RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH WALTER ERSHOW

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Corey Ershow: This begins an interview with Walter Ershow at his home in New York, New York, on November 2, 2009. I am Corey Ershow …

Shaun Illingworth: … and I am Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for having us here.

Walter Ershow: Nice to have you.

SI: We appreciate it. It is great to have another Class of 1948 alumnus in our files. To begin, could you tell us where and when you were born?

WE: I was born in Newark, New Jersey, September 14, 1923.

SI: What were your parents' names?

WE: David Ershowsky and Minnie Ershowsky.

SI: Beginning with your father, do you know anything about his background, where his family was from, how they came to the United States?

WE: Well, my father's American-born. His father, and that part of the family, came from an area in Czarist Russia which was called Poltava Gubernia. At that time, the Russian Empire stretched from the Baltic to the Pacific Ocean, so, people who were in all these countries encompassed by Russia were called Russians, but they … came from these different peoples and countries. The area that my father's people came from is now part of the country of Ukraine that's in the Eastern Ukraine, and my grandfather came over when he was very young, about six years old. The government had an anti-Semitic policy which selected Jewish people for various types of unspeakable crimes that were called *pogroms*. … My understanding about this is from my grandfather and what was told to me, … that the *pogroms* that broke out in that part of Russia was in the [period] sometime after [the] 1850s, and possibly up through 1870. There was a *pogrom* in that area of Poltava and, eventually, they were able to immigrate to the United States. [Editor's Note: *Pogroms* were violent assaults on Jewish communities in the Russian Empire by neighboring populations and/or government forces, carried out from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth century.]

SI: Did they immigrate directly to New Jersey or did the family live in New York at first?

WE: They originally went into New York, and then, as my grandfather was growing up, he bought a farm in Morris County, near the western part of Essex County, in the little town called Pine Brook, New Jersey. … There was a group of farmers there who … were truck farmers. They raised vegetables, and they also had general farms, and my grandfather's parents, who were my great-grandparents, lived there. I knew and remember my great-grandmother, who was my father's grandmother, because she was alive while I was growing up. My great-grandfather passed away in 1912. So, the family was in Pine Brook from [the] early 1900s.

SI: Were many of them able to escape from Russia? Was anybody left behind?

WE: One of my grandfather's brothers ended up in Australia. We have cousins in Australia and, occasionally, have some contact with them. Also, other parts of my grandfather's immediate family came to this country and I knew them as I was growing up as a child.

SI: What about your mother's side of the family?

WE: My mother's side of the family came to this country from an area that was called Galicia, which was an area in the western part of what's now the Ukraine. … Her people came from an area around the city that was called Lvov by the Russians or the Poles, but was called Lemberg by the Germans, and it was an area where there were battlefields … during the First World War. … Many of that part of my mother's immediate family, my grandparents and two of my uncles, were born there. The rest of the family was born in New Jersey. That area in Poland was the area that was first invaded by the Nazis in World War II and the people from … the western part of Galicia were overrun and destroyed by the Nazis, but the rest of the family was born and grew up in Newark, New Jersey, and my mother was born in Newark.

CE: How did your parents meet?

WE: … My father and my father's grandpa used to deliver a type of cheese, that we call farmer's cheese, that was made on the farm and they drove, usually took a horse and wagon, from Pine Brook, and then, went through Caldwell and Montclair, and then, went down Bloomfield Avenue into Newark to deliver this cheese. … They were delivering someplace near where my mother's family had a butcher and a meat business and they met down there, … as far as I know. I never got a chance to taste the cheese, [laughter] but their farm was a general farm and they probably had about--well, I remember barns that had stalls and stanchions for cattle--probably kept about thirty cattle. The farms in Pine Brook, as I said before, were general farms and small farms, and they were stretched out along old Bloomfield Avenue, which is now adjacent to Route 80 and Route 46 in New Jersey, went all through that area. It was an area that … had very productive soil. The farm was adjacent to a branch of the Rockaway River. Also, the Passaic River had branches that went through that area.

SI: Do you have siblings?

WE: I have two brothers and a boy who was brought up with us, who we considered a brother.

SI: Where did you fit into that birth order?

WE: I was number three among the four, and I came from a family that, growing up, … had about ten people in it, normally, and, occasionally, two or three extra cousins and other people who needed a place to stay, lived with us. My grandmother lived with us after my grandfather died, and our family was involved in a meatpacking business. So, the family worked together and we all grew up together.

SI: What are some of your earliest memories of growing up in that area?

WE: I need a minute to think about that. [laughter]

SI: Sure.

WE: Well, in Newark, we lived on the last street in Newark, in an area that was adjacent to Irvington. … The area was developed from farms and we lived in an area that had once been called the Halsey Farm. … I guess, as the area was being developed, Mr. Halsey, who we called "Old Man Halsey"--he was probably younger than I am now [laughter]--still lived in a mansion that looked like something out of a Charles Addams cartoon, at least the way I look at it. [It had a] Mansard roof [or French roof], and [was] in the center of this area that was being developed. … My other grandparents and my great-grandmother lived on the farm in Pine Brook and we used to alternate between going to the farms in growing up. Once we started to go to school, we didn't have as much time, so, we used to go up there, whenever we could, and stay up there. … At that time, the farm, my father originally worked the farm, but, then, he got into the meatpacking business and my grandfather rented the farm. They had tenant farmers up there. They raised cattle and general crops. The farms in the area were mainly truck farms or general farms and, during the growing season, they'd grow vegetables, basically for the fresh vegetable markets in Newark or Paterson. … As the crops changed, they continued through the growing season and, after [the] growing season, the farmers fed geese for the New York [market]. Fat geese were a delicacy used by European families who ate geese. So, the geese would be brought in as young geese. They were started and grown in the Midwest, then, shipped into New Jersey, and then, … the farmers would fatten the geese for the holiday market, for Thanksgiving and Christmas. … Then, things got very quiet on the farms until they started the plants for the new growing season, … but I recall geese more than turkeys at that stage. You know, later on, people started to eat turkeys. That was a big part of the business, fattening geese.

SI: When you would go out to the farm, even as a young child, would you have to do a lot of chores or work on the farm at all?

WE: … When we were little, we didn't really do much chores. As we got older, I'd say around ten or eleven, then, we started to get more involved with the operation of the farm, but I also worked on some of the farms in the area.

SI: Okay.

WE: … They always needed young kids to pick tomatoes when we were on school vacation. … I went to school in Newark and my friends from Pine Brook went to, basically, a one-room schoolhouse in Pine Brook. Pine Brook was a very, very small community.

SI: Going back to the street that was on the border of Irvington and Newark, what was that neighborhood like? It sounds like you went through a lot of development while you were there.

WE: The house we lived in … must have been built twenty or thirty years before these new houses were being put up in the area. … It was a mixture of new houses, plus, older homes, and our friends who lived in Irvington went to different schools. We went to the Newark public schools. Our friends who lived across the [street] on the same block, but in Irvington, went to Irvington's school system. … The area was not completely rural and was built up, pretty much,

but there were a lot of open lots, and it was enough out in the country so that when the circus came to town, it would parade through the area, down into what we called Irvington Center, where there were huge, open fields. … That's where the circuses were set up. It usually came in every year, with a lot of excitement. That area is now Irvington Center, where the Parkway goes through Irvington.

CE: Was that a largely Jewish neighborhood at the time?

WE: No. The neighborhood was predominantly non-Jewish, and we had friends growing up who, … the ones who were in school, went to Catholic schools that were nearby, and we all played together and we all lived together. The neighborhood was, I'd say; I can't give you a percentage, but it wasn't a largely Jewish neighborhood.

CE: Did that ever make you feel like an outsider or in any way out of the norm?

WE: I never felt that way. Growing up, we weren't aware of any of these differences, other than the fact that we had different holidays. Our parents were friendly. Everybody was working. So, there was a slightly different type of involvement of families at that time, mainly because people worked, basically, seven days a week, sometimes six-and-a-half, and my family was in the meat and meat processing business. … Part of their business was retail business and that was, as I recall, a full six-and-a-half days a week, and long days that start early. … Everybody was working and, as I recall, my friends' fathers were working, some of the women worked, but basically the fathers. … I grew up in the 1920s and in the early 1930s is the time when the Nazis came to power in Germany. Many people that I knew at that time had been born in Europe. They came from Germany, Austria, well, Austria-Hungary, which was part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, up until the First World War, Poland, and Russia. Everyone spoke English, and most people spoke German. Everybody spoke Yiddish, which was the language that came out of Eastern Europe, and some people in the family, spoke Hungarian, some spoke Polish, everybody spoke German and also a few other languages. … Growing up, it was hard for me to understand how, among these cousins, everybody spoke a different language. It wasn't until years later that I started to understand this. Years later, when I was flying out of Italy, we flew over most of these countries. … In my work, in using navigational charts, I would see, occasionally, a name of a town or a place that was familiar to me from stories my grandmother told me. … After the war was over, which was in May 1945, I tried to get up into Vienna, and then visit some of the places I thought our family was in, but it was very difficult at that time. Vienna was governed by the four Allies, the Russians, French, English and Americans, and the Russians had a lot of control, because, with their political foresight, they knew exactly what was going to happen in the occupied countries. … Occupied cities, such as Berlin, and Vienna, were essentially closed, even though they had American, British and French [who] were sharing the administration, but the Russians controlled a big part of it. In order to get into that area, you had to have a lot of political influence or high rank in the US Army. I was an officer, but I was a flying officer and it was not possible for me to get in there, and then, later on, we found out exactly what happened and the situation with the people. … Essentially, our people, among millions of others, were caught in that area when the Germans attacked the Russians and went through that area and, eventually, were stopped at Stalingrad, but before they were stopped, … they destroyed many people.

SI: You started off …

WE: And I have very strong feelings about that.

SI: I know. You started off talking about when the Nazis came to power in Germany. Did that have an impact on your area? Were there *Bund* people nearby?

WE: Yes, it had an impact. I got off, side tracked, on it. This interview may turn out to be mostly footnotes. [laughter]

SI: No. Some of our best material comes from these little side stories we get into.

WE: … We lived in an area that was very close to a German beer garden, a big park and beer garden. It was called Montgomery Park. Later on, when the Nazis came to power, for awhile, they had tremendous influence in the United States. There were Nazi camps that were operating in Andover, New Jersey. There was another one operating out here on Long Island, and this is where they had Nazi rallies. The American Nazi Party was growing and developing at that time. There were pro-Nazi rallies at Montgomery Park in Irvington, and it took awhile until the government and the people who were responsible for looking after this type of political activity and hate dissemination at that time … to pay attention to it and deal with it. Before that, there were Nazi rallies at Montgomery Park, which was probably a block from where I lived. It was an area in Irvington that was a center of pro-Nazi sentiment. They recently on TV [put out a story] about the growth of the Nazi Party in the United States. A lot of it was centered around Yorkville in New York City, which is nearby here on the East Side. Actually, we're on West 86th Street, that was on East 86th Street, near Lex[ington Avenue] and Third Avenue. That area was called Germantown and it was a center of pro-Nazi activity for awhile. Also, we would listen to the virulent anti-Semitic, anti-everybody broadcasts that came out of Germany at that time, because this was around 1933, '34, '36, '37. … Occasionally, on the History Channel, they'll show movies of these rallies and, at that time, the sentiments that came out of Germany were, "*Deutschland über alles,*" [meaning, "Germany above all," from the first stanza of Germany's national anthem, *Deutschlandlied*] because their philosophy was, "Germany over everybody," and they said over everybody because of their racial and religious policies. They had a structure, a hierarchy. The Germans were at the top of this hierarchy of humanity and down at the bottom of that type of ladder, the very bottom, were the Jews. Some other people, like Polish people, and other people who were not in synch with their philosophies, may have had a little higher designation on that figurative ladder. … At that time, this all came out in Nazi radio broadcasts. We listened to the German radio broadcasts, and it was all laid out. Even today, so many years later, there's still Holocaust information coming out with some living witnesses to exterminations, but not very many anymore, who were witness to that horror. … This past summer, I met and heard a talk by a Catholic priest, who's French. He wrote a book recently about the destruction that took place, which were unrecorded, because this was before the publicity of the camps and the death camps that we heard about, that came out later. There was some talk and discussion about these events during the early years, but it wasn't finally revealed until after the Allies were victorious and started to expose what went on in the death camps [at the end of World War II]. This priest, who is involved with the Vatican, is also

involved with Sorbonne University in France, and he has been documenting witnesses to these atrocities and the destruction that took place in the Ukraine. All traces of this destruction disappeared because of the Nazi concealment policies. The priest's mission is to record the personal witness to these deaths and the locations of the deaths of all those people that the Nazis eradicated, which wasn't [revealed] until the … Russians came into that area. This occurred basically in Western Galicia that we're talking about, and went all the way to the east in Galicia, which is now part of the eastern Ukraine. All traces were covered up. Nobody knew much about it, because there were very few witnesses to it. However, there are still some elderly, very old, Ukrainian people who were witnesses. The priest's mission, one of his missions, is to record those witnesses while these people are still alive. I met him this summer. His work is very good, very important, and he's involved with the Vatican as part of [this]. This is part of his work in the Ukraine now. It's very interesting. He came out to East Hampton this summer. [Editor's Note: Mr. Ershow is referring to Father Patrick Desbois' work in documenting hundreds of Holocaust mass execution and burial sites in Ukraine, chronicled in Desbois' book *The Holocaust By Bullets* (2008).]

SI: One of the things that is very different about that era is how open and prevalent anti-Semitism was.

WE: Yes.

SI: Were you ever in any kind of confrontation with people who were maybe pro-Nazi or anti-Semites in general?

WE: Yes. There's actually one incident that I remember. We lived in a very quiet neighborhood. There were people from all religions living there: Catholic, Protestant, whatever, and some Jewish people. … During this time, I recall an incident of being in our house, and I was around fourteen or fifteen, so, that was probably around …

SI: 1937, 1938?

WE: 1936, '37, '38, and we heard, in our house--I think I was home with my younger brother and a couple of the women in the house, my grandmother, possibly--and we heard this noise outside, of many people coming down the street, yelling, "Kill the Jews;" highly unusual, frightening, hard to understand. … I heard some noise. A couple of my friends who lived across the street were in an argument, with some bigger boys, older boys, who were picking on them. … I went over and we got into a fight, and then, other people in the neighborhood came out and we chased these guys out of the neighborhood. That's the only thing that I recall about that time. … We lived in a neighborhood where people of different religions worked together. It wasn't a corporation [town]. Everybody was involved in his own business and usually employed local people, people from the neighborhood, to work for them. So, that's the only thing that I can recall at the moment. … I just remember these two boys, who I played with and was friendly [with], but the guys that were picking on them [were] quite a bit bigger than they were. …

SI: They were outsiders, from somewhere else. They were not from the neighborhood.

WE: Yes. They were walking through our neighborhood. I had never seen them before. I did not know who they were. … I don't recall ever seeing anybody from the beer garden. …

SI: Where was the family business located?

WE: It was located in an area called the Third Ward in Newark. The business originally was a butcher shop that was started by my grandfather. My mother had four brothers. Three of the brothers went into that family business. My father, later, after he married my mother, became a partner in that business. … They not only had a retail business, they also had a wholesale business and manufactured various types of processed meats there. … Everybody worked in the business and we all grew up spending our free time working there. I didn't play much basketball. [laughter] Well, nobody played basketball then, but we played baseball and stuff, but … everybody was working all the time.

SI: What were some of the jobs that you would do while growing up?

WE: Well, … when we first started, as little kids, since my father was always working and there was a retail business, in addition to the wholesale and manufacturing part of it, we all worked long hours. I had a lot of male cousins; my uncles had sons, and we were all a good source, and a cheap source, of labor. Generally, when we were about five or six or seven, we'd start going down to the factory because we all wanted to work and help out. We'd be given little jobs to do, such as run errands, or occasionally tidy up or sweep up, and help out in the factory. … We worked mostly in the retail business, wrapping packages, helping to load the delivery trucks, and, as we got a little bit older, putting on an apron and getting behind the deli counter to wait on a customer. … We made all kinds of great meat products. Then, as I got older, working in the processing plant, which involved meat curing and smoking, and production of salami, frankfurters, corned beef, tongues, and all kinds of smoked meats. We were all trained in this. My brothers and I were trained by my father, who was very knowledgeable in this business. … He was responsible for the production and for purchasing the materials and sales. We got to learn how to recognize and deal with very high-quality meat products, at different levels, and produce processed meat products as we got older. … We were also trained, as we got older and were teenagers, to be able to fill in for somebody who couldn't come to work or was sick or didn't show up; not on the same level as a professional German sausage maker, a *wurstmacher*. There were many people, who were trained in Europe, in Germany, as sausage makers, which is a very highly-skilled … profession. … In Germany, they had an apprentice system, so that people who moved along that track ended up with a diploma, which qualified them as being a certified and qualified sausage maker. Their diploma was a beautifully engraved certificate which attested to that fact. … They were as proud of that as diplomas you see in the doctor's office today; very highly-skilled, most came from Germany, and also from different parts of Russia or Hungary. All were European people. The closest thing to the products that are similar that I have seen is in New Jersey, at a place in Linden, New Jersey. It is called Pulaski Meat Products, where they process and they also have a huge retail market. You and I [Corey] ought to go down there sometime. It's just great. So, we were trained to fill in, if a man didn't come in. We weren't as skilled as someone who'd spent his life in it, but we're able to do the work. We worked in the sausage kitchen and we worked around the smokehouses--that's part of the sausage kitchen--and in all meat processing of cured beef. At that time, pickled beef tongues were a

delicacy. Tongues were very cheap; they're very expensive now. A tongue, a pickled tongue or cooked tongue, is about thirty-five or forty bucks. That's a lot of money, to my way of thinking. [laughter] … Then, also if a truck driver didn't show up; when we reached seventeen, we had a driver's license and we were able to handle all the trucks that were used, from the large trucks that went into the wholesale market [to smaller trucks]. We didn't operate any tractors or trailers at that plant, but we had large panel trucks and small delivery trucks. So, we'd also work on the deliveries. At certain times, we'd also work in the retail store, and one of the things I went through to qualify [for] working behind the deli counter was being able to slice liverwurst. [laughter] That was the test for a kid. If you can slice liverwurst without smearing it, without breaking it up, and get nice, even, thin slices and could handle that large deli knife, which was the big knives--how long is that, about, the blade?

CE: About a foot-and-a-half, two feet.

SI: Yes, two feet.

WE: Yes, a big knife. It was like a saber. [laughter] Now, to be able to pick that up and slice liverwurst for a customer who wanted some liverwurst sliced, [was the test]. We couldn't cut, or we didn't cut, liverwurst at that time, because of the way it was made, on an electric slicing machine, because it would smear [on] the blade. So, it was all cut by hand. If I could slice liverwurst, that was my test. [laughter] … I recall Uncle Barett, my older brother, who was very skilled as a sausage maker, he was trained as a sausage maker and in all phases of that part of the meat business. He was a little bit older than I was, and, when I was getting ready to go to work I wanted to help out behind the deli counter, … he said, "Not until you can slice liverwurst. You have to know how to slice liverwurst." Well, we didn't eat liverwurst in our house. At that time, growing up, while my grandmother was living with us, we had a *kosher* home. Liverwurst was out. Although the business [was] manufacturing *kosher*-style beef products, they also handled pork products. So, the test, to determine whether I was ready to put on an apron and help out, was to slice melted Sabbath candles that were melted and formed into a loaf, [laughter] like a small salami. That was the test that Barett gave me. I still remember this talking about it now. When I could cut that wax liverwurst properly, then, I got the okay to go to work. That's the way we were brought up. Yes, we all worked together, lived together. My brothers … later on, ran very large meatpacking and processing operations that are similar to what you occasionally see on *Modern Marvels* [on the History Channel]. [Did] you ever see the one on processing sausage?

CE: I have, yes.

WE: That is very large scale sausage production. That's Barett's really strong point. He ran pretty good-sized operations, but on a smaller scale compared to that shown on *Modern Marvels*. I was brought up in the part of the business that was federally inspected by the US Department of Agriculture. … The two parts [of the] business that I was involved in, which was M. Reinfeld and Sons that we've been talking about, and Coatesville, PA Packing Company … were federally inspected. Whenever the meat products were processed, there was always a government, federal inspector, on the premises. … They were very careful, and the product that came out was wholesome, and there was no getting around the regulations. There was no philosophy of

deregulation at that time, or of self-regulation, which I personally don't believe in, … that is self-regulation. Having been brought up working in federally inspected meatpacking plants, and, later on, I did business with many of them. They produce wholesome food, considering all the things that can go wrong. … So, I guess … that's in our genes, I'm not sure, but Barett's very good, and my younger brother, Morey, was also. He also was brought up in this industry. We also worked with Peter Kravitz, who I was raised with. Peter and his mother lived in our home and Peter was like a brother. Peter was also very capable. He was a specialist in deli products and all kinds of meat products. …

SI: Would your business also supply local supermarkets and that sort of thing?

WE: At the time that we're talking about, … they were not many supermarkets. There were a few chains, like A&P, which operated smaller neighborhood retail stores. … I recall supermarkets coming in around 1940. We supplied some supermarkets. There are markets over here in New York City you ought to see before you leave. Processing involves breaking down the carcass, whether it's pork or beef or whatever, and then, doing various things with it, that most people don't like to talk about. I just know from my own experience, that when things are done properly and there's proper supervision and enforcement of regulation, it's safe and wholesome. …

SI: Would they have two areas of the business, one that handled the *kosher* meat and the other that handled non-*kosher* meat?

WE: No. After my grandfather died, the business was no longer considered a *kosher* business. They produced what were referred to as *kosher*-style products. This, to my understanding, is mainly referring to the unique taste and type of seasoning that's used in the various products. You wouldn't find anything that's made out of pork that's called *kosher*-style. My uncles, and I guess my dad who was involved at that time, decided to no longer run a *kosher* meat operation and changed the direction of the business. You're either *kosher* and then follow all the *kosher* regulations … and the laws of *kashruth* and its supervision, and everything that's involved with this, or you're not. The company gave up the *kosher* supervision, but they maintained the US Government inspection, Federal inspection, the entire time they stayed in business. That business, eventually, closed because the area was taken over for urban renewal. My father and one of my uncles were still active in that business when that business shut down. … The business was well-known in Newark. It was in an area, in the Third Ward, that I started to talk about before, which was basically centered between High Street in Newark, Clinton Avenue was on the south, Springfield Avenue was on the north and Belmont Avenue was on the west and High Street was on the east side. That area was referred to as the Third Ward. One of the streets in that ward was called Prince Street. Prince Street was where this business started. My grandfather started it around 1890. Eventually, it went through to the block in back, for the processing plant, but they also always maintained a retail business there. They also ran a wholesale business and … they had a very large home delivery, with a large walk-in business. There were three or four companies like this in Newark. They all did the same type [of work] and they were all quite active, up until around the 1950s or so. Prince Street was a thriving retail area and, … as I first recall it, it was a little bit like places down on the Lower Eastside in New York, where my other grandfather had a similar business. The streets on Prince Street were

paved with wooden blocks. They used hardwood blocks, … that had the grain running vertically. … They were square blocks that may have been three-by-three or four-by-four inches. They were set vertically. This provided the surface of the road, similar to paving with cobblestones, which were used to pave many of the streets in the East. The cobblestones were brought over from Europe as ship ballast. … Prince Street was paved with wood, and it was very slippery when it got wet. … The area that I'm familiar with went from Springfield Avenue south to West Kinney Street, and that whole neighborhood was a very big shopping [area]. … Originally, our home was on High Street, which was about ten or twelve blocks east of there, in a very nice neighborhood. We lived in a three or four-story brownstone, on High Street. My uncle, Abraham Reinfeld, who I was very close to, was a physician and a surgeon. He had his offices on the first floor, with a waiting room. On the second floor … a kitchen, dining room and living room, and sleeping quarters on the third and fourth floors. We all lived in it; my grandmother, Peter and Annie Kravitz, my parents and my brothers, and one of my uncles. After my grandfather died, that house was sold to St. Barnabas Hospital, which was nearby on High Street. St. Barnabas took that house over for a nurses' residence. Then, our family moved to another neighborhood, I spoke about before, which was on Clinton Hill. It was actually at the extreme western part [of Newark], adjacent to Irvington. We lived in an area that was originally Halsey's Farm. … I grew up and went to school there. … [laughter]

SI: Could you tell us a little bit about your early education? Where did you go to school?

WE: … I started school at Madison Avenue School, which was … kindergarten through, I think they called it junior high school, through ninth grade. At tenth grade, I transferred to Weequahic High School, which was a relatively new and very good high school in Newark. Bert Manhoff also went to that school. He was a year ahead of my brother. He played football for Weequahic, and I remember seeing Bert play football. We belonged to a Conservative Jewish congregation, B'nai Abraham. That synagogue was in the Third Ward in Newark. Then, B'nai Abraham built a new synagogue in Newark on South Tenth and Eleventh Street … and Clinton Avenue. There was a Catholic church, St. Peter's, across the street and St. Peter's Catholic school. Some friends of mine, who didn't go to the public school, and belonged to that church, went to its grammar school. … We all grew up together. That was part of my early upbringing. … I felt we had very good teachers growing up, looking back, certain teachers, are in mind. … At that time, we had woodshop, for … boys. We were able to take this after fourth grade. We had a wonderful teacher for woodshop and, also, when we got older, we went into the printing shop. One could take printing and learn this skill, and a little bit about printing. We got a very good education in woodshop and in the print shop, where we produced all of the school's printed forms and stationery. … We learned how to set type by hand. At that time, type was kept in a wooden box, which is partitioned, called a font, F-O-N-T, font of type. Different fonts have different complete sets of handset type that are kept in these trays. When someone decides, … at that time, to print something, they select which typeface they wanted. … These typeface, fonts, were a little bit bigger than this table, and separated the type. … Eventually, after they stopped using handset type, or they had surplus, the font boxes were used for decorations on walls, with all these little cubbies. … My first wife's family were in the printing business. They had a very substantial and well-known printing business in Newark, New Jersey, where they did letterpress printing. This was Grandpa Harry Denburg, who originally was trained as a chemist at Rutgers; this is Donald's, Corey's father's … other grandfather, Harry Lisle Denburg, Rutgers, 1919.

CE: He is my great-grandfather.

WE: He's your great-grandfather.

CE: Harry, yes.

WE: Yes. He's Donald's grandfather. He and his brothers had a very fine, well-known, topnotch printing company in Newark that was originally on Washington Street in downtown Newark. … They did the finest quality printing, of all types, including advertising printing with four-color capabilities, and one of the best printing companies in New Jersey. … Our families all knew each other. Some of our parents went to school together, and grew up together, so we all had those contacts, and we also knew each other through B'nai Abraham. … My mother and father were married in the old B'nai Abraham, before it moved from High Street and Thirteenth Avenue in the Third Ward, up to South Tenth Street. It was a central part of our life. The synagogue was the center of many activities. We all went to "Hebrew school" there. It was a congregation that was active in our community. … There also were many other synagogues in the City of Newark where there was a very large Jewish community. … There were … Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox, and other.

CE: Denominations.

WE: Denominations. … So, we went to Hebrew school. We had good rabbis and teachers and good community leaders. … This congregation was in Newark up until the time of the riots in Newark and at some time after the riots, it moved eventually to Livingston, New Jersey.

SI: In 1967, maybe. [Editor's Note: The Newark Riot occurred in July 1967.]

WE: There were riots that broke out in the City of Newark. … There were about five days of rioting, to the point where the government, finally, finally, after dithering around, brought in the armed National Guard and declared; what do they call it?

SI: Martial law.

WE: … They declared martial law in the City of Newark. Well, having been brought up in Newark as a child, coming from a wonderful home, family, friends, and growing up there, I always thought Newark was a pretty good place to live. I lived in Newark and also lived part of the time in Pine Brook with my other grandparents. They were all a loving family, good people, people who worked, and a large close family. After the riots were over, the government appointed a commission as they usually do after these things; after the Kennedy assassination they appointed a commission. The main newspaper in Newark, before the *Star Ledger,* was a newspaper called the *Newark Evening News*. After the riots, and after the commission was organized, … [they asked], "Why were there riots in Newark?" which destroyed a big part of the Third Ward and a lot of other places in the city. The commission came out with the report that said that Newark, the City of Newark, New Jersey, led the nation in ten categories, one through ten, each of which we would consider a very negative aspect of our civilization. The highest

unemployment, the poorest education, poor schools, the highest venereal disease and it went down the list through number ten. This was like a [different world]. It was hard to picture it. Well, for me, it was hard for me to relate to that. I had worked in a business where the business employed black people from the neighborhood. Many of these small businesses in neighborhoods like this, also employed kids from the neighborhood who were growing [up. If] kids needed a job, or somebody needed a job, there was always a place for somebody to work, not only as I did, in my family business, but other kids as well, … or kids getting out of school. Maybe there were people who were unemployed or working at whatever level, who also needed a job, or something to do. The old people always had a restaurant where they could get a meal at a reasonable price; … where one didn't need a gold credit card to have breakfast, where you could get a breakfast at a price that people could afford, plus a place to live, plus, this and that. Well, this was all destroyed by early urban renewal policies. Urban renewal came into neighborhoods like the Third Ward, and other places in Newark, and destroyed the neighborhoods, and also destroyed the structure of the neighborhoods. The neighborhood community structure suffered. I have very strong feelings about this. It destroyed it. Eventually, these areas were cleared. These looked like areas … bombed out during World War II that I saw pictures of and I flew over some of these places that were leveled to the ground. The people who had lived there, eventually, if they were still living twenty or thirty years later when they might have put up a high-rise or an apartment [building], they might have been able to get an apartment there, but that community was gone, [due to] government policies. Eventually, they built high-rise apartments, but they found there was tremendous destruction and problems in these high-rise apartments. … They got out of control. Anyhow, that's what happened in the Third Ward. I went through there recently; I guess I took a bus from Penn Station and went up to Irvington, and the bus went through that area. There are now small homes, individual homes, and attached homes, replacing some of the original high-rise buildings. The reason for the riots [was], it started with the arrest of a black man. I have a close friend whose name is Bert. He is a former FBI agent. I have some stuff to show you about him, later, if you can put up with it, if you're still awake. [laughter] …

[TAPE PAUSED]

WE: … Bert is a close friend of mine, [who] I grew up with. He worked for the FBI, in the Newark office. He and another man were making an arrest of somebody and went to the police station that became the center of this riot I was telling you about started. Bert and his friend were lucky to get out of there with their lives. He was right there, because they were going out to either pick up or arrest [someone]. The riot started there and had something to do with a guy who was in jail in the police station that was close to Belmont Avenue. It started, it spread, it ended up with burnings, and shootings, and rioting for five days and nights. The state and city government finally decided [to] put the armed militia in. They were armed National Guard. You ought to look into the riots in Newark, New Jersey. … As I said, when I read the commission report, I couldn't believe they're talking about the same city I knew. My experience was different. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Your family business was very much a part of the community. I was wondering how the Great Depression affected the business, the community and your family.

WE: … During that time, during the Depression, they repealed the Prohibition laws, I think that was around '32 or '33, but, because of the repeal publicity, everyone knew that, "At a certain date, it's going to be repealed." [Editor's Note: The era of Prohibition began on January 17, 1920, with the enactment of the Eighteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, set in motion by the Volstead Act. It ended with the ratification of the Twenty-First Amendment to the US Constitution on December 5, 1933.] So, that experiment went by the board. My recollections [are] of growing up hearing about Prohibition and alcohol. Part of our family had been bootleggers during Prohibition. A lot of people were bootleggers. Many made their connections during their work in bootlegging, so that when Prohibition went off, they became legitimate liquor distributors. They had topnotch lines, and, they also had the distribution setup. President [John F.] Kennedy's father, Joseph Kennedy, was involved with Scotch. Part of my family, William Reinfeld's, his picture's in here [in Mr. Ershow's papers] … that's his part of the family. During the time that he and I spent [together in World War II], there were times when we … didn't have any duty or we weren't flying. So sometimes we'd spend time talking about a lot of this stuff, about Prohibition. It was an interesting topic. We knew about it, but our parents never told us too much about it. We knew that they were bootleggers, but they became legitimate when they repealed the Volstead Act. The family was involved with Seagram's. Canada was a big source for whiskey. Seagram's and the people that [run] the liquor business are essentially cartels. When I was in Italy with Bill, we would talk about it and he had connections with people in Italy who were in the liquor business, mostly in wines. … In Italy, in Tuscany, there were some wineries owned by some of the companies that his family represented. After the war was over, one of the bootleggers sued a member of the family for millions of dollars, for money that he claimed he was cheated out of after these whiskey sales became legitimate. So, twenty years after Prohibition went off, the New Jersey newspapers were publishing the daily accounts of the trial, where this man, whose name was Niggy Rutkin, who our family knew--his son-in-law was my insurance agent--Niggy Rutkin was in a jail someplace, I think in the Essex County Jail. … He was suing Joseph Reinfeld, who was one of our cousins, that's Bill's uncle, suing him for, at that time, it was twenty-two or twenty-five million dollars. [Editor's Note: Organized crime figure James "Niggy" Rutkin sued Joseph Reinfeld and the Bronfman Family, of the Seagram's distilling empire, for twenty-two million dollars in damages in the mid-1950s.] That was considered a lot of money. Today …

CE: It is still considered a lot of money. [laughter]

WE: Every day in the newspaper, they reported the accounts of what went on at the trial. So, everybody in Essex County, everybody in our community, started [to discover things] that we, as [that generation's] kids, … didn't know anything about. At this time, Grandma Lanie and I were married and we were reading about things we'd heard of as kids, and many things that Bill and I never talked about, because he didn't know about it either. … I think Rutkin lost the case, but, in the trial, they documented how some people in the Coast Guard were sending information to the bootleggers, who went to go out to pick up the whiskey offshore. They had a "three-mile limit" and where the Coast Guard would go out to patrol. The bootleggers often had somebody in the Coast Guard who was tipping them off as to when the patrol was going out. It's stuff that all

took place, with a tremendous amount of corruption, which was also produced by Prohibition. But, anyhow … one of the things that came out was a great story. There are houses along the beachfront, in places like Deal. Grandma Lanie and I lived on the beach in Monmouth County, where there are all these houses along the beach. One of the schemes that the bootleggers had was to bring the whiskey in, in bulk, and, instead of off-loading many bottles into a smaller boat, and then, running them to shore, they obtained some of these houses that were along the beach. They put tanks in the houses that they owned, then the bootleggers pumped the alcohol into a smaller boat, and then, anchored this boat just beyond the surf and ran a pipeline into these houses, as they reported in the newspaper, to pump scotch whiskey, or whatever type of whiskey they were bringing in. They figured it was easier than bringing it in in bottles, to bring it in bulk. … They pumped it from the boat up onto shore, … when the surf was quiet, and filled up the house tanks. Except, … in the story in the paper, there was one time, one of those hoses got disconnected or pulled out and they pumped all that whiskey into the ocean. This was just one of the crazy stories I happened to remember about Prohibition; all kinds of crazy stuff. But the family legitimately stayed in that business. They ended up with Piper-Heidsieck, Haig and Haig, the Haig line, Martini & Rossi that I mentioned before, and many other top [quality brands]. At our family parties, while growing up, early on, during Prohibition, there were always wonderful, wonderful parties, with meats and cold cuts, as much as you'd want, and also plenty of alcoholic products. … Of course, after Prohibition went off, it became legal. … It is part of the family history. … Two of the uncles in that family had farms in Colts Neck, New Jersey. One had a large dairy farm where they raised and bred purebred Guernsey cattle, top lines, and the other one had an apple farm. Both farms were on Colts Neck Road. We used to go down there often where Bill and his family had the dairy farm. … He went to Rutgers and he was in the Class of '49. So, growing up as close friends, and our being together during the war, and being together as kids, after I had transferred from VPI to Rutgers, we also went to school together then at Rutgers as well.

SI: What was his last name?

WE: His name was Reinfeld, R-E-I-N-F-E-L-D, William Reinfeld, Rutgers 1949, and he was in the business courses. After graduation, he went into the family liquor importing business. Our family had many people in Rutgers. Grandma Helene Denburg, NJC '50, her father, Harry Lisle Denburg, was in the Class of '19. He knew Paul Robeson. … I think Robeson was in '19. …

SI: Yes. [Editor's Note: Performing artist and activist Paul Robeson graduated from Rutgers College in 1919.]

WE: Yes, also Corey's dad, Donald Ershow went to Rutgers. Grandma Lanie, Helene Denburg, went to NJC, 1950, and Sheldon Denburg, 1949 …

SI: Sheldon Denburg?

WE: Shel Denburg was my brother-in-law. I was married to his sister, Helene. She was at NJC, Class of 1950.

SI: He was interviewed by our program, too.

WE: Oh, is that right? Yes, he was a medic and he did very important work. After the war ended, there were thousands of liberated American prisoners of war, GIs. The army set up camps in France to take care of these men who had been German prisoners of war. … The camps were called the "cigarette camps."

SI: Yes, like Camp Lucky Strike.

WE: There's a camp called Lucky Strike. They used cigarette names, Lucky Strike, Chesterfield; there were four or five of them. The Army medics had the assignment of caring for these men … most of whom were in very poor physical condition. Some were able to be taken care of there; enough to get them going and go home. Others had to be moved to another facility, maybe go to England, various places, but that's what Sheldon did. He was in the medics there. My brother, Barett, Uncle Barett, was also in the medics, but he ended up in the Philippines, and he was attached to a unit called the Eleventh Airborne Division. … He served in the occupation of Japan. He and Peter were both in the Philippines, in the Sixth Army. … We had so many [veterans] in just our own family, in our immediate families and also in our extended family, which were our friends, and many people, including Sheldon's cousins. Some of my first wife's family were in the military. Paul Denburg was in the Sixth Marine Division, in the Pacific. He saw action. Eddie Denburg and Stanley Denburg; I start to think about guys I went to school with. … We were involved with each other in school and Scouts and with sports clubs … at the "Y" [YMCA] community center, which was a big center of the activities and while going to high school, and in some cases, early on, at Hebrew school. Many went into military service.

SI: Were there any other activities that you were involved in?

WE: I was in Scouting, which I enjoyed very much. I went in when I was twelve. There was a boy who lived across the street who was in Scouts, so then I got started with him. … I belonged to a Scout troop at B'nai Jeshurun in Newark. Most of my friends, who were in Scouting, were in that troop. Bert Manhoff was one of our Scout leaders at B'nai Jeshurun. … I enjoyed Scouting and went through Scouting into the Explorer Scouts, which was for older boys, and then, I went into the Sea Scouts, where I saw Bert again there. I have his picture with the Sea Scouts.

SI: What kind of things would you do with the Sea Scouts?

WE: What kind of work?

SI: What kind of activities?

WE: Oh, activities, okay. … When I was in the Sea Scouts, I think I was probably in tenth or eleventh grade, and then all through high school. I belonged to a Sea Scout ship, called the SS *Philip Lindeman.* It was part of a group of Sea Scout ships that were in Essex County. … We met at Temple B'nai Jeshurun, which was on High Street in Newark at that time, in the basement, in order to do the work of Sea Scouts, which involved a certain amount of discipline, naval

discipline, and naval traditions, and everything to do with Navy stuff, also, with boats. … My father was active as a committeeman in the Sea Scout ship. My father was, among other things, … a steam engineer and he planned the outline of a small boat for us to use as part of our Sea Scout work. I helped my dad build and set up this mock-up. He brought some pipe threading equipment, and pipe cutting equipment. We put it down in the basement of the building we were using and we built an outline of a ship that was probably pretty close to thirty feet long. … We used wood … that was shaped like a boat and used that for the base, with threaded pipe stanchions that supported a railing that duplicated the shape of the bottom that went all around. So, once we set up these and assembled the threaded stanchions in the pipe fittings, we had what looked like a ship. We had a gangplank and a bridge and we conducted all the work that had to be done on this mock-up of the ship, SS *Philip Lindeman*. This involved all the naval formalities, when coming aboard, [asking for] permission to come aboard, saluting the flag, and all of the work. We did knot tying and various other things to complete Sea Scout tests that take one from one level to another. I liked it and I really enjoyed it, and all the boys who were in it enjoyed it and I made some very good friends. Bert Manhoff was our first mate. … We also had a metal lifeboat that somebody gave the Sea Scouts. This was a rusty, large, metal lifeboat that was kept down along the Passaic River in Newark and, once the weather got better, we went down there and we scraped off all the rust and repainted it and fitted up that boat to take out onto the Passaic River, at that section of the Passaic River which is at the north end of Newark. There were some marinas down there, and also some factories. It's in an industrial area, and it's right across from North Arlington and around, or it's a little bit south of, the Arlington bridge. … So, in addition to doing the work in the basement of B'nai Jeshurun, when the weather got better, on weekends, we went down to the Sea Scout ship. We also participated in regattas, where we'd get together with other Sea Scout ships and we'd have different contests, rope tying, building things, constructing things with rope lashings, and rope work. … We would have these regattas at places where there were rowboats and … we'd set up tents there for the weekend and camp out. That's where that picture with Bert Manhoff [comes from]. That picture [among Mr. Ershow's papers] was taken, at a regatta in Weequahic Park, which had a very nice lake at the time. They also had a racetrack there. They had a trotting track, at that time, and some other fine facilities. We'd meet there with the other Sea Scout ships. There were not as many Sea Scout ships as Boy Scout troops, a very limited number, but it was very nice work.

CE: Did you learn how to sail in the Sea Scouts?

WE: No, I'm sorry to say, I never even got aboard that SS *Philip Lindeman* thing. [laughter] All I did, [I] remember, is going down there and scraping rust off. [laughter] There were some boys, later on, who eventually got it out. … I always loved, was fascinated by, boats and ships and, when I was a kid, I bought a … sailboat to sail on the pond at Irvington Park, but I didn't have an instructor. Everybody [in the family] was working, I guess. When I had time off, I'd go up by myself and try to sail this boat, but I really didn't know how. I was only about ten, maybe eleven. I'd carry the boat up, I'd put it in the water and I thought it would sail out and come back, but I didn't know how to adjust it. So, sometimes, it would end up across the pond and I'd have to wade across the pond and pick it up, but I remember that sailboat. … Recently, my cousin, Barett Silverman, who was the pilot in this picture [in the memoir], and I were talking about boats. He said, "Do you like boats, sailboats?" I said, "Yes." "Wait a minute." He went down into his basement and he brought up a hull of a boat that was like the one I had. He said, "Would

you like this?" It was exactly like the one I remembered. So, it's down in my basement. I'm putting a mast on it and fitting it up, and it brings back my first interest in sailing. I found out later, when I occasionally went over to Central Park, where they … have many sailboats in the pond and they have very active model sailboat clubs, that … there are ways to adjust the sails and the rudder, so, if the wind's under certain conditions, the boat may come back to you, if it's setup right. … When I first moved to New York, I was thinking of [joining]. They had a Friendship Sloop club and since I used to sail on Friendships, I was thinking of joining it. … So, that brings all that back and, every time I go down to the basement, I have that reminder of my first sailboat from Barett Silverman. It's about this long. … I have to put the spars and mast on it. It's about this high. It's on my workbench, and I hope to finish it this winter. … But the first boat I ever sailed in, I sailed when I was a soldier in Italy, on the Isle of Capri. The Isle of Capri had many unoccupied villas because the owners who lived there left during wartime. They … came from other countries in Europe, or wherever, and, during the war, when they left Italy they closed … up their properties. In some cases, they had sailboats that they used to sail around Capri. … So they arranged for the Red Cross or the Army recreation people to use these boats, to take soldiers out on sailing excursions around the Isle of Capri. … They had Italian fishermen's kids, who were perhaps twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old, who would take out groups of military people on cruises around the Isle of Capri on these sailboats. Whenever I had a chance to go to Capri, I would go out on a boat, and those are the first boats I ever sailed in. Then, when I came home, I got into sailing with Grandma Lanie when we lived down at the Jersey Shore and used to sail out of the upper part of Barnegat Bay, south of Point Pleasant. … One could rent a sailboat, like a Cape Cod Knockabout or a small sailboat, and that's how I learned how to sail there, living in Monmouth County. I enjoyed sailing for a long time.

SI: When you were in school, did you always have the idea in mind that you were going to go on to college? What were your plans when you were in Weequahic, in that time period, before World War II broke out?

WE: Well, my brother went to college after he graduated from Weequahic. He was two years ahead of me. He was in the Class of '39, and I guess I had an idea I was going to go to college. I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do in college. At that time, I had a close friend whose name was Paul Maybaum. He was in Rutgers, Class of '43. Paul was a swimmer. He was on the Rutgers Swimming Team. Rutgers, at that time, had a wonderful swimming coach whose name was Jim Reilly … and anybody, any athlete who could swim, wanted to be on his team. He had topnotch teams. Paul was in the ceramic engineering course at Rutgers. … I was interested in ceramic engineering as a field. I went down to visit Paul at Rutgers, probably around 1940, or '39. Rutgers was a very small school at that time. … I guess I went down and stayed with Paul and went to some of the swimming meets and visited the Ceramic Engineering Department. There was a building called Ballantine. I recall an old brick building, sort of across from Johnson & Johnson. I think that was the library at one time and they had some classrooms in there, later on. [Editor's Note: Ballantine Gymnasium housed Rutgers College's gymnasium prior to the construction of the College Avenue Gym. Voorhees Hall, next door, was the main college library prior to the development of the Alexander Library. The site is now occupied by the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum/Voorhees Hall complex, which houses the Art History Department and Art Library as well as the museum.] So, I visited Paul and I became interested in the field called ceramic engineering. … I started to apply to schools, after I graduated from

[Weequahic]; I graduated from high school at midterm. They had graduation in my high school twice a year. I graduated in January. So, I wasn't going to school, I wasn't working, I was staying out late every night, carousing around with a few of my friends. … Most of my friends were off at school someplace, and this wasn't working well in my family, where everybody went to work early and got up early and got out of bed, and made up the bed. It was a house with ten people living in it so they had to have a certain amount of structure, and I started to think about going into the service. At that time, one could enlist into the military for a one-year enlistment. So, I thought, "Well, maybe if I go into the Army for a year, it'll straighten me out." I knew I needed a little more discipline. So, I started to think about that and then they changed the regulation, so [that] one could no longer enlist for one year. It became a three-year enlistment. I was not interested, at that time, in enlisting in the Army for three years, and going away for three years. One year might be all right. [laughter] So, I started to apply to colleges. … My high school record was okay, but I was not very good in math. It was not one of my good subjects, and I started to contact schools that had offered degrees in ceramic engineering. VPI [Virginia Polytechnic Institute, now more commonly referred to as Virginia Tech] was one of them, plus, it was a full military college, which interested me. … I thought it would be a good combination for me, because, if one graduated from VPI and stayed in the military, he could get a commission as a second lieutenant in the Army, in one of the branches of the service that they offered there. Also, they accepted ten percent of the class for commissions in the Marine Corps. So, that's how I ended up at VPI … in engineering, and in Army ROTC. But, I arrived late, on the date for newcomers to come, and I was assigned to an infantry ROTC company. Everybody … had to go into the military in the Cadet Corps--it was a full military college--where they had Army Engineers, Infantry and Field Artillery ROTC. … Because I was in the engineering school, I was supposed to go into the engineering barracks, however, they were filled up, but, they had a vacancy in the infantry barracks. I ended up in an ROTC infantry company in VPI, in Army ROTC. I was in that ROTC program when Pearl Harbor was bombed and the war broke out. … I stayed at VPI through that year, while I was waiting to go into the Army. I went to Rutgers I believe after I enlisted, either at VPI or at Rutgers, I don't recall now exactly when; but, originally, when the war broke out, I was in Infantry ROTC. I wanted to get into the Army Air Corps program. So, I went to see the Commandant of Cadets, who was in that building … adjacent to where they had all the shootings at Virginia Tech last year on that campus. [Editor's Note: Mr. Ershow is referring to the April 16, 2007 on-campus shootings carried out by a Virginia Tech undergraduate at West Ambler Johnston and Norris Halls.] … He was a full colonel who ran the program for the military. At that time, in order to get into the Army Aviation program, the cadets program, one needed two full years of college. The Air Corps eventually realized you didn't need that to become a flying officer in the Army. They changed that, eventually, but, at that time, one had to have two full years of college. Then, I wanted to get into the Marine Corps, and so I went up to 90 Church Street [in Manhattan], which was where people from this area went for physicals and testing. … The Navy ran the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps had various programs where one could enter these programs to go to OCS, which was Officer Candidate School, and the Navy ran various programs called the V-programs. The Army also ran programs to provide college training and use college facilities. In order to get into these programs, you had to have passed certain physical and written tests and, if you completed the program, you ended up with a commission in the Army, in the Navy or in the Marine Corps. If you didn't complete the program, you ended up as what we eventually called "grunts." They didn't use that term then. If you don't complete the officers' program, you become an enlisted

man. So, I took the exams for the Marine Corps program. It had a V, a number to it but I don't recall the number. The program was to go into Marine Corps basic training. There was a ninety-day period of training. If you completed it successfully, you got a commission as a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps. I was interested in that but when I got back home, or got back to school, I got a letter from the Marine Corps saying that, since I was in Army ROTC at VPI, one of eight full military colleges, I therefore was not eligible for this program, even though I passed the physical and the mental tests. They were sorry, but they couldn't take me. The letter, essentially, was that … there was an agreement among the services, the Armed Services, Army, Navy, Marine Corps, not to take people enrolled in certain programs. … Since I was in Army ROTC, which one had to be in at VPI, unless physically unable, I was not eligible for the Marine OCS program. So, I enlisted in the Army Enlisted Reserve Corps. It was called the ERC, the Enlisted Reserve Corps, and the Enlisted Reserve would accept one based on physical and educational qualifications. At a certain point, they would be called to active duty. … I think I may have enlisted at that time, in the Enlisted Reserve Corps, because, then, eventually, when I was called to active duty, I was called up in the Enlisted Reserve Corps. … Since I had been in the Infantry ROTC, I didn't want to go into the infantry particularly, but then I had a chance to take an examination for the Aviation Cadets, to get into the Aviation Cadet program, which was the Army Aviation flying program. So, I took that and I passed it and I was accepted into that program, and then … when I was called to active duty, I went into that program. … When I was called to active duty, I had to report for active duty at the Federal building in Newark, New Jersey. The night before, I had a big party at home, a farewell party. Some of my cousins who were in the military came, as well as friends and family. I remember my Dad wanted to come with me when I reported in. I said I couldn't picture myself going off to the Army and my Father coming along with me. So, I dissuaded him from coming. You know, I said, "I have to report there at seven-thirty AM, at the Federal building," and I didn't want my Daddy coming. As I was leaving in the morning, I was at the front door of our house. I stepped out onto the steps and my Grandmother stopped me. She said I had to "change feet." I was stepping off the front step to go out with--I don't recall if it was my right foot or my left foot. Whichever foot it was, she held my arm and made me stop, saying, "You can't go off on a journey like this unless you step off on this particular foot." It was a custom that she probably remembered from her childhood. She was brought up as a child in Galicia. So, she stopped me. I never really did find out why or which was the correct foot. Still, I remember that day. I remember taking a trolley, at that time, to go down to report. When I got there, there were hundreds of guys my age who were waiting, milling around in a narrow basement of the Federal building, and then, just waiting and waiting and waiting. It was the beginning of our learning the adage in the Military, which is: "Hurry up and wait. Hurry up and wait." No one came out to say anything, and then, after I'd been there for a couple of hours, I saw my Dad walking down the corridor. He was wearing a white, we called them "market coats." When people in the meat business went to the wholesale markets and went into freezers and meatpacking places, they wore a white coat, which was called a market coat. Here was my dad, coming down to see me. Well, I was so happy to see him, because we were just sitting there, or milling around. Nobody knew anything, wondering what's happening next. Then, finally, they called us and told us to go out in front of the Federal building and assemble on Broad Street in Newark. So, we assembled there, all in civilian clothes, carrying a bag, and my Dad was right next to me. They had a marching band in those days, which was relatively early in World War II. We marched on Broad Street in Newark to Penn Station, and my Dad marched right alongside of me. I just recall the joy of seeing him and

thank goodness he didn't listen to me when I said, "Don't come." So, that's how I left. We got on a train, a troop train, and that was the first of many troop trains that I rode. We all thought we were going to Atlantic City. From Newark, Atlantic City was about three hours, but we started to head south. After Philadelphia, and about five days later, we ended up in Biloxi, Mississippi--what a difference.

SI: Before we talk about Biloxi, can you tell us about the day Pearl Harbor was attacked?

WE: Pearl Harbor was attacked on a Sunday, on December 7, 1941. I was a cadet in C Company in the First Battalion at VPI in Blacksburg, Virginia. The school at that time was full military. We lived under military discipline in barracks and Sunday was a relatively free day. We didn't have to stand inspections or formations, or duties that we had during the week. So, we had no classes that day. We were studying and relaxing in the barracks and I was sitting at my desk with my old lady. We referred to our roommates at VPI as our "old lady." My old lady was Ivanhoe Virginius Farley, Jr. He was a wonderful kid who came from the eastern part of Virginia. He lived on the Rappahannock River in Lancaster County, Virginia. His family were oyster farmers and also grew tomatoes and farm crops, in this remote area that only recently obtained electricity. He was a wonderful roommate and we became close friends. I always called him "Ivy." On that day, we were studying and heard a commotion out in the hall. Somebody came into our room and told us to turn on the radio. Then, we heard the news about Pearl Harbor. From that point on, there was a lot of excitement. Some of the cadets were away on leave. We were glued to the radio as much as possible. The next morning, we got up, awakened to reveille and our usual military routine. The military routine for cadets at VPI, especially for freshman cadets, was hard, because there was a certain amount of hazing, which was illegal but existed. Hazing was part of the military tradition. Virginia and many Southern states had a very strong military tradition. Some of their high schools had Junior ROTC. There were two military colleges, Virginia Military Institute (VMI) and Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI). There are two military colleges in South Carolina, the Citadel and Clemson. The military at all the schools is basically the same. They have since eliminated a lot of the hazing. After being broken into the military routine at VPI, I didn't have much of a problem adjusting to the Army when I went on active duty. So, that's where I was when the US entered World War II. The upper classes at VPI, like the Class of '41, left very early. The Classes of '39, '40 and '41 at Rutgers that were ROTC also went into service early on. Then, in some cases, the schools started to make adjustments in the curriculum; depending upon an individual's military circumstances, they shortened some of the courses. The boys who were in Advanced ROTC were moved along because they ended up staffing the military. The military was building up from practically nothing. From an army of perhaps around five hundred thousand, they were anticipating millions. We had industrial geniuses and people in the military who worked and planned together and who created all the facilities for producing everything that was needed for the war: tanks, vehicles, aircraft, munitions, etc. There was a program to produce fifty thousand military aircraft a year. The military opened many training facilities, including the colleges and many educational programs to train people in various areas. Rutgers also trained engineers and expanded the Aviation Cadet Program. They operated the student detachments. When planes eventually started rolling off the assembly lines, there were trained people to operate that piece of equipment. This was a pipeline of people and equipment, with everything coming together planned by these civilian and military leaders. I always referred to them as "the geniuses" who

planned all of this. I went into the Aviation Cadet Program. After basic training, we went to the student college detachments. They were referred to as CTB. Before a soldier could become an Aviation Cadet, they had to have this training. I went to Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. I was in the 32nd College Training Detachment. I had a cousin, Sid Lester, was in the same detachment. One of the nice things about that was that my Mother and my Aunt used to come down to visit us occasionally, because we had a travel limit which was referred to as a fifty-mile travel limit. In order to travel, one had to have a pass that had a signature on it, which authorized you to be away from your base. One weekend, a friend who worked in the office of the Commandant of Cadets came into our barracks, with a pad of these weekend passes. He also had a signature stamp of the major who was in charge of the detachment. Anybody who wanted a weekend pass, this guy would just stamp a pass. I thought, "Well, why should I be restricted to fifty miles of Carlisle, Pennsylvania? I wanted to go back to New Jersey to see my family." So, I took a pass, a forged pass, and I traveled on this forged pass. The whole time I was traveling, every time an MP came by, I sort of cringed and tried not to be noticed. I realized that I worried so much the entire time I was traveling on this forged pass out of my area that when I was home, I really didn't enjoy myself. Plus, I risked being washed out of the Aviation Cadet Program. That was serious. I certainly didn't want to be washed out of the Aviation Cadets, to become a private in the infantry. That was the last time I did that. I eventually became an "Aviation Cadet."

[TAPE PAUSED]

[Editor's Note: During a break, the interviewers asked a question about Mr. Ershow's education at Rutgers.]

WE: Well, I just want to tell you, I can't think of the name of the professor. He had a Greek name.

SI: Peter Charanis.

WE: Professor Charanis, yes. He was one of the best professors I ever had. He was wonderful. I remember going to his classes at Bishop Hall. I also made a very good friend who sat next to me in that History class. I am still in touch with him. He went to Rutgers, Class of '48. His name is Sid Trontz. He lives in California. He and I always sat together. What was the name of the dormitory that was built close by there?

SI: There was Demarest Hall and there was the Quadrangle.

WB: The Quadrangle.

SI: Were those classes with Professor Charanis held in Bishop House?

WE: Yes! In addition to Professor Charanis, I remember a few other professors. I took classes in Ballantine. I think after it was being used as a library. They had some classrooms. I took a course in public speaking with a man who I think was named Reager.

SI: Richard Reager?

WE: Yes, Richard Reager, outstanding, outstanding, plus, he had a graduate student named [Edwin L.] Stevens. There were other outstanding guys that I remember. … I remember a graduate student from Princeton whose name was Von Loerke, who taught an art course that was very good, and Dr. [James H.] Leathem, who was in the Biology Department and Haskins was one of his graduate students, [Harold H. Haskin].

SI: The Biology History Department?

WE: No, Biology.

SI: Just Biology.

WE: Well, biology in the Biology Department.

SI: Haskins.

WE: Yes. A few professors, a few friends, and a lot of excitement with everybody coming back from the war, because, when guys were going off, you'd be with them and, all of a sudden, they'd be gone; they were called up, and then, three or four years later, you start to see some of these men again.

SI: Roughly how long were you at Rutgers before you were called up for active duty?

WE: I think, … I believe, I was there in the Fall of '42, and then, I was called to active duty at that time, but I am not really clear on it right now, because I think I went there … while I was waiting to go on active duty. … That's the time when everybody … was being called up. … I lived in Hegeman [Hall and] I lived in another dorm that was up near the Quadrangle. … Also, in a dorm that was up near the [New Brunswick Theological] Seminary.

SI: Ford Hall.

WE: No, I never stayed in Ford Hall; I took some courses up at Old Queens. … The college set up many new structures during the wartime, also there were Quonset huts across the river near where the stadium [Rutgers Stadium] is now, and they had many classrooms for the Army ASTP Program [Army Specialized Training Program] where they ran a very large engineering program, with a lot of engineering students in that.

[TAPE PAUSED]

WE: To Biloxi, before Dickinson, yes.

SI: Okay, you were in Biloxi before Dickinson.

WE: Yes. … I went there for basic training.

SI: How long was that, roughly? What did that entail?

WE: Well, it was roughly a couple of months, but, right after I got there, I came down with measles because there was an epidemic, of measles in the Army camps. So, that delayed my training somewhat, because I had to be hospitalized, and then, eventually, I got out and went on with my basic. It was Army basic training and, initially, I was with the men who had come from Newark, and the New Jersey area, which was part of the original shipment. Then, there were men who came from the Midwest, and some from down South. Then, our group went up to Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to the 32nd CTD [College Training Detachment] at Dickinson College. … At that time, my rating was changed from private to aviation student, AS. While there, we had some early flight training, [during] which we got acquainted with aircraft. We flew small aircraft called Piper Cubs or Taylorcraft. The courses were basically in ground school courses, and also military subjects. We lived in college dormitories. This was a very nice station, because Carlisle Barracks was a permanent Army base in Carlisle, where they indoctrinated and trained Army doctors. There was a lot of high rank in this town. We were constantly saluting very high-ranking officers, because they brought in doctors who were older and experienced and they came into the Army with relatively high rank and they were trained there. Carlisle was where the government had a famous Indian school [the Carlisle Indian Industrial School], and we knew about a wonderful, Indian athlete whose name was Jim Thorpe and he was famous. We grew up hearing about Jim Thorpe. … He went to the Indian school there. … That part of Pennsylvania trained a lot of soldiers. It was an area not far from Harrisburg where there was a huge Army installation at Indiantown Gap and there were always a lot of soldiers around. …

SI: You described it as somewhat high pressure, because, if somebody failed, they would wind up in the infantry. Was that the case for you?

WE: Being eliminated from the Aviation Cadet program was always referred to as a "washout," washed out for one reason or another. There were various reasons. We were … on a track to learn how to fly aircraft and, usually, along with it went an opportunity to get an officer's commission. … At that time, everybody that I knew wanted to learn how to fly. It was very glamorous. Everybody wanted to stay with that, plus … the Air Corps was a relatively new service and not as rigid as other branches. … We had an expression called "stay on the ball," don't screw up. If you screw up, you'll get washed out. If you get washed out early on, it was you're liable to go into the infantry. Later on, they'd say, "They'll send you to Alaska." That was supposedly one of the worst Air Force stations one could go to, so everybody wanted to do the right thing. As I said before, I worried a lot when I deliberately did something that would risk my getting what I started out to do, and I [realized] that it wasn't a good idea to do it.

SI: How many semesters were you able to complete at Dickinson before you were sent elsewhere?

WE: I think we were there; I don't recall the exact dates and I don't have a record of it here with me. I have it written down someplace, but it must have been about four months or so, and then, from there, we went to Nashville, Tennessee where the Air Corps had a classification center. Everyone who went into the Air Corps wanted to fly. Most people wanted to become fighter

pilots. That was very glamorous. The Air Corps had different requirements for fighters, bombers, transport, air-sea rescue, and various types of flying activities. They needed navigators, pilots, bombardiers, aerial gunners, radiomen, flight engineers and others. The classification process was what I always thought of as a wonderful system for determining the best application of a person's capabilities. They were batteries of tests covering visual, physical, psychological, manual dexterity and different other things called into play in flying various types of aircraft. The military requirements differed depending on the category, however, they wound up placing men where they were best needed.

CE: What were some reasons they would feel that somebody would be better on a bomber as opposed to a fighter?

WE: There were different requirements. As I mentioned before, that the plan was to produce fifty thousand military aircraft a year, I flew on an aircraft that was one of approximately thirteen thousand. For some models of aircraft, they only produced five or ten thousand. They needed just a certain amount of air crew for each category. At the same time, the Army ground forces also needed capable people. There were times during the war where there was contention between the Army Air Forces and the ground forces for available manpower. At a certain point, they were losing a lot of men--(casualties). An example was after the landings in Normandy, when the armies started to move toward Germany, there were many casualties in the Battle of the Hurtgen Forest, the Bulge, as well as Normandy. The ground forces had pulled many men out of the various Army training programs because they needed infantry replacements. These men had been in various school training programs, including the Air Corps programs. They closed many programs down and sent many students to the infantry. I believe they moved men around as needed. The Hurtgen Forest was a battle that took place after Normandy and before the Bulge. So, no matter what a man's test showed, if needed as infantry replacements, that's where they wound up. There was a well-known expression, a term, "At the convenience of the Government." A soldier may have been assured of training in a certain program and wound up in the infantry at the convenience of the Government! If needed, you were reassigned--that was it! When one went into the Armed Services, there was the ritual of "Being Sworn In" by "Taking the Oath!" After this, you are no longer governed by civilian law. Once you took the oath, "You're in!" The laws that governed the military were called the Articles of War. It's now called the Code of Uniform Justice. [Editors' Note: The Uniform Code of Military Justice replaced the Articles of War in May 1951.] Corey's Uncle Lee Wilson was a lawyer (Judge Advocate) in the Marine Corps. I knew him very well

SI: Corps?

WE: Corps. He was in the Marine Corps. His work, partly, was to deal with cases that were violations and infringements of the Uniform Code of Justice. We got to know each other and he said that a lot of his work involved what was referred to as "rocks and shoals." Rocks and shoals are places shown on nautical charts which indicate dangerous areas. The Marine Corps used this term to refer to somebody who ran into serious problems. "Rocks and shoals" was an apt description; however, during World War II, we all operated under the Articles of War. There were serious penalties for violations.

SI: At the end of classification, what were you classified as?

WE: I was classified as a bombardier and a bombardier/navigator. So, I went along that track. Then, my classification became Aviation Cadet. I think I got an increase in pay and I was an Aviation Cadet. From there, I went out to Santa Ana, California, to preflight school. It was a very large Army base in a beautiful part of California, in Orange County. It had the best food and best treatment I had in the Air Corps so far. I went through preflight training with cadets who were being trained as pilots, navigators and bombardiers. I trained with a bombardier class. There was an incident there that I'd like to tell you about: I came back to my barracks one day, and there was a note for me to report to the Army Intelligence at Headquarters. I had to put on a class "A" (dress) uniform and be there at a certain time. At Headquarters, I was taken into a room that just had a table and two chairs. Two men in civilian clothes came in and they told me they were FBI agents. They asked me questions about a cadet in my squadron. His last name started with "F." Since everything was done alphabetically in our classes and work, this cadet and I attended all our ground school classes together. Our bunks were together and we were always adjacent alphabetically. We were friends, and they asked me many questions about him and, at one point, I asked them, "Why are you questioning me?" They said that they suspected him of being a Nazi spy. Well, I couldn't believe it and, at the end of this interview, they told me to forget everything we discussed and never to mention it to anybody, under threat of who knows what! I forced myself to forget about it. At times, I'd think about it, but say to myself, "This is ridiculous, so, stop thinking about it." I did. About a year-and-a-half later, I recalled this strange incident. I couldn't imagine "F" being a spy. I thought, "Perhaps they were checking up on me." Although this was the best bases I was ever on, this negative incident stuck in my mind. I was always in transit, and one day I totaled up the number of Army airbases I had gone to, including those in transit, and there were about thirty. However, Santa Ana California Army Air Base was the best one.

CE: This was in Nashville?

WE: No, this was in Santa Ana Army Air Base in California. They are not coming after me, so, don't say anything and they won't come after you either!

CE: Not after me. [laughter]

WE: It was just a weird incident. I always meant to speak to my friend, Bert, about it. He was an FBI field agent for thirty years. He told me many exciting stories about his work and read some of his many citations to me.

SI: What did the training at Santa Ana consist of? What type of training was it? Classroom and field work?

WE: We had what was called ground school. That consisted of classroom work in many subjects: radio, Morse code, radio transmission and reception, plus such basic academics as Math. There were also basic aviation subjects. We learned how to send and receive messages in Morse code as it was used in the Air Corps. Morse code was very difficult to learn. It was like learning a new language. In order to pass the test, we had to be able to receive and send five

words a minute and, in some cases, under conditions of severe static. We spent many hours learning and practicing. We practiced by speaking to each other in Morse code. Looking back, that seems very funny. The Coast Guard used Morse code transmissions until fairly recently. It's no longer used there. I was in the Army Air Corps, which became the US Air Force in 1947. We now refer to it as the "Brown Shoe" Air Force because we wore Army colors. Physical training was a big part of the program at preflight school in Santa Ana. Every place we went, we ran. No matter where we went or how far, we always had to run. We also did a lot of PT (physical training) a certain number of hours every day. Early on, ground school didn't cover much about flying or aircraft. We then went on to various advanced schools for pilots, bombardiers and navigators. We spent half the day in ground school and half the day in physical training. Sometimes, for recreation, athletic teams would visit and demonstrate their skills. They would work with the instructors up on platforms leading these masses of troops in calisthenics. We constantly studied aircraft identification. In identification classes, we'd sit in pitch-black rooms. The walls were painted black. An aircraft or ship would be flashed on a screen to be instantaneously identified. We had to identify the difference between enemy and friendly aircraft and ships. It took a while to get to know all the aircraft and ships. We were constantly working on this. In our barracks, we had models of ships and aircraft hanging from the ceiling. We had charts all over the place and were constantly studying these graphics and models. We studied the same things on flash cards. In class, the instructor would say, "Ready. Now," and, for an instant, show an image on a screen to be identified. Who knows? If you had a stopwatch or could trace a bullet, it might tell you how fast these images were flashed. But it was fast. "Friend or foe?" We learned all these skills and put them into practice. Radio operators went to special schools, but all the people on the aircraft that I flew on learned the basics of radio as well. After preflight, I went to aerial gunnery school, which I enjoyed. When we started off, we used twelve-gauge shotguns. The system was to teach men how to shoot weapons that were used in the air. We trained with shotguns initially on various shooting ranges. It was a great part of the training. Gunnery school was not at Santa Ana; I went to Kingman, Arizona, for that. The station was Kingman Army Air Base. This was a big disappointment, especially after Santa Ana. I thought it was a terrible station.

SI: Did you go anywhere between Santa Ana and Kingman?

WE: No. I went from Santa Ana to Kingman. At that time, we flew on four-engine piston aircraft, the B-17. They had added a forward firing machine-gun turret, which gave the aircraft two additional machine-guns. The bombardier operated these guns in the nose of the aircraft. They called it a chin turret, and it hung underneath the plexiglass bombardier's position in the nose of the ship. It gave the aircraft additional forward defensive protection. I enjoyed the gunnery training. We learned how to assemble and disassemble fifty-caliber machine-guns while blind-folded. The work there was good, but we had poor treatment there. At that time, in the winter, there was a flu and respiratory epidemic in Army camps. I unfortunately caught a lung infection. I was sick part of the time I was there. Many of us were sick and that made things more difficult. One of the things about Air Corps flight training was that one didn't have to be in combat to be in danger. There were many fatal and serious accidents that occurred during training. Flight training required working with high-octane gasoline, armaments, powerful aircraft and machinery. Constant emphasis was put on safety and safe procedures. Whenever flying above ten thousand feet, oxygen was required. There were frequent oxygen

checks on personnel at the various oxygen stations on the aircraft. Equipment had to be fitted correctly and always in working order. As the aircraft ascends, the amount of available oxygen in the air drops drastically. There is a medical condition called "anoxia." This is a lack of oxygen. It could be deadly. Unless people in the aircraft were constantly checking the oxygen situation, planes would come back with guys who were dead from anoxia or had passed out. In some cases, the men who were unconscious were able to be revived. These were just part of the training hazards. Part of our work was aircraft safety. When we started flying regularly, this was crucial. The barracks were very cold that winter. The food was poor and a lot of men lost weight. We just wanted to get out of there. During this time, we were training on night firing missions and exercises.

There was a Southern Pacific Railway mainline [that] went through the camp. … In order to stop traffic on the road going into camp at the crossing, an MP, stationed at a little gatehouse along the railroad track, would get a signal that there's a train coming through, and these trains came through at high speeds, because it was out in a part of the desert where there was a straight, flat run, for miles in either direction. An MP would come out with a little handheld sign that said, "Stop," to stop the traffic at the crossing, and the trains would come flying through at high speeds, big diesel engines, fast freight. One night, we were in the post theater and they stopped the movie and asked for people with a certain blood type to report immediately to the infirmary.

CE: Oh, no.

WE: What happened was; … the busses were made out of some type of wood or plywood bodies, because metal was in short supply. So, this was an Army bus that took cadets and soldiers out to the night firing ranges. Something happened where a bus was stopped for the train, and then, proceeded across the track and was hit by a high-speed Santa Fe Express. There were approximately twenty-six cadets who were killed immediately. One or two others were thrown out of the bus. They found them the next day. The situation at this camp was [awful]. I felt, along with some of the other cadets, that we wanted to get out of camp. We volunteered to escort the bodies back to their homes, not pleasant duty under any conditions, just to get out of the camp. Well, fortunately, I wasn't selected. There was a movie made recently about someone escorting a body, the movie … with Kevin Bacon.

SI: Yes, *Taking Chance,* [a 2009 HBO film].

WE: Right. That's just one incident remembered. There were also several aircraft accidents and accidents on the gunnery ranges. One time, I saw an accident on the malfunction range. While we were stacking fifty-caliber guns into a flatbed truck, a gun discharged, killing a soldier. Other things that I remember from Kingman are; that while we were trying to learn how to shoot, essentially how to shoot down Axis aircraft, part of the training was shooting at clay pigeons. That's how we learned how to lead and do various things learned later on with aerial guns. We used shotguns for this and used clay pigeons as the targets. One of the nice things about Santa Ana and gunnery school was learning how to do skeet shooting, which I enjoyed. I like shooting clay pigeons. Early on, before we started using machine-guns in turrets, there were training setups where they would put a single shotgun shell into a twin machine-gun turret mount. Then, we would learn how to track targets and also how to operate the electric turret. When the time came to hit a target, the turret had one single shotgun shell in it, so that as you were tracking the

target, which was shot down from a very high tower. It was shot out of a device that ejected a single clay pigeon from a tall tower. We learned how to track aircraft by using this ground turret device and, when you pulled the trigger, only one shotgun shell went out. I always thought that was a very clever device. We had that plus aircraft identification, which was a constant.

SI: After Kingman, where did you go?

WE: After Kingman, I went to Deming, New Mexico, to advanced bombardier school. This is one of about ten Army airbases that trained bombardiers. Some trained bombardier-navigators. I was originally in the Class of 44-9 at Deming New Mexico Air Base. However, I graduated in Class 44-11 after having a few physical problems. One was when we had a take-off accident one night that resulted in a crash. They called it a ground loop, an accident on the ground. I had to spend some time in the hospital until they checked everybody out. [Editor's Note: Mr. Ershow later indicates that another previous delay in training was the result of an illness rather than this accident.] If one missed more than three days of classes, they'd call it "wash back" to the following class. So, I was washed back because of that accident. I washed back to the Class of 44-10. I was just doing general duty around the camp, waiting to get into the next class routine, when a classmate I was with came down with suspected scarlet fever. We were put into a hospital under isolation and observation to see if the scarlet fever developed, which it didn't. So, we were washed back to another class, my friend and I. I ended up in the Deming Class of 44-11. I graduated from the bombardier school as a bombardier with a DR navigation rating and with a commission as a second lieutenant in the Army Air Corps. I made it, I did it--luckily!

CE: In all, how long did your training take?

WE: In Deming?

CE: From Biloxi to Deming, about how long?

WE: In total? must have been close to a year-and-a-half. I mean, it was take a kid out of the wilds of New Jersey and elsewhere, and make him an officer and a gentleman, and train him how to do all this airplane stuff and Army ways. But, after bombardier school, I still had additional training, because, we had training in what was called RTU or replacement training unit, and combat crew training, where the crews were assembled to training together. I was originally assigned to B-24 aircraft, with some other friends of mine. We were not happy about it, because we were hoping to get onto B-17s, or possibly B-29s, which were just becoming operational then. We had heard about them. Instead of going to a B-24 unit, [the] part of our class that I was in went to a B-17 unit in Oklahoma. My cousin, Bill Reinfeld, was training at that unit, but he left before I got there, and went to the 8th Air Force in England. We trained with a group of fifty … or forty-nine other crews. We were fifty aircrews training and we trained in pre-combat training, formation flying, night flying, and various types of training as squadrons. Our fifty aircraft were approximately the equivalent of one combat group. We trained as a group and learned how to work as a crew and do everything involving the crew, and that was part of the Air Force's system of what they had learned, possibly themselves, or through the British, as [to] how to train combat crews. … It was starting to be no longer fun in the classroom. It's now starting to get into, as I call it, "serious stuff." … We flew out of Ardmore, Oklahoma on various

training flights. We had all kinds of training flights and also learned how to operate all the equipment on the aircraft, and operate as a crew, and as part of a squadron, and as one crew as part of a group. … We made many long-distance flights and also practiced bomb runs on cities like Galveston, Texas, and Houston. The people below didn't know what we were doing. These were sham missions. … We then started to come in contact with combat flyers who had returned from their combat tours. They were some of our instructors. Some of these guys were, we had … an expression called "flak happy." When somebody's been shooting at you, under very difficult conditions, one can develop a condition called "flak happy," or being "flak happy." Combat flying is a constant drain, with everybody jittery, nervous, crazy, or a type of craziness that you don't recognize, which tells you how crazy you are. [Editor's Note: This phenomena is a manifestation of what today is called post-traumatic stress disorder.] … Then, we started to have contact with information on overseas combat operations. We were preparing to go overseas to a combat theater. But we didn't know which one at that time and, at that time, the war was on full-scale in Europe, the Mediterranean, the Balkans and also in the Pacific. At this time, they probably may have been in New Guinea, before moving up to the Philippines; eventually to go to Japan. It was part of the plan. So, I always thought, "These geniuses know what the plan is." They seemed [to]. I always felt that we had pretty good leaders. … At times, when somebody was a real screw-up, they had other people who were supervising and they had ways to move them out into a different [assignment] someplace else, and … get a replacement who was more capable, to keep incompetents out or to a minimum, which I felt they did. … I felt that our leaders were capable people, who were leading us at that time. We had excellent supervision. A big problem which took place in Iraq and that came out of Washington not too long ago, was about incompetents and inept things, which is hard for me [to comprehend]. Possibly because of the type of training that I had, I expect things to be done a certain way. Then, we were all kids. I was at this time, what? maybe twenty. I started when I was still seventeen, eighteen; many people were rising far beyond what they thought that they might be able to do, and having capable leaders was very important. I think we had proper supervision, and common purpose. I was fortunate, in many ways, in that the group of men that I was with, who were all essentially in a fairly close age group, eighteen to twenty-six or so, we all had a common purpose and common direction, so that some of the things that tend to separate people, wasn't quite as important. Everybody was directed towards the same goal. I think with affection of the people that I served with; I have a friend who was in my squadron. He was a pilot and I located him some years ago, out in Sag Harbor, [New York], and I see him and talk to him, occasionally, and whoever the guys are, … the guy who was holding the coronet in the music picture, Warren, was a pilot in my squadron. He was my tent mate. … I feel, with some differences, we're essentially similar types of guys. My cousin, Barett, lives up in Gloversville, [New York]. He was a first pilot in a bomb group whose camp was about five miles from me, so I saw him constantly, also with Bill. … It's just … like putting on my own comfortable shoes. … So, these are just a few among the hundreds of people I met. Anyhow, that's what happened. Where was I? …

SI: You were in a replacement training unit.

WE: In the replacement training unit in Oklahoma. I trained with a crew whose officers all came from the New York metropolitan area. I was from New Jersey, the first pilot, Dick, was from Brooklyn, Willy, who was the copilot, … his family was from Greenwich Village, and Dan, who was the navigator, came from St. Albans, [in Queens, New York]. Just before the crews

were ready to ship out, I was pulled off this crew. I tried to stay with the crew. We went up to see the Colonel but they had made the decision already. That crew went to England. They went to the 305th Bomb Group in the Eighth Air Force. They got shot down over Germany, and most of the guys survived, but two bailed or were blown out. I had wanted to stay with this crew and I was very unhappy about being taken off the crew. … The system was to train everybody to work as a crew, with your buddies. That's part of the military system. You're not fighting for this and this, way out in [the] "wild, blue yonder," you're fighting for the guy you're working with, for your buddy--a lot [of] it … is geared toward that. I wanted to stay with them but I wasn't able to. I was then assigned to another crew and I caught up with this crew in Lincoln, Nebraska, and then, I went overseas with this other crew and we flew together out of Italy. … That is the crew that I was with when, … later on, we wrote this book. I did locate two men from my original crew, some years after the war, one in California and one in Florida. … I tried to stay with them but when I found out what had happened to those guys, when I got the full report of the mission that they were on, where they ran into all these problems, I said to myself--at that time I was in Italy, when I was corresponding with one of the guys who survived--I decided, "Wherever the Army sends me, whatever they want to do with me, I will go willingly along. I will not try to change it or press my luck," because a couple of those guys died and a couple of guys were blown out of the plane over Germany. It changed my attitude. So, I had some other experiences later on with the Army that worked that way. That was my first crew. …

SI: How quickly did you form a bond with them?

WE: With the new crew?

SI: Yes.

WE: Well, … I'd say the bond formed quickly when we flew an aircraft over to Italy. … We first got together at Lincoln, Nebraska, when we received a new aircraft, which we thought was ours. They gave us this brand-new airplane. It was beautiful, compared to some of the war weary wrecks we flew in Ardmore, Oklahoma, [laughter] just a beautiful aircraft. The B-17 aircraft, at that time, was worth about 250,000 dollars. So, we felt, "Well, we must be somewhat responsible if the government gives us a piece of equipment that's worth 250." Nowadays, probably, an aircraft in that similar category, which is jets and everything …

CE: Probably twenty million.

WE: … Yes, maybe five hundred million. Who knows what they are? Unbelievable, but, anyway, we took this aircraft that had just … come from a factory, and then we did everything that had to be done to prepare to take it into combat; all the instrumentation and equipment; check it out, check the engines, fly it, do everything that had to be [done]. That took awhile and it was an interesting part of training, and then, we flew that aircraft from Nebraska to Dow Field in Bangor, Maine. … Then, we went to Newfoundland, stayed there for awhile, then flew over to the Azores, and then to North Africa, and, eventually, took it to Italy. I personally thought--and my crewmates also thought, this was our airplane, but they took it away from us. One day, after we brought it to Italy, they said, "Take all your stuff off the aircraft, put it in the truck."

"Well, what's happening to the plane?" "Well, they're going to do some stuff to it. You'll get it later." We never did see [it again]. They took it away from us. [laughter] We felt--we were hurt. They took our airplane, our airplane, our 250,000-dollar, gleaming, beautiful aircraft. [laughter] What happened to it? We never did find out. Although they had said, "You'll get it when you get up to your next station," when we got up to our group, they had all these "war weary" aircraft that had been through combat. Some were relatively new, and some were old planes, all patched up with sheet metal patches on all the flak holes and all the damage; a large piece of one airplane attached to another, it was unbelievable, but they did what they had to, to keep them flying. So, of course, being in the new crew, that's what we got to fly. [laughter] … All of a sudden, we found ourselves in Italy and, "hey, this is for real," but it now was the work. All the combat crews that I came in contact [with] always traveled as a crew. You'd see other guys and knew guys from other crews, but, essentially we were the unit. It didn't make any difference what your rank was on the crew; everybody was dependent upon someone else. … We flew mostly with nine guys, but sometimes ten. Everybody was doing the same work, so everyone was responsible for everybody else, looking after everybody, and it was always "the crew" and that attitude and feeling was encouraged. We got to meet men from the other crews. I think that the psychologists that I mentioned who tested us at classification … were pretty smart guys, and the Air Corps selected these types of guys for air crewmen because they were best suited for this work, and this part of the Army was relatively new. The Army air service started in 1917, perhaps. [Editor's Note: The Aeronautical Division of the US Army Signal Corps was established in 1907. This organization became the US Army Air Service in 1918, the US Army Air Corps in 1926, the US Army Air Forces in 1941 and, finally, the US Air Force in 1947.] … The bomb group that I was in was a World War I unit. It was called First Day Bombardment [Group], and they were still in operation, years later. But it was one of the early ones. … They have a very good record as a unit and anybody who was involved with that unit became part of it. [Editor's Note: Mr. Ershow served with the 20th Bomb Squadron, Second Bomb Group.] Air crews were constantly changing, because, for the combat crews, there was a rotation and you had a chance to complete your missions, and then, eventually, go home. But the ground crews and the ground people didn't have that, and some of those ground crewmen had been with the group in North Africa. … They were in North Africa in 1942, and then, '43. … Those guys hadn't been home for a long time. The flight surgeons and the people in the medical department in the Air Corps knew, because of the type of work, how far somebody could be pushed, physically, and then, at that point, could get a break. Otherwise, the flyers become very "flak happy." Everybody was [affected by] the hairy stuff; high octane gasoline, bombs, high explosives, all kinds of weapons around, the work, and flying constantly. You don't see it now, while flying but sometimes, our wing tips would overlap on the plane next to you, while in close formation. [laughter] You don't see these things, but you may read about it once in awhile. The other day there was an incident of a plane landing on the wrong runway. In our training and flying combat that stuff was happening all the time. …

SI: Where was the bomb group when you joined them?

WE: I joined the bomb group in Italy.

SI: Which base in Italy?

WE: … We were in an area that was right at the base of a mountain on the peninsula, which forms the spur of the boot on maps. Italy looks like a boot. This part of southern Italy goes from the spur on the boot to a heel, then, there's also a part that looks like a toe; we were right at the base of the spur. We were approximately seven miles from the Adriatic Sea. We were at the base of a mountain called the Gargano Peninsula. We were near a large town. It was large for that part of Italy. The town was called Foggia. This area, generally, had many German and Italian airfields and airbases there, because part of the area were wheat farms and it was suitable for aircraft bases. … When the British 8th Army and American 5th Army invaded Italy, after the battle for Sicily, the British proceeded north in Italy along the Adriatic and the Americans proceeded north along the Mediterranean. They took the airbases around Foggia. I was at an airbase called Amendola Airfield. … Most of the airfields were bomber bases. … This was part of the strategic bombing campaign, by the US strategic air forces, which were the Eighth Air Force in England and the 15th Air Force, based in Italy, to attack Germany and occupied areas from England and also from the south, from Italy. Our area of work was Germany, Austria, France, the Balkans, and other places east; also Czechoslovakia, Poland, and parts of Russia. That was the work. … There's a map in there of … where it is. That's where we operated, and we were part of the early strategic air force. That was the strategic plan. Occasionally, we would be involved in operations which involved ground forces, which we referred to as tactical; tactical, rather than strategic, was a different type of work at lower altitudes. … At times, tactical supported ground operations and troops, but it was involved, that's the work that we did.

CE: Do you remember your first mission?

WE: Yes, I mentioned in there, my first mission, when I got a little excited, because I was sitting up in front and I saw this black mass up ahead of me. It was just at the time of the Battle of the Bulge. [Editor's Note: The Battle of the Bulge began on December 16, 1944, and continued until the end of January 1945.] The weather in Europe and in Italy was terrible. Often we weren't able to fly. One of the problems in the Battle of the Bulge is that all aircraft were grounded because the weather was so bad, and we had the same thing in Italy. We went to a target that was very far north, either--I will have to check it--either Brux or Blechhammer.

SI: Brux.

WE: Brux.

SI: That was your first mission.

WE: It was around the 25th of December.

CE: Do you want to take a look at the map?

WE: Yes, I think that's on that map. … See this? This is called flak.

SI: We are looking at a picture of B-17s flying through a field of flak.

WE: Right.

SI: We are now looking at a map of your missions.

WE: … Yes, Brux is shown up there, up in Silesia someplace.

CE: Up here.

WE: Right, okay. That's where we went and we were at very high altitude. … The aircraft were producing, because of the weather conditions, … contrails, which is condensation resulting from the heat of the engine exhausting into the very, very cold air, that produces ice crystals trailing in back of the aircraft engines. … These form these white contrails that you see [as] white streaks in the sky. You don't see them so much now, but we used to see them a lot, under certain conditions, and I was up forward doing whatever, on the way to the target. We keep busy up to a certain point. I looked ahead and I saw [the] formation ahead of us, at a higher altitude, going through this black stuff, like [flak]. … I called the crew and the pilot to tell them I saw flak. So, somebody said, "Calm down, that's not flak. Those are just the contrails." From where I was sitting, in that light, the contrails looked dark and they looked like bands of flak. Certain types of flak look black. Oh, it's in that book. You see the black? Is there a picture there of flak? There's a picture in there someplace. … There it is. So, from way back, from where I was, this formation ahead looked to me like … they had all this flak at that altitude. Oh, here it is, and this flak [was the result of earlier events]. There was a plan that these geniuses in the Air Corps came up with, which was to destroy the German Air Force, the *Luftwaffe* Air Force, and it'd encompass not only destroying aircraft in the air, but aircraft on the ground, and the airfields that were supplying them, and the German aircraft industry, and so forth. … That week, all the British Royal Air Force Bomber Command and the American Eighth Air Force in Great Britain and our air force, the 15th, in Italy, went after the German aircraft industry and anything involving aircraft, including destroying aircraft that were parked on the airfields on the ground. It was referred to as "Big Week." [Editor's Note: Operation ARGUMENT, also known as "Big Week," took place between February 20 and February 25, 1944.] After that, the *Luftwaffe* was not the same organization. A big problem, however, became enemy flak guns. The Germans retreated West towards Germany, after the Battle of Stalingrad. The Russians were following them, headed to Germany as well. The Germans brought more artillery and antiaircraft guns to defend the targets we were heading towards. Places like Vienna, Austria, had about 450 heavy flak guns. Many of these came from the Russian Front. These guns were more of a problem for us than fighter aircraft. The Germans began using the ME 262 (Messerschmitt Jet Fighter plane) which were their first operational jet fighter planes. I knew a man in bombardier school who was a B-17 bombardier in the Fifth Wing, in the 15th Air Force. We had six B-17 groups. He got credit for shooting down an ME 262, the new German jet fighter. They were the fastest planes flying and to shoot one down was extraordinary. What happened was, he was in a flying formation up near Munich. The standard attack was for the ME 262 to fly through the formation. If they hit something and the B-17 pulled back in the formation, another German aircraft would finish it off. The attacking plane pulled back alongside of this bombardier's B-17. The German pilot knew the B-17 was hit, but probably couldn't understand why it was still flying. He told me that when the ME 262 pulled alongside of him, the pilot seemed amazed. The B-17 bombardier turned his chin turret ninety degrees and shot down the jet that was flying alongside him. I remember him telling me this unusual story after the war. When the ME 262s came out,

fortunately, the Germans did not have enough aviation fuel or planes to turn the tide for them. However, they were a serious threat. The war ended in Italy on May 2, 1945, and it was over in Europe on May 8, 1945. All combat operations in Italy and Europe ceased at that time. The war was still going on in the Pacific and I had other assignments. [Editor's Note: V-E Day was declared on May 8, 1945.]

SI: Your second mission was to Blechhammer, correct?

WE: Yes, I went to Blechhammer.

SI: That was another difficult target.

WE: Yes, Brux and Blechhammer were my first two missions. They were both very difficult missions and important targets. The oil refineries were a critical part of the strategic air plan. After the USAAF (United States Army Air Force) destroyed the German Air Force during "Big Week," our major targets were: oil, synthetic oil, chemical plants, transportation and natural oil reserves. Auschwitz had a synthetic oil plant at Odertal. Brux and Blechhammer were both oil targets and they were both very difficult targets and missions with a lot of flak guns and a lot of losses. You can see some of these logs showing our missions. I had my logs, navigational data and charts when I returned to the States. When I came back to Morrison Field in West Palm Beach, Florida, I had all this material in my navigators cases, which were turned in. I received all new equipment, including a new chronometer watch, and some flight clothing. Unfortunately, my records and charts were lost at that time. I did go to Brux and Blechhammer, they were both very tough targets. This was around Christmastime 1944. My cousin Bill was on these missions as well. This map (a map in Mr. Ershow's papers) shows the general area that we flew over. There's a notation that Bill made on these propaganda leaflets about the date and the fact that he went to Blechhammer. I previously referred to an ME 262 jet that was shot down by a bombardier. This photo shows the bombardier's position in the nose of the aircraft and the gun controls and gun sight. After completing bombardier school, I was rated as a DR navigator. During the war, I was sent to the 15th Air Force Radar Navigator School in Bari, Italy. I received new ratings as a radar navigator and radar countermeasures officer.

SI: What was DR navigation?

WE: DR stands for dead reckoning. DR navigation was a basic type of navigation. There was DR, and celestial--which was navigating by the stars--and radar navigation which I really enjoyed. There's a notation on a propaganda leaflet from one of those missions. Blechhammer, what does that say?

SI: It says, "December 19, 1944, First Mission, Blechhammer."

WE: Blechhammer, right. That's my cousin Bill's notation. That's his. We got these propaganda leaflets that were called "nickels." This nickel leaflet was in his log and it refers to his mission to Blechhammer. We carried these propaganda leaflets on combat missions. These were dropped over targets and Nazi-occupied territory.

SI: Okay, his first mission was to Blechhammer.

WE: That was his first, and mine was to Blechhammer either first or second.

SI: That is interesting. Your first two missions were reversed. Your first was to Brux and your second was to Blechhammer. His first was to Blechhammer and his second was to Brux, according to this.

WE: Yes, well, that's possible. I don't recall, but somewhere I have a book that has this information in it.

SI: Did you have to use the dead reckoning navigation at all?

WE: Yes, we used DR at times. It's a basic type of aerial navigation. We studied basic navigation at preflight ground school, and in bombardier school. We got into more and more technical things. Aerial bombing has certain ballistic problems and ballistic conditions that are not encountered by ground artillery. I always thought of our type of flying as being an airborne artillery platform. We studied the theory of ballistics as part of our training. It's a bit on the technical side. We flew in piston-driven aircraft. After the war ended in Italy, there was a possibility of being redeployed to the Pacific. All the men, aircraft and equipment had to be dealt with. Some of the men went back to the States and retrained on B-29s, which were operating in the Pacific. There were various plans for the returning troops. Some went to the Pacific through the Far East or Middle East, which was British. Some went back to the States on leave. There were different setups. A point system was set up to expedite return of personnel to the States from Italy. The point system depended upon length of time overseas and other factors. Those who were deployed overseas the longest had priority. I flew down to North Africa on the "Green Project." This was a project set up to return personnel and aircraft stateside. There were airbases in North Africa and French West Africa and South America and the Caribbean to the States. Many men returned to the States by ship. Many of the passengers on returning warplanes were combat ground troops. I was rated originally as a bombardier. I was also qualified as an aerial gunner. Then, I went to radar navigator's school and received new ratings. The military uses a designation called MOS--"Military Occupational Specialty." Depending upon your assigned specialty, that becomes your primary MOS. If you're a rifleman, you are a MOS #701. I had a bombardier's rating and MOS #1035. Then, when I was reclassified as a radar navigator, it was #1038. Then, I got another rating as radar countermeasures MOS #0142. That was a new rating for radar countermeasures. After the war ended, I was slated to stay with our group, which was going to Austria with the Army of Occupation. In the Army, the document of organization of a unit is called "The Table of Organization and Equipment" or the TO&E. This states specifically the number of people in each MOS and the type of equipment they need. That's what governs how a unit will basically be organized, what positions need to be filled and what ratings and MOS numbers will do those jobs. At that time, I was one of the few radar navigators in our group. I was the radar officer for my squadron. We were supposed to go to Austria as part of the Occupation Forces. We went to class to learn to speak German. "*Guten abend* (good evening), *guten morgen* (good morning), *danke schoen* (thank you)." That plan never materialized. I had an assignment for a short while at a prison camp that housed Americans that committed various crimes, but no capital offenses. Capital offenses were dealt

with at disciplinary barracks. This was in Italy, adjacent to the Second Bomb Group. Then, I was assigned to the 15th Air Force Weather Squadron, flying long-distance, high-altitude weather reconnaissance in radar equipped P-38-H Lightnings. However, I did not go operational with this unit. Instead, I was sent to the University of Florence, Italy, with two hundred other men for a special educational program. The Allied Military Government had funds available for courses or civic programs to get colleges or universities back to work. This program was part of that.

SI: Could we ask a few more questions about your missions?

WE: Sure.

SI: When you were acting as a radar navigator, what would that entail? What would you do during a mission when you were doing that?

WE: Well, after I completed that 15th Air Force Program, I was one of two radar officers in my squadron. The radar equipped aircraft were used as lead and deputy lead aircraft in the squadrons and group. I worked with the navigator on the aircraft to track our position. I worked with the bombardier for blind or non-visual bombing and tracking on visual bomb runs. If the lead aircraft got hit, the deputy position replaced the lead. The radar was developed by the British. They originally used a radar called H2S. We used a similar radar set that was called H2X. We also had a set called APQ13. These early radar sets were powered by vacuum tubes. The problem with vacuum tubes was that their filaments were fragile. Sometimes, when we tested the sets on the ground during preflight tests, everything would check out. After we took off, with a full bomb and gas load, the weight of the aircraft as it bounced around on the runway would sometimes cause problems with the operation of the set when we reached the target. We also used GEE. This was an early form of LORAN, which required special parabolic charts. It worked fine on the ground, but would go out when we reached the target. This was a problem because we couldn't see the ground. We had to bomb through the clouds using the radar set, if possible, in conjunction with the bombsight. If the ground was visible, it was not a problem, but, if it was obscured, radar was really the only thing we could use that would be somewhat effective. That was a constant problem. When a set worked and under proper conditions, it was great! We had a scope that was called a PPI (plan position indicator). This was a flat scope display that showed a radar picture of the area that we were scanning. In the B-17 aircraft, the radar scanner was in a dome that replaced the lower ball turret. This was a scanner that sent out a beam rotating 360 degrees. The angle could be adjusted. Under very good conditions, the scope would bring back a signal covering a huge area. I think, at one time, I calculated maybe thirty-three thousand-plus miles as the area I could see. The conditions were so perfect for the radar and the altitude. Flying over the Mediterranean, with Italy adjacent, I could see so many thousands of miles clearly--"That was a trip, like the wave of the future." Everything was perfectly visible on that particular night. I flew from Foggia up to Marseilles, France. I was flying west and northwest along the Mediterranean over the water. It forms a better reflective picture. We used negative maps for flying over mountains, such as the Alps. One can locate and make out locations shown as a negative by shapes. It was always easier to navigate when there was a body of water nearby, because the water shows up as black. There's no reflection from it. It was more effective for our work. The radar operator's position on the B-17 was amidships in

the radio compartment. The bombardier's position was forward in the nose of the ship. I liked this location. I used to joke with my crewmates that, "Missions are flown just to get me to where I can do my work." I got to the target first sitting up front. I could usually see what was going on. I was always mindful that this was "wartime work," along with other men, frequently hundreds of miles ahead of our ground troops. We got there first and hopefully returned safely to complete the mission. The thing about flying is, after you take off, you must complete the flight successfully. You can't stop in the middle and toss out an anchor. You've got to get up there, do the job, and bring the aircraft down safely. It's a challenge!

SI: Were there any close calls on these missions that stand out in your memory?

WE: Yes, I remember one close call toward the end of the war. We flew a mission to Vipiteno, in the Alps, in the Brenner Pass. The Brenner Pass was a pass through that part of the Alps that went from Austria into Northern Italy. It was the main passageway for German troops entering and leaving Italy with equipment and supplies. These were mainly bridge and rail targets. The German flak guns were placed very high in the mountains, some as high as thirteen or fourteen thousand feet (five thousand meters). Because their guns were placed so high, they were very accurate. We were hit in two engines as we were going over the target, after "bombs away." We had gasoline streaming from the wing tanks. My cousin Bill, an aerial photographer, was flying in a plane just below and to the rear of us. He took a picture of our aircraft just as it was hit, showing the gasoline flowing out. This was a dicey situation and everyone called us to pull out of formation. We didn't know if we would make it back! We knew two engines were hit and the tanks damaged. We thought we might "blow up" or "go down." It was very hairy. It was toward the end of the war and so far we had been lucky. We used to joke about the guns high up in the Brenner Pass being high enough to shoot down on us! Sometimes, there were other dangerous incidents, such as malfunction of the bomb shackle release device in the bomb bay. Once, I had to crawl into the open bomb bay catwalk and manually release them. There I was, staring down twenty-five thousand feet to the ground below. Stuff happened all the time. That was also part of the work.

SI: Did anybody get wounded or killed on your crew?

WE: Nobody got killed on this crew. The first crew that I was on was the crew that went to England. Billy, the ball-turret gunner, got killed, along with one of the other men. I read about all of this after the war in the 305th Bomb Group history. Their problem was they went over the target two or three times. When they didn't drop their bombs the first time, they went around again and they really got blasted. Then, they blew up. Two men died. The rest were able to parachute out. I was hit by flak once. It came in through the plexiglass nose and hit my jacket, but, fortunately, didn't break my skin. That was the only time. We would get flak pieces that came into the aircraft occasionally, littering the floor. Shrapnel were pieces of metal, all kinds of metal sweepings, machine shop floor sweepings, such as rusty screws, nuts, bolts and metal turning pieces. These were put into flak shells to act as shrapnel. There's a picture in there of one of my crewmates standing alongside a huge gash in the fuselage. He didn't get hit, but the engineer gunner did. He was wounded. Our crew was very lucky! There is a picture of him standing alongside the aircraft.

SI: Wow.

WE: Do you see that gash?

CE: Oh, yes, there is a gash right there!

WE: Walter D. was the right waist gunner. We were all at a reunion at Langley Field, Virginia, one year and he got up, he's from North Carolina. He's gone now--he said: "Wherever we went, we kept running into Walter's cousins." He said: "I don't know if it was a tribal thing or what," he said: "but whenever they got together, they always had so much fun that, from now on, we're all cousins (the whole crew). We're all going to be cousins." About a year later, he called and he said: "Walter, I know you're my cousin, but I never had a brother, and, from now on, you're my brother!" After that, he always used to call me "Bro." His wife also would call me "Bro." [laughter] They were wonderful people. They're both gone now. He was a wonderful crewmate. He wanted to be a pilot, but somewhere along the way, at classification, he washed out and was classified as a waist gunner. This is a flak hit that we had. Luckily, he was standing right nearby and he didn't get hurt. I didn't even see that until we landed [looking at picture].

SI: For the tape, this is a picture of the waist of a B-17 where a large gash has been created by flak, I guess.

WE: From flak, yes.

SI: Not bullets, right under the Army Air Forces' symbol, trailing up to the gun opening.

WE: Yes, … that was the right waist window. He was the right waist gunner. So, yes, that was a close one, but, often we had a lot of damage but the planes came back. The ones that could be fixed up, would be patched up. We never knew what the targets would be, until we'd have to fly. Also, many times, we didn't know if we'd have to fly the next day or immediately or what. To repair flak damage, the sheet metal crews would come out and patch up all the holes, as much as possible, or patch up the aircraft and fix it, depending upon how much damage there was. …

SI: It seems like the conditions on the base were kind of primitive. There was not much there. You had to make do with little, basically.

WE: Right. We heard a lot about the Eighth Air Force in England and we would see their films, in training. Many of their bases were permanent … but in Italy, our airfields were mainly created out of just fields and were very primitive and very basic. … You can see from the picture of the control tower, that it was just a covered wooden platform. …

SI: Were there any cases of men who refused to go back up, who would not go on missions anymore?

WE: Yes, there were a few that we heard about. They would give various reasons for not wanting to fly but there was a way to deal with it. … We had a setup in our group, as in most units like ours, where each squadron had a flight surgeon. The flight surgeon was a doctor who

had extra training in the problems of high-altitude flying; various types of physiological problems and things involving aviation, especially the injuries [that] were somewhat different than injuries to ground troops. Many of the casualties [were unique to aerial combat] and because of the nature of the work with aircraft; when we were flying, all of a sudden, crews were just gone. As you can see here, in some pictures, you'd see a plane get hit. The most dangerous time was on the bomb run, during which time the aircraft had to get lined up with the target and was restricted in movement.

SI: We were talking about men who refused to go back up.

WE: Oh, and the flight surgeons. Guys who felt that they couldn't fly probably went to visit the flight surgeon first, to make sure there were no physical problems or mental problems. They had various ways of dealing with it. Everybody was pushed to the limit. We occasionally used a product called Benzedrine. With high-altitude flying, one of the problems is getting blockages in your nasal passages. One of the ways to relieve it was to use these Benzedrine inhalers. The stuff we got was real Benzedrine, I think. They later on came out with a thing called Benzedrex, which may have been not quite the real stuff. So, guys were always inhaling this thing. …

CE: Correct me if I am wrong, but Benzedrine was an amphetamine, correct?

WE: Right, I was going to say that, but we had this Benzedrine. We also had an escape kit, in case we got shot down. We always carried a kit, usually our personal bailout. We also had a kit furnished by the Air Corps, of things that might be needed in case we got shot down. We were prepared for that. You know, we'd see planes going down all the time and guys bailing out, or planes blowing up, and crashing, and also hearing about guys that walked back, that escaped. … One of the things in the escape kit was a Benzedrine inhaler, because, if you got sleepy, you'd inhale this stuff and [it would] pick you up. … Amphetamines pick you up for awhile. Guys were always inhaling this Benzedrine. So, as to whether or not we were charged up because of the work or inhaling the Benzedrine, [laughter] plus, we were working very hard, physically. The flight surgeons had a pretty good idea of just how much an individual could take. They knew how far they could be pushed physically. They knew that the guys that had been flying so many combat hours, or so much of this and so much of that, so it was time to take a break. … The Army Air Force had rest camps and rest centers, where you'd get into a completely different atmosphere, with no military discipline. Depending upon where you went, there were great rest camps. In our case, it was Rome, or Capri, Italy. High-ranking officers had a rest camp in Palestine, which was British, that was very fancy and different. The flight surgeons were important and helpful to us when we got "flak happy," or needed a break from flying these aircraft. … Especially for the pilots, it was hard work, physically. Under certain conditions on missions, the pilots usually took turns after a fifteen-minute stint. On B-17s, there were two pilots aboard, so, they could relieve each other, but, sometimes, they couldn't and both would be working the whole time. We flew in formation, large aircraft full of high-octane gasoline and all kinds of explosives. Sometimes, not always, these explosives were armed. Some explosives we carried, once armed, could not be brought back. They had to be dumped in the ocean if possible. Flying in formation entailed a lot of physical work for the pilots. It was scary for the crew at times, to look out the window and see the wing-tips of other aircraft so near. That was in good weather. In bad weather, flying into a cloud bank in these large formations of aircraft that are all

bombed up was just something else to worry about. After a while, the pilots received a device called a "formation stick." This was a small joystick control that was hooked into the aircraft controls and was fitted onto the armrest of the pilot's seat. The pilot could more easily maintain a position in a formation just by using the stick. This helped conserve the pilot's energy. Flying between seven and eleven hours, and on oxygen a good part of the time, it was very debilitating for the pilots. The flight surgeons knew just about how much stress could be handled and there were procedures for dealing with this problem. There were some guys who didn't want to fly anymore. I personally didn't know anyone overseas, however, I did meet a guy in the States who thought, when he was a cadet, "Hey, what am I letting myself in for?" He purposefully did things to wash himself out, because he didn't want to go overseas, perhaps to get killed. I don't recall anyone else doing this. They were probably moved out of the units quickly. Maybe we were the "early" amphetamine addicts because we were on Benzedrine. Well, you know, I never thought of it that way. [laughter]

SI: How would you feel after you took the Benzedrine?

WE: Well, my nasal passages were clear, [laughter] but we tried to keep ourselves, it was difficult, to keep ourselves in good condition. This was very difficult, especially during the wintertime. Well, the year before in Army camps … there were all these epidemics and respiratory problems, and I had a few bouts in the hospital. I had one, come to think of it now, when I left Kingman, Arizona. The entire time we were at this camp the weather was very cold, and they never had hot water in the shower that would be available to us at the time we were able to shower. … Also, we were living in very cold barracks and in an atmosphere where it would … only warm up during the day. So, we could partially disrobe then, but never completely disrobe, and, at night, we would sleep in our clothes, including long johns. After completing training, we heard that we're going to get a delay-in-route, which meant we had an approximately two-week leave after this gunnery school, so we all decided to go down to the shower to get cleaned up, to get ready to go home on leave. As we walked into the shower, the shower room was … filled with men taking showers in what looked like steam. It looked like steam from hot water. As we got into the showers, [we] realized it wasn't hot water--it was just the condensation coming off our warm bodies with this cold water. So, we finally managed to get cleaned up, and, as I looked at my [body], I saw my ribs sticking out, also my hip bones; I saw that all the flesh on my arms had fallen away. That whole time I was there the weather was bad and I never took my clothes off completely to go to sleep at night; so, I didn't realize I'd lost all this weight until I decided to take a shower and I saw my bones sticking out. I got sick on the train coming home and I was sick the entire time I was home on leave. … I got back on the train to report back to camp, because I didn't want to miss my class 44-9 at the bombardier school … and wash back to another class. … I was so sick I was taken off the train in Chicago. I was taken off on a stretcher, practically unconscious, and I stayed at Gardner General Hospital there for a couple of weeks with a type of pneumonia that was going around at that time. So, eventually, I got out of the hospital in Chicago and I reported to Deming, [New Mexico]. That's when I missed my class and was moved back to 44-10 that I mentioned before. It wasn't at [that] time when I went into the hospital from that ground loop accident. So, that was that experience, and, I learned, years later, there was an epidemic in Army camps. The Army did a pretty good job in keeping people healthy and we had very good medical, a lot of good medical care, I felt. … That's my own personal feeling. I occasionally talk to somebody else who doesn't see it that way.

SI: Let me pause for a moment.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: You mentioned when the ended that you did not have to go to the Pacific and you came back home. What happened then?

WE: I came back to the States around November of '45, after completing that assignment I had at the University of Florence. … I came back and I had a long, very long leave, because I [had] accrued leave time, and I did a little bit of traveling, and I reported back to Greensboro Army Airbase. … I was assigned to the airbase and I stayed there until the Spring of '46, at which point I found out that I could return to Rutgers and, if I signed in by a certain date, I would get credit for the full semester, although it was relatively late. If you would come in for a late registration, they extended the courtesy of a very much delayed registration to returning veterans. … I went back to Rutgers and I changed my field of interest from engineering, which I realized wasn't good for me, to animal science, and I was enrolled in the Class of '48, in the Animal Science Department at the College of Agriculture. … I stayed with that and graduated in the Class of June '48, I met many returning veterans. At that time Rutgers was just expanding from minute-to-minute. … [The] place was just opening up all over. They opened up Raritan Arsenal and a place up on the hill, various places, and the college was accommodating everybody, and wanted to help everybody. [Editor's Note: Rutgers University began operating student housing at nearby Raritan Arsenal, in former barracks facilities, and in trailers on the Hillside Campus in Piscataway (now the Busch Campus) in the postwar period.] It was a very helpful atmosphere on the part of the college and, of course, for the students, it was all a lot of fun, because we found out what everybody did during the war after we parted company in 1942. … As I recall, there were guys coming back even after I graduated; they were coming back over a long period of time. I met David Landau then. … I think he was in Class of '50, wasn't he?

CE: Yes.

WE: Right. That's his other grandpa, who also went to Rutgers, as did many others in our families.

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

WE: No, I didn't, because I really recall the feeling that I wanted to survive the war, because I wanted to go to college when I came back. I wanted to go back to college, and, so, I adapted quite well. I knew New Brunswick, I'd lived there for a little while before I went away, and I liked Rutgers. Of course, now, it was big and getting bigger all the time, but I made friends very quickly. Grandma Lanie was at NJC. She graduated in '50. At Rutgers they were very nice to the veterans. Of course, I didn't have to worry about ROTC. I had gotten my commission, so, I was no longer eligible for that, and it was a nice time for everybody.

SI: Did you throw yourself into college life or did you just focus on your studies and getting done with school as fast as you could?

WE: Yes, I did better in my studies when I came back. Also, I met Helene Denburg, who was my first wife. She was at NJC. We focused a lot on each other, but I think she studied more than I did. She was a very good student, and the social life was involved with her friends from NJC. I wasn't in a fraternity. I didn't have too much interest in it at that time. …

SI: When you graduated, in 1948, you then went back for graduate studies.

WE: No, not at first. … My brother and I went into the wholesale meat business for awhile, but I … thought I'd like to go to vet school, become a veterinarian, which I had an interest in. … At that time, all the war classes and postwar classes were filling the vet schools and there were very few veterinary schools openings available. At that time, there were about eight in the States and two in Canada. There was none in New Jersey. Pennsylvania was the closest one and there were a few other vet schools around in the East. They didn't have the regional schools that they have now. I think they have one in Virginia and a few other places. So, then I thought, if I went to graduate school and completed that, I'd have a better chance to get … into a vet school. So, I moved in that direction, but, then, at that time, we were living in Monmouth County and Helene was teaching part-time down in Spring Lake and Allenhurst. … There was pressure to move … back to Essex County and, at a certain point, I just decided to pack it in, because I'd started college in 1940-'41, here it was, mid-1950s, and I was still in college, still thinking about another five years, and I sort of moved away from that. I think Abby was born and then Linda was on the way, possibly. So, I moved away from the academic field. But I remember thinking, during wartime, "I want to live through all this stuff, because I want to go back to school," which I enjoyed. … I even enjoyed the military part of VPI, but I'd had enough of the military for awhile. I believe in civilians in the military.

SI: You were in the Reserves for quite awhile after the war.

WE: I was in the Reserves until around 1954. … At that time, the Korean War had broken out, in 1950, and, during that time, I was in the Army Reserve. … I had applied for a program in the Army that was involved with hydroponics and this program was given by the Army Quartermaster Corps. So, when I got into this program, I was transferred from the Army Air Corps to the Quartermaster Corps and I received a commission in the Quartermaster Corps, and then, the Korean War was on but the Army didn't need any quartermasters. They needed chemical warfare, ordnance, artillery, infantrymen, etc.. So, I was never called to active duty during the Korean War. Also, my wife, Grandma Lanie, was concerned I'd be called back into the service. I also had strong feelings about the military calling to active duty the combat veterans, who had really done what they were told to do, and calling them back first, rather than getting the entire population involved in the Korean War. It was never declared a war; it was always referred to as a "police action," or whatever. It was a whole different thing then. I decided [to] resign my commission afterwards. I didn't want to go back on active duty then. I had put in more combat time, plus, the government never did anything to put the country on a wartime footing, which I felt that everybody should be [involved] in. It was just inappropriate to call upon one category of citizens, which is what they did at that time. I got out of the Reserve and I was never called back to active duty. … I had a couple of friends who had the same MOS numbers I had, who stayed in the Air Corps. They became US Air Force and they started flying

on round-the-clock missions with SAC [Strategic Air Command], with nuclear weapons. I don't know if you're [familiar], … but there was a time when they were flying twenty-four hours a day. [US Air Force General] Curtis LeMay originally was in charge of that program. I never went back into the military, but my feelings were always very positive about the military and its place in our society. I just felt that also during the Vietnam War, when many of the topnotch schools gave up their ROTC. … I had strong feelings about that happening, because I thought this removed … some of the influence of civilian soldiers from all backgrounds in the country that should be in the mix, and from good schools. They had other schools [that] were carrying ROTC, but, because of pressure on the good schools to give up ROTC, and, also, by eliminating the draft and just selecting certain categories of professional soldiers, this eliminated a lot of the good that came out of the Reserve programs that were at colleges all over the country. … We required it in land-grant schools, so, I guess Rutgers had it because they had the Agriculture School, and also at Cornell, but … these are just my own personal feelings about it. So, I wasn't happy to be eligible to be called back to Korea at that time and under those conditions. … That's just part of my idea of how I think things should be. I think in wartime everybody should be involved. What has happened recently is that only a certain segment of the population is involved, and nobody else. I don't think it brings the right results. I believe in universal service, not just having only professional or contracted soldiers.

SI: Can you give us a brief overview of your career and the jobs you had?

WE: My work career?

SI: Yes.

WE: Well, I was brought up in the meatpacking business and various aspects of the meatpacking business. I did work in the food processing industry. I did work in the metal production industries, in a field, an area, called cold-heading, which is a type of machine production, precision metalworking. … I've had many jobs. I've been unemployed at times, so, I did the needful, and I did have a long [stint where] I worked for a very fine company called Bristol Company, which was a division of American Chain and Cable Company. … They were part of American Chain and Cable, which was one of the topnotch industrial companies at one time. They were into machine products. Bristol was into precision instrumentation machine products, and so forth, and I traveled through the Northeast working for them, met a lot of fine people … with Bristol. What other kind of work?

Jacqueline Jankoff-Ershow: You worked as a manufactures representative and then, you went into the spice business, and then, I told you to do what you really loved, which was to do boat renovations. … That's when you wound up on City Island, in the boatyards, having the best time ever.

WE: Yes, I worked in boatyards and construction … for awhile, and in New York City, when there was a lot of this type of work. When I moved into the city, I did a lot of work on renovations of residences.

JE: This is some of the stuff he does. Now, he does small ones, instead of big ones.

SI: I am looking at a picture of a ship's hull.

JE: These are models, done from scale, from the plans itself.

WE: I would just say that I did the needful at the time. Some of the stuff, I can't recall at the moment, but that's late in the interview; catch me earlier, next time you come back. [laughter]

SI: Is there anything you would like to add to the record about your family?

WE: About my family? Well, I have an unbelievable grandson who's a senior at Rutgers. He's involved in history projects that bring him in contact with old soldiers, occasionally, [laughter] which is a most enjoyable experience. … It was nice to go down to Rutgers to attend his Phi Bet ceremony. That was a very fine day, in many ways; well, to be back on NJC Campus again. I guess they don't call it NJC anymore.

CE: No.

SI: They call it Douglass.

WE: Right. Well, it brings to mind all those years with Grandma Lanie at Douglass College, which was right next to the Dairy Department, and, also, I lived out on Hardenberg Street for awhile. … New Brunswick always had jobs for people from Rutgers or NJC, at either … Squibb's or Johnson's or at Merck. That was a good source for them. It was just nice and good and exciting. … My daughter, Linda, his aunt, is an NJC graduate and, also, she went to Rutgers Law, right?

CE: I believe so.

WE: Yes.

CE: I have one question. Your last name is different from that of your parents. Could you talk about how that came to be?

WE: Well, this took place years ago when there was a certain … movement to Americanize names. So, we just dropped the S-K-Y off, which just indicated what part of Russia my great, great-grandparents came from. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but I don't think I would get involved with it now, … no point of it.

CE: When was this?

WE: Maybe 1940 or whenever, years ago.

SI: Did your parents make the decision?

WE: No, just my brothers and myself. Yes, like I said, it just seemed like a good idea at the time, but, in retrospect, what's the point?

SI: How did you meet Mrs. Ershow?

JE: We had a blind date.

WE: Met her on a blind date. The blind date was when she was working in a hospital here in New York called Manhattan Eye and Ear Hospital. Jacqueline ran the deaf baby program, which was a new program, experimental program, that was being run at Manhattan Eye and Ear and, also, at Bellevue Hospital and other hospitals.

JE: Also at Hunter College, at Montefiore and at Elmhurst.

WE: Right, at various places, it was a very good program, which is no longer in effect. I guess it was too good.

JE: Well, now, they do different things.

WE: We had a blind date and that's how we met. Not too long ago, I had cataract operations and they were done in Manhattan Eye and Ear Hospital. After one of the operations, my eyes were bound with gauze and, as the nurse was taking me, moving me on a gurney, Jacqueline mentioned that we were in a part of the hospital that she worked in when I first met her. So, Jacqueline told the nurse that we met on a blind date right in this particular spot in Manhattan Eye and Ear Hospital, and the nurse said, "Well, he's still blind." [laughter] …

SI: Do you have any other questions?

CE: No, I think that pretty much covers it.

WE: That's it?

JE: It's only been since ten o'clock this morning, right, these poor guys. [laughter]

SI: I really appreciate all the time you have given us, your hospitality and the wonderful lunch. It has really been a pleasure to meet both of you and to record your story.

WE: Okay, thank you.

SI: Thank you very much.

CE: I'll be back. [laughter]

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

Reviewed by Kristie Thomas 4/30/10

Reviewed by Jonathan Conlin 2/7/11
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 2/22/11
Reviewed by Walter E. Ershow 5/2/11