: The prisoners.

HD: Yes, we saw those.

SH: What about the Americans and Allies who had been released from German prison camps?

HD: They were already at home. When they got released, they were piled into C-54 [Douglas C-54 Skymaster] airplanes and taken home.

SH: Okay. What about the displaced persons, the people who had been part of the labor camps and things like that? Did you see some of them trying to return?

HD: Yes, but there was nothing for them to return to, really.

SH: How were these people taken care of?

HD: They weren't. They would forage and pick up what they could. When we blew up planes, like we blew up all of the '17s [B-17s] that were in the [field], and the A-26s, over there, because it took gas to bring them home, they would pick over them, get metal off them and sell the metal, all kinds of foraging, until they were able to start businesses again. Tailors would buy a needle and thread and mend tears in our uniforms and we would pay them. There was a special currency issued for use by the Americans, which was good in any country, and the Americans would redeem it. I used to have one of those, but I don't know where that [went].

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

Reviewed by Edisona Hysenaj 3/1/11

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