RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT J. FISCHER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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Kurt Piehler: This begins an interview with Mr. Robert J. Fischer on February 7, 1996, at Rutgers University, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Kurt Piehler and Maria Mazzone.

KP: I'd like to ask you questions about your parents and growing up on the Jersey Shore, because that must be a very distinct memory for you.

Robert Fischer: Yes.

KP: It sounds like your father had a job and was very dependent on the resort community because he was a waiter and a steward.

RF: Yes, he was a steward at the Hollywood Golf Club, which is [a] prestigious golf club in the shore area, and he had been a waiter there, and worked his way up to being a steward.

KP: He stayed there.

RF: He's been there ever since. He was retired from there.

KP: How did your father start there? What led him to chose the golf club?

RF: Well, he was a waiter, and a busboy, and a bellboy in the area, and he also worked in the Lawyers Club in New York before that, and then in World War I, he was a cook in the army.

KP: Then he came back?

RF: Yes.

KP: Did he ever talk about what it was like to be a cook in the Army, and World War I, in general?

RF: Yes, well, he was in South Carolina, Camp Jackson, South Carolina, in the artillery, and he was a cook in the officers' mess, and he talked about, well, how they got along with the officers, and so forth, and they had great meals there, better than the enlisted men, actually, and we have pictures of him at home. He was given a horse to ride, every once in awhile, for recreation, and so forth, and that's about it.

KP: He had some perks by serving the officers, I mean, riding the horse sounds like a very pleasant experience.

RF: Yes, and that's about it, because he wasn't in there too long.

KP: It also sounds like his work as a waiter in a private club was very similar to what he … ending up doing in the Army, in World War I.

RF: Yes, he was in the … food service business … and so when he went to the Hollywood Golf Club, he became a bartender, and from that he graduated to being a steward.

KP: Did he like working at the club?

RF: Oh, yes, very much so. Spent his whole life, it was his whole life, and he was there morning until night, not too much chance to be at home.

KP: Did your father have steady work in the Depression by working for the club?

RF: Yes, we were fortunate in that sense. He had a good job during the whole Depression.

KP: How did your parents meet? Do you know, is there any family lore?

RF: Well, they're originally from Newark. Down Neck area of Newark, (the Ironbound section of Newark), she lived in Irish Neck, he lived in German Neck, and, I guess, they met somehow, and they got along. In fact, he was working at the Shore at the time, and he used to drive his Model T up to Newark occasionally, and, I guess, they met, and they finally got married, and my mother always visited Asbury Park, she worked for the Celluloid in Newark, Down Neck, and she used to come to the Shore. We have pictures of her at the beach, in Asbury Park, Ocean Grove, and so when they finally got married, they went on a honeymoon to Ocean Grove. That was it. … I was born in Newark, on Chambers Street, Down neck, and we moved here. When I was about a few months old, we moved to Deal. The house was built for me, it was a bungalow-type house in Deal, and we lived there ever since.

KP: So, your parents, they owned their own home.

RF: Yes, he had that house built at the time, yes. That was in 1923.

KP: While you weren't wealthy or well-off, but it sounds like your parents were fairly comfortable through the ‘20s and ‘30s.

RF: Yes, we were.

KP: Your mother never went back to work after getting married?

RF: Oh, no, no. She remained a housewife. In fact, my grandmother lived with us too. She died in 1935.

KP: So, you have very distinct memories of your grandmother, too, then.

RF: Oh, yes. She was a widow, and my grandfather was a fire captain in the city of Newark, and he must have died when my mother was about, was very young, maybe two or three years old, so, they, I guess, she became a floor lady in the Celluloid.

KP: This is your grandmother?

RF: My grandmother, yes, and, well, that's about it.

KP: Your mother ended up working in the same plant?

RF: Yes, I believe, yes.

KP: Did your grandmother retire from the Celluloid plant when your mother married?

RF: I don't know. I don't know why she left there, or anything, maybe when I was born, they pulled out, went down to Deal, and she came along.

KP: Did your father speak German at all?

RF: No, not fluently, he, however, he did go to the German school in Newark, and he only went to about the fourth or fifth grade, something like that. In fact, he left school, because the instructor, the story is the instructor was pretty harsh and everything, so he left and he didn't go back.

KP: Your father was Lutheran and your mother was Catholic. It sounds like you ended up going to your mother's side, in terms of Catholicism.

RF: Oh, yes, we were raised as Catholics, and, of course, my father had to agree to that, on which he did.

KP: Your father didn't convert to Catholicism?

RF: No, he didn't. However, he supported the Catholic church.

KP: Being a German American, and Newark had a very large German American community, how did your father feel about the First World War, both of serving, and about Germany in general? Did he ever express any thoughts?

RF: No, none at all. My grandfather, of course, was German, and visited Germany a couple of times, before and after the war.

KP: It sounds like for your father, Germany was very distant.

RF: Yes.

KP: Did you ever take German in school?

RF: No, I took Spanish.

Maria Mazzone: What attracted you first to Rutgers?

RF: Well, my father insisted I go to college. I really didn't want to go at the time, but a friend of ours, in Deal, did go to college. Jim Wallace, "Buzzy" Wallace, he was the captain of the football team here, and all that, and so, through him, I attended a … prep school weekend, or something like that, at the Beta Theta Pi fraternity, he was a member of Beta Theta Pi, and so I was invited to go there, for the prep school weekend. As such, I was more interested in engineering or chemistry, something on that order, and so, of course, he suggested ceramics. So, when I went into the reception in the gym, they had the chemistry department set up, the engineering departments, ceramic department, and all the places for the people to go and be interviewed. So, geez, the engineering line was long, the chemistry line was long, the ceramics, there was three people there, so I went to the ceramic line, and …

KP: Have you ever thought about how your life might have been changed if the chemistry line had only three people?

RF: Yes, that's possible. So, however, I went to the ceramics department and they gave me a tour through there; showed me how a slip was cast, and so forth, and it was interesting, so I figured, why not?

KP: You weren't interested in college growing up, so you didn't have a notion that you would go to …

RF: No, of course, in high school, I took a college preparatory course, but I didn't take any college entrance examinations, which all the kids did who intended to go to college. I just refused to take mine, didn't bother.

KP: It sounds like your parents wanted you to go to college.

RF: Oh, my father did, he insisted.

KP: Really?

RF: Oh, yes. "What are you going to do," though?

KP: Why do you think your father was so insistent, at the time, did he ever tell you why he was so determined?

RF: "In order to get anywhere, you got to have that piece of paper," that's what he said.

KP: Oh, he used to say that.

RF: Right.

KP: Do you think that came from his working at the club?

RF: No, no, of course, there was affluent people there, (?), very wealthy people, but there was no influence there.

KP: He just saw that. How good was your education in elementary and high school, especially, when you think back about coming to Rutgers?

RF: Well, I thought it was very good at the time, because … I went to Asbury Park High School, which was more popular in the area than Long Branch High School, that's the choice we had, Long Branch or …

KP: You could choose between the two?

RF: Yes, and we liked, well, most of the kids liked Asbury Park High School better. However, as I looked back on it, Long Branch gave you a better education.

KP: What were the differences? You said, Asbury Park is more popular, why was it more popular, when Long Branch gave you the better education?

RF: I don't know. Well, we weren't interested in education, you go to high school, you go to high school, that's it, and, I guess, the football team beat them, and so forth. However, I learned my wife did go to Long Branch High School, and I later learned, see, the Long Branch High School, imported a lot of teachers from the New England area, Maine, New England area, which were strict, and they were very good instructors, especially their English department, and that's one of the reasons I say they were better. In fact, I see you have a list here, Larry Stamelman, he graduated with my wife, he became a judge, he's retired now.

KP: He went to Long Branch?

RF: He went to Long Branch.

KP: Did you play any sports when you were going to high school? Did you play on any teams?

RF: No, I think I went out for track, I made JV track, or something.

KP: You liked going to the football games and the other …

RF: I did the football games, basketball games, and so forth.

MM: Lots of school spirit. Talk a little bit more about your high school, like were you popular?

RF: No.

MM: Were you president of the class, or anything like that?

RF: No. I was president of the class at grammar school, and I was president of the Spanish club in high school, and I don't know, I wasn't very popular, so to speak. The group of kids we went with, we were on a technical course, so to speak, and let's see, I had the honor of being, I got a hundred in Spanish, on a Spanish examination, that made the papers, a hundred in algebra, that made the papers, but insignificant.

KP: So, you did well in school.

RF: Oh, yes. I was on high honor roll all through school.

KP: You really didn't have that drive to go to college, it was more your parents.

RF: No, I did my homework, and as I say, Asbury Park High School was a pretty easy high school, so that's why I had good marks.

KP: Roughly, how many people went to college from Asbury Park?

RF: Oh, quite a few, quite a few. We got a few doctors, in fact, we had a fiftieth reunion a few years ago, and a lot of the successful people.

MM: How did you meet your wife if you went to different high schools?

RF: Well, she lived in Deal, too, her father was a gardener, and lived on an estate, and we met going to the beach.

KP: So, how old were you when you both met?

RF: She was about fourteen.

KP: You've known your wife for a long, long time.

RF: Yes, yes. We didn't go together, but we knew one another, and all. In fact, we didn't go together, until I was in school, Rutgers.

KP: Growing up in Deal, which has a lot of affluent people, but then a lot of people like your wife's family and your family, what was it like to have these sort of two different communities, living in the same place?

RF: Well, no, a section of Deal, centered about the firehouse which is where I lived, is called "The Patch," and it consisted of bungalows, and so forth, where the people who worked for the more affluent people lived. Then on each estate, on the larger estates, there was these carriage houses, originally, and in these carriage houses was an apartment upstairs in which the gardeners, or people who worked on the estate were allowed to live, and that's where she lived, but there was no, in fact, you never knew the more wealthy people.

KP: So, you wouldn't bump into them at church, or you wouldn't bump into them …

RF: No, they were mostly Jewish … and we only had a Catholic Church in Deal.

KP: So there really was a lot of distance between …

RF: Yes, but don't forget, those people used to, had homes in New York, and they, just in the summertime, they lived in the Deal area.

KP: So, once the summer season had passed, it was really just the locals who stayed.

RF: Right, that's right, it was local, so, social life centered about the firehouse, where they had pot luck suppers, and things of that nature.

KP: Was your father a volunteer firemen?

RF: Yes, he was fire chief, and all that. My brother became, was a fireman, too, but I never did. Because I was away all the time, I never joined.

KP: Did you ever travel much before the war? Had you traveled much beyond the New York, Philadelphia area?

RF: No, no, when we were young, my father brought us to Washington, DC, and that's about it. We went to the World's Fair in New York, and that's about it.

KP: Were you ever a Boy Scout?

RF: Oh, yes.

KP: What rank did you get?

RF: I guess, First Class. In the Boy Scouts, we had a rifle club. The Scoutmaster was a policeman in the town, and we bought .22 rifles, and we used to go down into his cellar, where he had a rifle range set up, and so, we belonged to the NRA, National Rifle Association.

KP: In the 1930s?

RF: Yes, yes.

KP: Are you still an NRA member?

RF: No, no. It doesn't bother me either, the NRA.

KP: So, you went to the Army knowing how to shoot a rifle.

RF: Oh, yes.

KP: You entered Rutgers in the Fall of '41. We were not quite in the war although we would soon be.

RF: Yes, well, of course, war had broke out in …

KP: Yes, as you were finishing your first semester.

RF: Yes.

KP: What were your first impressions of Rutgers? Your first semester would be sort of a pre-World War II Rutgers.

RF: I don't know, it was nice, it was homey, although I didn't stay on the weekends. I went home, usually, on the weekends.

KP: You continued a great Rutgers tradition.

RF: Yes, we lived in a house on Hamilton Street. In fact, a schoolmate of mine from Asbury Park shared a room with me, and, well, it was all right … I remember this campus here, with snow on the ground and all, it was nice in the evening.

KP: It is still nice.

RF: And that's the impressions I had.

KP: How were you able to swing tuition, did you have any help from Rutgers?

RF: No, my father was affluent enough.

KP: So, he could afford to send you to Rutgers.

RF: He sent me to Rutgers, right. See, whereas my roommate, he came in on scholarship, a state scholarship, but I didn't apply, or anything.

KP: So, your father really had plans for you to go to college for a long time.

RF: He didn't plan on it, really.

KP: He had the money to do it.

RF: He had the money to do it. That was what, the tuition was what? Three hundred, or two dollars a year, or something like that.

MM: You were here when Pearl Harbor was bombed, December 7, 1941. How did you feel?

RF: I don't remember any special feeling, or anything, no anger or anything like that. Just awe, that's all. In fact, I was home at the time, it was a Sunday.

KP: Were you listening to the Giants game?

RF: Oh, no, no, no, I was, I don't know what I was doing.

KP: At the time, when you came to Rutgers, did you have any sense that America would go to war, say, in September, October '41? Did you have any sense that your college days might be numbered?

RF: No, no, I didn't think of that at all.

KP: In some ways, it sounds like Pearl Harbor came, I wouldn't say out of the blue, but you really weren't expecting to go to have to fight in a war.

RF: No, no, no, I guess, it was the following year where they had physical training, and so forth, you know, it was mandatory, and they had an obstacle course set up here. That was the following year, though, at Rutgers.

KP: That's when you had the sense that they were getting you ready for war?

RF: Yes, yes, yes, well, of course, the war was going on and all. That's when the *Normandie* burned in New York City, and fellows went to New York to see it. I didn't go with them.

KP: To see the ship burning off the coast? (It burned while docked.) How did the war, well, let me back up and just ask a few more questions about Rutgers before the war. One of my standard questions is to ask about Dean Metzger. He seems to have enlisted a number of comments, everyone seems to have a very distinct memory of him. What do you remember with Dean Metzger?

RF: Yes, I, see, the weekends I did stay here, for the weekend, you had to go to chapel. It was mandatory to attend chapel, and I was Catholic, I had to go to church also, and one of the fellows living with us in the rooming house, he was Catholic, too, and he didn't go to chapel.

KP: He went to Mass.

RF: Yes, he went to Mass. So, I said, "How did you get out?" You had to sign in or something, at the chapel. He says, "You go, and you see Dean Metzger, and tell him you have scruples." So, I did, and I told him I wasn't coming to chapel anymore, to sign in. I didn't, nothing happened.

KP: That was fine?

RF: Yes, he wasn't pleased with that. I had an appointment with him, but …

KP: You can tell that he wasn't …

RF: Yes, oh, yes.

KP: Well, I've been told by people he was a very stern character.

RF: Oh, yes, yes.

KP: Yeah, that really he could be …

RF: See, at the time I wasn't interested in attending the chapel, at all, or even the convocations they used to have, but, now, I wish I had.

KP: Really, looking back on it?

RF: Yes, this is something I missed, but at the time, in the hustle bustle of doing things.

KP: It was just one more requirement?

RF: Yes.

KP: Had you thought of living in a dormitory? Why did you pick off campus housing?

RF: Well, there was no dormitory available. See, I entered late, I applied late, and there was no plans in coming here. In fact, it happened since August, when I decided to go, I was going.

KP: Since you applied so late, if you hadn't gone to college, what were you thinking of doing?

RF: I don't know. Probably work for the telephone company, or something like that, apply for a job there.

KP: It sounds like you were enjoying your summer a great deal, after graduation from high school.

RF: Oh, no. I was working, I worked every summer.

KP: Where did you work?

RF: I worked at the golf club, and at that time, I was working in the office, assistant to the bookkeeper, but I had no plans of staying there, only as a summer job.

KP: You started in ceramics, how did you find the academic work, was it a challenge?

RF: Oh, it was very difficult. I did very poorly. This is why I keep blaming the high school, because I was a whiz in math in high school, and then when I come here, they hit you over the head. I had a pretty good math instructor. I mean, very good, he was a very good man, and I had no maturity in math at all, so, they hit you over the head and, you know.

KP: So, this is when you learned you would have been better at Long Branch.

RF: Well, no, I didn't think about that then, I didn't think about that until after I got out of school …

KP: You had it tough when you were here first?

RF: I found it very tough, and English, too. As, you can tell by the way I speak, I don't speak very well, or write very well, and that's the biggest deficit I have, in my whole life, is being able to express myself and to write. If I did that, I'd be on top of the world, but, so those are the things that I had the most trouble with, and the schedule was, with the ceramic curriculum at that time, it was the most trying.

KP: Well, I've been told that you almost had no electives, everything was pre-set.

RF: No electives, and you had Saturday classes, I mean, you had a lot of labs, and this is the freshman year. So, it was a grueling pace. Like, when we left for the weekend, we couldn't leave until Saturday afternoon, because I had a mechanical drawing class all morning, and that was twice a week.

KP: So, college was, for you, a six day a week affair.

RF: Oh, yes, definitely, yes, yes, definitely. Don't forget, we had to get a hundred and forty-eight credits at the time, as opposed to one hundred and twenty that most of the students had. So, and that schedule, and all, I wasn't doing very well. I wasn't doing well in math, I failed English, probably, and mechanical drawing, I wasn't too good at.

KP: Did you work at all when you were going to Rutgers?

RF: Not on campus.

KP: Did you work off campus?

RF: … Only in the summertime.

KP: Only in the summers.

RF: Right.

MM: What is your overall fondest memory of Rutgers? Where did you like to hangout, did you do anything social?

RF: No, not really. No, no, not at all.

MM: All books, all work and no play, huh?

RF: Yes, more or less, because I really didn't have any, of course, we went to the movies, that's about it, you know, you take a break, and forget everything, and go to the movies.

KP: They were downtown at the …

RF: Yes.

KP: You would come back for the fall semester of 1942?

RF: Right.

KP: When did you know that would be your last semester, because you would enlist in December of '42. When did you have a sense that you wouldn't be able to finish out college?

RF: Only when this ERC program came along, and they says, "You better sign up now, or else you're going to be drafted soon." In fact, it was the same time I signed up, is when I would have been drafted, really. So, I signed up, and we hung out to what? March, something like that.

KP: So, you came back for the spring semester of '43.

RF: Yes, because we were already enlisted, and …

KP: Then the Army had other plans.

RF: Yes. In fact, as I told the girls, I brought the roster, the orders of all these guys here. She said you would be very much interested in seeing that.

KP: These were you orders reporting to Fort Dix?

RF: Yes, and those are the fellows from Rutgers right there.

KP: How interesting, yes. I recognize some of these, because Nathan Shoehalter, I interviewed and, oh, very interesting. When you enlisted in ERC, had you hoped initially, to finish your degree before going off to war?

RF: Not degree, finish the year, that was

KP: That was your goal.

RF: To stay in … college as long as you can.

KP: When did it seem that wasn't going to be the case? It sounds like when you enlisted in ERC, you were getting the hint that it wasn't …

RF: Right. See because my roommate, whom we went to high school with, and all, he about the same time, he enlisted in the Air Force. He's not in there, he went to Penn State afterwards. Yes, so he enlisted at the time, and the other fellows, see, there were about six guys living in the house on Hamilton Street where we lived.

KP: What happened to everyone? They were all going to Rutgers. Where were they from, and where did they go during the war.

RF: Well, I lost track of all of them.

KP: All of them?

RF: Right, I know what happened to some of them. I mean, there was John Eckel, I don't know what happened to him afterwards, but I left, he was still there when I left. There was another fellow, he was in the Marines, he became a Marine there, in the Marine Air Force, and the other fellows, I don't know what happened to.

MM: How did your parents feel about you and your brother joining the military? Were they for it, or, well, your father had served?

RF: Of course, they were for it, because I would stay in school longer, you know, through the ERC, and so, he was pleased about that. I would stay out as long as I can, but, like I said, they came and picked me up when the orders came to home, they came here, and picked me up, and said, "Let's go home." I had about a week home, before

KP: So, they really didn't want to see you go.

RF: Oh, of course, nobody would, no.

KP: Had you thought of trying to go join another service, such as the Navy, or, had you wanted to join the Army Air Force?

RF: No, no, I went into the Army. I thought I'd be in the infantry, because we had the infantry ROTC here, but that doesn't mean anything.

KP: So, you didn't want to try to get into the other branches?

RF: I went into the Army, I didn't even know where I was going, and we went to Fort Dix, and it so happened, I believe, that probably all the Rutgers people here, we who went into the Air Force, half of them went down to Miami, and the other half went to Atlantic City.

KP: When you were going to Fort Dix you just assumed they would assign you to the infantry?

RF: Yes, we didn't know, I had no idea.

KP: In reporting to Fort Dix, what were your initial impressions?

RF: I don't know. It was interesting. Did you ever hear the story of Sergeant Lydick?

KP: No.

RF: The toughest sergeant in the Army. Well, he was I guess, Polish decent, Lydick, and he was an older man. I guess, he was in his forties or something like that, and he had a megaphone, and he used to stand up on the barrack's fire escape, and call all the men together in the recruitment center there, the whole company, and he'd bang on the railing. He'd call you out, and you would fall out in the street. He'd be sitting up there with the megaphone, he says, "You think you're soldiers, you're shit," and he'd get, we were all recruits, you know, half of us were in civilian clothes, and the other half wasn't and some of the fellows, who were given an arm band, they were the leaders and kept after you, and he'd call the men out in the street, and he'd either push them into the kitchen to work as KP, all the time, and then he had the famous thing he'd say, "Police the area." He says, "You men who don't go to school, you stand over here, you men you go to high school, you stand over here, and you men, you go to college, and you stand over here," and he separated everyone, and then he taught you how to make a skirmish line, walk, spread out. He says, "All right, you men, you go to college, you pick up all the cigarette butts," he says, "You men, you go to high school, you pick up all the match sticks," he says, "You men who don't go to school, you watch them, you learn something," and he is quite a character. As a matter-of-fact, he was written up in *Life* or *Look* Magazine.

KP: No, I've never heard of him, and so this was your introduction to the Army?

RF: Yes, and, so we stayed there a few days, you know, taking tests, and whatnot, and medical inspection.

KP: How long were you at Dix?

RF: About a week or two weeks. I guess, March, yes, I guess, a week or two. Yes, I left, we went there on March 23rd, and we left about April 8th.

KP: You wouldn't get infantry in fact, you got …

RF: No, we were just assigned to the Air Force in Atlantic City for basic training.

KP: None of this was your own doing, or preference.

RF: Oh, no, no, no.

KP: Did anyone from Rutgers in this initial group join you? How many went to the Air Force roughly? Did you recognize lots of them?

RF: As I said, about half of them went to Atlantic City, and half went to Miami, or someplace like that, that's all.

KP: How long did you train in Atlantic City?

RF: Until June. We were there from April until June.

KP: In which hotel did they station you?

RF: Dennis, Hotel Dennis, which is Bally Park Place now.

KP: It must've seemed that you hadn't gotten very far, Atlantic City is not far from home.

RF: It might as well have been a million miles away. It was rough duty in the hotel as opposed to the camp.

KP: What was harder about it? What did they have you do, in terms of your training?

RF: Well, the training was the same, they march on the boardwalk down to a field, and they march you back and forth, and you march to the firing range, and you march to the convention hall, and you saw training films, and so forth, typical basic training at the time.

KP: How long were your days and how much did they put in a given day? What was the typical day like?

RF: I don't know. You got up at around six, I guess, and you did whatever training you had to do, and we ended up around five or six at night, I don't remember the time frame.

KP: How often did you get stuck with KP?

RF: Atlantic City, once. Don't forget you had a big KP there, you know, the big kitchens, and, well, you know, you get to, peeling potatoes, or pots and pans. Pots and pans was the worst, no matter where you went.

KP: Yes, peeling potatoes does not sound as bad.

RF: I remember, I peeled potatoes with a guy, it wasn't too bad, all we had to do was peel potatoes, you know, because it was quite a bit of them, two guys doing it, you know, all day, all morning. But it was rough, you're confined to a hotel, you didn't get out, couldn't get out at night, walk the boardwalk or something, that's what you did at night if you could, go out and walk the boardwalk, go to a movie or something. But in order to get out of the hotel, you had to go before a corporal, who was acting commander of the floor, and you had to repeat your general orders and memorize

things, in order to get out, and obtain a pass to get out. … You had to wait in line in order to do that, each fellow had to do that, in order to get out of the hotel. … Of course, you had the Steel Pier there, and a few other places of entertainment, and you did get out on a Sunday.

KP: Otherwise you were kept very close there, even though you were in a resort.

RF: Yes, it was very busy really, you know, we had to clean up in the hotels, scrub the floors and whatnot.

KP: How many people did you share a room with?

RF: Four.

KP: Where were you sent after Atlantic City?

RF: Camp Crowder, Missouri. Not to Fort Monmouth, to Camp Crowder I went.

KP: That was distance, and what specialty did they put you in?

RF: Radio. Radio repair. I guess, the test I took at Atlantic City, they asked me if I wanted to fly, and I said, "No."

KP: So, you had a preference, and you wanted out of flying.

RF: Yes, I didn't want to fly. I still don't fly.

KP: Really? Why didn't you want to fly?

RF: I don't know, I figured, what the hell, I'm on the ground, I can take care of myself on the ground. I don't have any control about flying.

KP: One of the things I'm struck by, with interviewing pilots, and people who were in the air, was how dangerous flying was.

RF: Yes, not only do, you get a chance of being shot down, I mean, you could have an accident.

KP: Yes, people have said, especially in training, planes were crashing.

RF: In fact, one of our, I don't think he went in ERC with us, a guy by the name of Ed Stahl, he was in the ceramics, and he crashed. He was killed.

KP: It sounds like you were very happy with radio repair.

RF: Well, I don't know, … I felt I was more technically inclined, and the test that they gave you, to find out what you were suited for, you know, they'd ask you a question, "Would you rather change

a flat tire or type a letter?" You know? So, I know what answer to write, "I'd change a tire," and they give you a mechanical test, you know, they gave you wrenches and you'd see if you'd be a, I guess, a mechanic or something like that, and, I guess, I did well in those, and so they sent me to Camp Crowder, and then at Camp Crowder, they interview you, what you want to do, whether you want to be a code operator or, but, of course, you had tests, whether you could be a code operator or not. Which a lot of people don't have, and other people comes naturally. If you're musically inclined, usually you can take code pretty good.

KP: Hold that thought.

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

RF: In Atlantic City, he lived in Brigantine, his father was a doctor, a medical doctor in Brigantine. In fact, he was in the room with me in Atlantic City, and I think he came, Byron Davis, [from Rutgers]. Is his name on that list? [Mr. Fischer is referring to his enlistment orders.]

KP: Yes, he is, Byron Davis, 202 19th Street, Brigantine New Jersey. Did you ever go to his house?

RF: Yes, he invited me Easter time or something.

KP: Did your parents ever come to visit you while you were in Atlantic City?

RF: My mother came on my birthday, a neighbor drove her down. We went to the Steel Pier, that was May 4th, or around that time.

KP: May 4, 1943.

RF: Yes.

KP: You had been to Washington, DC, as your big trip growing up, and you were sent to Missouri. How did you get out there, and what was that experience like? What were your impressions?

RF: That was an experience. We went in a local rail car, there were no sleeping cars or anything. It was a long trip, it took a couple of days, and what impressed me about going across the country was to see the "mail pouch" signs on the red barns of the farms.

KP: You'd see the actual mail pouches hanging?

RF: No, no, mail pouch, tobacco.

KP: Oh, okay.

RF: Chewing tobacco, it was an advertisement on the red barns, and so forth. You could see that throughout the area, I guess, and it was warm. It was June, you know, and it was hot and it was

grimy on the train, and when we reached St. Louis, we got off and went to the USO. They had a huge USO in St. Louis. So, they took us off the train, and they allowed us to go into a big washroom, a big shower room, and we went in groups, that was the first shower or bath we had in a couple of days, and we were up to our knees in water and the water was black from the soot from the train.

KP: So, you didn't have a diesel train.

RF: I don't know what it was.

KP: But if you had all the soot you had a steam train.

RF: There was a lot of soot because the windows weren't closed tight, and we were sleeping on barracks bags, and rested our feet across the seats. After St. Louis we went down to Camp Crowder, and it was hot. It was about 107 when we got off the train that day, and then we went to regular camp, and it was a lot better then the hotels, really.

KP: Really?

RF: I liked it a lot better.

KP: Why? Because I would think …

RF: The living conditions. I don't know the barracks was nice, there was a bed, and you were in a company then, so you were with your company of about two hundred men, and you had a day room, and could walk to the PX facility, and, when you were off duty, you could walk anywhere you want in the camp.

KP: So, it sounds like you felt almost as if you were in a prison cell in Atlantic City.

RF: More or less, yes, I did.

KP: You could really walk around in the camp?

RF: Right, yes.

KP: What were your days like at camp when you were training? How often would you be in class and what other things were expected of you?

RF: It was all day in class. As I said before, you know, when you went to the Signal Corps school, they determined what you wanted to do, whether you wanted to be a code operator, or radio and repair, or teletype, teletype repair, and, fortunately, my interviewer was a … Rutgers man. He was an officer, and he says, "What do you want to do?" So, I said, "I'll try radio repair," and so, I went into radio repair.

KP: What class was he, did you know him from Rutgers at all?

RF: No, he was an upper classmen, maybe he had graduated. He knew "Buggy" Walace from Deal, and Rutgers.

KP: Did you know his name?

RF: No, no, I forget, no.

KP: He was a Rutgers man and he noticed you from your file?

RF: Yes, oh, yes.

KP: You're the second person with a similar sort of placement story.

RF: Oh, yes?

KP: Of someone who had a Rutgers person give them a good assignment.

RF: Yes. So, then we … . I was a member of the 804 STR, signal training regiment, and radio repair school. The first week they taught you how to use tools, things like that. Of course, you had to pass, it was like a trade school, I guess, so, you learn how to use a saw, and then you take a test, that proved you used a saw, and make a Western Union splice on wire, and things like that, and you finish that, and then we went into radio school. I … knew nothing about radio or anything, and they teach you the concept of radio, the transmitter and the receiver, and so forth, and then they show you all components, capacitors, resistors, and so forth. They identify them for you and you take a test, you got to be able to identify those, and then you get into, they teach you radio circuitry, and they teach you what an oscillator is, intermediate frequency amplifiers, and detectors, and so forth, the theory of radio receiver, and you take a test on each one of those, and then you get into transmitters, and so forth, and then into whole radio sets, the combination of transmitter and receiver, and how they're put on a truck, and what they do, and so forth, and the "walkie talkie," and then we were one of the first classes in FM radio training, and then FM came out, and we learned how to repair FM radios, the theory behind that, and that was it.

KP: It sounds like you liked the training a lot and did fairly well.

RF: Oh, I guess. I didn't, you know, I didn't get graded or anything.

KP: It sounds like people did drop out.

RF: You don't drop out.

KP: Well, you'd get reassigned. Was everyone able to keep up as well as you did?

RF: Oh, yes, the whole outfit, you went right through the whole thing. When you get sets to repair, maybe it'd take you a couple of days longer than another person, or something, and then you graduate to where you bug the sets, you know. You take a resistor out, or make an opening in a set, and then you give it to the student, and the student is supposed to go through the technique of tracing and find out where the thing is in, write it down, and then you pass, and then you go on to the next set. So, I more or less enjoyed it, but it was hot at the time, in Missouri.

KP: How often did you get off base?

RF: Well, you get off every weekend, probably, if you didn't have KP. … Went to Neosho, Missouri, and that was the first town outside the camp, and then from Neosho, you could get a bus to go to Joplin, or we always went to lesser towns, because all those towns there were just khakis walking all around, all you could see is soldiers. It was loaded. … I went to a town called Carthage, Missouri, which looked just like an old western town, there was a stable at the end, where you could rent a horse and go riding, out in the fields, and then we went to Galena, Missouri, another, I'm going to guess, a mining town, there was nothing there, at all, and we went to a town called Aurora, Missouri. We were going to Springfield on the bus, the big town, but on the way, we went to this little town and there were no soldiers in the town at all, we couldn't see any khaki, so, a couple of us said, "We're getting off the bus here." So, we got off the bus and we went to Aurora, Missouri, and we walked down the street, and they had a little USO, and they pulled us in. Pulled us off the street, and gave us, shoved a doughnut at us, coffee …

KP: Was that because they saw so few soldiers?

RF: There was very few soldiers in that particular town. … They told us there was a dance up the hill at the armory at night, and we had to go to it, and we went there, and there was only about five or six of us, and about twenty girls. It was heaven, and, boy, and when we went home that night, got out, the guys all swore, "Don't tell anybody about this one." But, finally, a few weekends passed, and the soldiers gradually kept coming in.

KP: It sounds like you really enjoyed these little weekend excursions to these different towns.

RF: Well, what are you going to do?

KP: So, when you went to a town, you would basically walk around, and go to a bar, or go to a movie?

RF: Well, a lot of people went to a bar, I didn't drink, I wasn't interested in drinking. Back then if you didn't drink beer, or anything, so, you just might mainly go to a movie, go to a diner, get something to eat, or a good restaurant, and that's about it.

KP: Having grown up on the Jersey shore, what were your impressions of Missouri? I mean, one of them was that you still have frontier towns, practically, were there any other impressions?

RF: No, nothing really. Except the only impression I had is you have these isolated towns, and you have a square in the middle, with a town hall in the middle of a square. The streets went around it, and, at home, it was just a continuous megalopolis as we have, you know, continuous cities, one right after the other, along the Shore.

KP: It struck you, that in Missouri, they were really separate towns.

RF: Yes, yes.

MM: What was your first Christmas like in the military?

RF: Where was my first Christmas? Oh, that was in Drew Field, in Florida, after I got out of Camp Crowder, we were shipped to Drew Field, in Tampa, Florida. I wasn't in any outfit or anything, just independent. … It was warm there. We had a good Christmas dinner, rather than a company mess there, they had regimental mess, which is a big mess hall, and they had a big turkey dinner for us, and all, and we got off that afternoon, and we went into Tampa, Florida. That's the first I got off, went off that post. … Maybe three or four of us, and we just walked around, that's all.

KP: You were also seeing a different part of the country; Florida was a very different place from Missouri, and from New Jersey. What did you think of Florida at the time, what were your impressions?

RF: No, the only impressions was when it, it was cold in the evening, we were there in December, I guess, and it was very cold in the evening. We lived in a small shack, about the size of a tent, and we had these round sheet metal stoves, coal-fired, or wood-fired, and it was cold in the evening there, but then at noon, it was warm, you'd take your shirt off, and that was just a holding area, I guess …

KP: So, you didn't spend a lot of time in Florida.

RF: Oh, no, no, not as much time. We were there, well, until about December, January, about a month, not a long time, and then I got a furlough, my first furlough. I went home, because I was going overseas.

KP: When did you know you were going overseas?

RF: Then. From Drew Field detachments were shipping out to go overseas, and I was given a leave, a delay en route, I had to report to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri.

KP: From Florida? Even though you had just been to Missouri?

RF: Yes, for overseas basic training, and I was given a delay en route.

KP: So, you could shoot up to New Jersey?

RF: … I could shoot up to New Jersey and be home for a week, or two, and then, I had to go to … St. Louis.

KP: How were your train trips then?

RF: … Coming home, I was on a commercial train, you know, the regular Florida train. I got a seat, got on at Orlando, and came home, and then I had to get my own ticket, from New York to St. Louis, and fortunately, we knew somebody who knew somebody, who worked in the railroad office, … was able to get me a seat on a train to St. Louis, and as it was, I arrived about twelve hours late. The train was supposed to be on time, but it was late.

KP: Did you get into any trouble because it was late?

RF: Well, they tried to give me a, after I was in there a couple of weeks, in Jefferson barracks, they call me in, realizing that I was late.

KP: They didn't realize it at first.

RF: So, they just had to talk to me and, you know, ask me why. They overlooked it, I guess. I think, they gave me one day work detail, or something like that.

KP: How long did you train again in Missouri? How long were you there for basic overseas training?

RF: About a month, let's see, February until March, but about a month, maybe a month and a half, or something like that.

KP: In 1944.

RF: '44, yes, yes. That was supposed to be rigorous basic, and it was, it was pretty good, because it was winter-time. They had you doing calisthenics a lot. There was colds going around, and when you went to the theater, that was your main thing at night, it was to go to the theater, see a movie, and you had a seat in every other row, every other seat, because you would transmit any germs, or something like that.

KP: That was the base theater?

RF: Yes, one of the base theaters.

KP: They had you sort of spread out, so you wouldn't …

RF: Yes.

KP: Wouldn’t spread …

RF: Germs, yeah, I guess. You know, colds going around, and it wasn't, pretty rough, I mean, KP was rough there, too. I mean, they get you up, two o'clock in the morning.

KP: How many times did you have to get up at two in the morning for KP? Was it often?

RF: Well, in Camp Crowder, too, well, I don't know, in Jefferson Barracks, it was only once or twice. I got KP all the time, you know. It used to be, when you were a corporal, corporals didn't pull KP, only the privates, and so forth. When I became corporal, then it was funny, sergeants didn't pull KP, you know, the corporals did, so.

KP: When did you become a corporal?

RF: When you finished radio school.

KP: So, you were a corporal by the time you came back to Missouri?

RF: Yes, I was a corporal then.

KP: So, it was sort of a surprise to you that now …

RF: You know, I'm telling you, well, so that was the story of my whole army life; I was always one rank behind.

KP: When you were going through basic overseas training, did you know where you would be going?

RF: No, no. I had no idea. Don't forget, I wasn't assigned.

KP: Yes, so you didn't know you would be going to CBI yet?

RF: No. … I didn't even know that until we got there. So, let's see, in Missouri, Jefferson barracks we, it was pretty tough, because they were strict for discipline. The barracks had to be cleaned, you couldn't go to town at all unless the barracks were, there were three barracks in the company, and only the honor barracks went to town, the others had to stay on post.

KP: Even if all of them were in top shape, there was only one honors barrack?

RF: Inspections, I mean, we cleaned out the whole barracks. We used to scrub the floor with (okite?) to bleach it white, and guys would go around making sure everybody's equipment was in order, in line, and so forth, and their locker box, and all our clothes were hung properly, and, finally, we did get the honor barracks and were allowed to go into St. Louis.

KP: So, you would have sort of the white glove treatment.

RF: Yes, yes, but, I mean, that's only once in several weekends, you know.

KP: That you got into town?

RF: Yes.

KP: So, it sounds like you were very glad to get out of Jefferson Barracks.

RF: Yes, well, you didn't know where you were going, what was going to happen. You knew you were going overseas, you were going to ship out. You didn't know where you were going to ship out. You were in the middle of the country, you didn't know whether you were going east or you're going west.

KP: Did you have any preferences at the time?

RF: No, I never thought of that. Didn't care about anything, really. This is what happened. I thought I would go to Europe, probably.

KP: You had no strong preference?

RF: No, no. So, then from there, we went to Fort Patrick Henry, in Norfolk.

KP: You probably thought going to Fort Patrick Henry that you were going to Europe?

RF: Oh, yes, and so we were there about a week, or so, still unassigned, you know. Then we got on the boat, and went. It was about a year after I came in the Army, it was March 24th, or something like that, and that was the day we got on the boat, got on a liberty boat, *George W. McCrary*. … One hold was designated for living quarters, and it had the bunks, on the periphery of the hold, a hatch, you know, and I was on the lower bunk. … You know, five high bunks, and just crammed around there. In the center, it was a recreation area, where they had tables where we ate.

KP: So, you literally lived in that hold.

RF: Oh, you lived in the hold, yes.

KP: You didn't have the luxury of getting up and going to mess, you ate right there?

RF: Yes, you had to go and get your food in the kitchen, and then you came back and you sat at the tables and ate. You only ate two meals a day on an American boat, and there was no, I mean, there was saltwater showers there, of course, nothing lathered up in saltwater. We could go on deck. I used to always go on the bow of the boat, hang on there, and watch it go up and down.

KP: Liberty ships were very small.

RF: It was a smaller boat.

KP: Yes. They're small. What route did you take, did you go through the Panama Canal?

RF: Oh, no, no, no, we went across the Atlantic to Gibraltar.

KP: So, you really thought you were going to Europe?

RF: Yes, we went through that, and then we went to … Oran, North Africa, that's where we got off. Then we stayed in Oran, North Africa, for a week or two, and then they boarded us on a British boat called the *Highland Princess*, which was a fast freight passenger boat. That was good, because where we were, there were cooling coils, where they carried meat, I guess, we were in that hold, and between the meat hooks, we strung a hammock, that's where we slept, and this cooling coil, it kept it cool in the boat, … you know, it was comfortable. So, we used to keep our canteen of water. We had cold water. Now on the English boat, they gave you three meals a day, however, we were a group of twelve guys, in this hold, and they gave you an oval pot, with an oval cover, and that's what you got your mess in, and they had a big, huge coffee pot. So, one fellow was assigned to carry those, to pick up the food, which was mutton, that was in the pot, and they gave you a loaf, … small loaves of bread, and those pots got, everything was put into them, and they were greasy, and there was no way to wash them off with saltwater, and the coffee pot got greasy. We used our mess kits to eat from. We ate in the hold, too. So, that was a miserable experience, because from there, Oran, we went into, while we were in that boat, we went across to Naples. We figured we were going to Italy. Well, when we got into Naples harbor, they had a big submarine barrier net, which they let us go, opened up for us to go through, and we're in Naples harbor, out in the harbor, and the pilot says, "Princess, I have no," that was the name of the boat, it was *Highland Princess.* He says, "Princess, I have no orders for you," and so we stayed there overnight, and the next thing we knew, we were coming out, and we went into Sicily. I don't know what port it was, I forget what the port was, and we stayed there about four days in some port in Sicily, and the Sicilians were coming out in row boats with oranges, and guys were trading packs of cigarettes for oranges and whatnot, but, and then, all of the sudden, we pulled out of there.

KP: The guys coming out, were they civilians or military people?

RF: Civilians, Sicilians, yes, and, you know, the boat, we were escorted by two corvettes, our boat, and we carried a big balloon, it looked like a blimp, in case a strafing plane came down. They carried those, and so, from there, then we went through the Suez Canal, and another little story there, too. Because, since our mess gear was so greasy and grimy, oh, we had British aboard the boat as well as Americans, and, of course, the British were in charge of the boat. But, however, our American officers, we griped to them, and so they agreed when we got in the Suez Canal they'd put a load of sand on board the boat. We cleaned the mess gear with sand, we cleaned the grease off of that, and then we could dip it in the boiling saltwater. So, they were cleaned. So, we were satisfied with that.

KP: Did anyone get sick from all this grease?

RF: No, I don't think so.

KP: It was still pretty disgusting.

RF: Yes, it was.

KP: In all the places that you docked at, did you ever get off?

RF: Oh, no. No, you're on the boat.

KP: Even when you spent two weeks in Oran, you stayed on the boat?

RF: Oh, no, no. Oran we were ashore.

KP: What do you think of Oran?

RF: Oh, you didn't see much of it. I mean, I did go in, we did go into town one day, and that's where you drank. There were bombings there, and all the glassware was broken, so you drank out of a Pet Milk can, that's where you drank your soda from, or beer, or whatever.

KP: Because all the glass had been shattered?

RF: Yes, and another thing, you're introduced to the toilets in the Arabs, it's just a hole in the floor, with two footprints. … That impressed us most, I guess.

KP: There was no indoor plumbing?

RF: Well, that was indoor plumbing, but it was just a hole. I mean, it was a marble latrine, so to speak, but it was just a hole in the floor with two footprints, where you stood, and that's about it. … There was something about the ten dollar bill, the gold star on it and, occupation money, our occupation money, that's the only one you could use, you shouldn't use.

KP: You couldn't use real money?

RF: Yes, and that's all. They said they were very strict because, I guess, Patton was through there, and he made you salute all officers, and that stuff, and then that's the first time you run into these native kids, these shoeshine kids. They hang on your leg, and they, "Shoeshine, Joe?" you know, and they hang right on your leg and you walk along, you've got to kick them off, or else they ask you if you want to go with their sister, or something like that. That's where you first encounter that, and so from there on, we then, we got on the boat.

KP: Then you docked at all these places, but never getting off?

RF: Yes, and so then, you know, going through the Suez Canal, in case you get into a wide area, where you want to pull over to the side, they had Egyptians, I guess, with a row boat on deck, and they pull the hawser over to the side, and your ship goes to the side, and the other boat comes through. Whoever has preference. Well, these guys, they had a flat, on the bottom of their boat,

they had all these souvenirs. When you're on the ocean for a month or so, you're hungry to buy things, you know, and where they had these Moroccan leather wallets, Moroccan leather cigarette holders, and all these things 'made in Morocco' with the sign on it, and everybody is eager to buy them. You know, a dollar for this, dollar for that, a pack of cigarettes for this, or a pack of cigarettes for that.

KP: Did you smoke at the time?

RF: Oh, yes.

KP: You smoked before serving?

RF: Oh, yes. When you come to Rutgers, you first start, you break out the Sensation cigarettes, which is a ten cent pack of cigarettes at that time. You got away from home, and you smoked.

KP: So, you went to the Suez Canal, which sounds very exotic, but also you've been on this boat a long time. Where did you go?

RF: Then we went to Bombay.

KP: Did you dock anywhere else along the way?

RF: Oh, yes, we stopped in Aden, yeah, and that's where I think they fueled, there at the Port of Aden.

KP: Well, once again you stayed on the ship?

RF: Oh, yes. We were on the boat, yes. I circumnavigated the globe, but on the boat. Yes, we went to, right to Bombay, and then from Bombay, we went to a holding area, outside of Bombay. It was a British camp, originally. I don't know how many others there were, maybe a few, couple hundred.

KP: You were on a British boat, most of the people on the boat were British Army, or British Navy, what did you think of the British Army and Navy? You observed the food, how it differed, the mutton, any other observations?

RF: Well, a lot of them, you know, they had been sunk before, you know, the crewmen. You talked to them, and in and out of the cabins, they had baffolds, to keep the light out, and the English say going through there, "Hot tea, hot tea." You know, they'd be saying that as you go through the bays, in order to go back and forth so you don't bump into one another. No, the people were all right. Their humor was very dry, and the officer in charge of the boat, he, they had boxing contests, and anybody who wants to box, you could have boxed.

KP: Did any Americans box?

RF: I think they did, yes. They give them a candy bar if you won, or something like that. … They were more free, though. They'd let you sleep out on deck if you wanted. You could sleep out on the deck, and in the morning they cleaned off the deck with a fire hose, and if you were still sleeping they'd wash you out. I was fortunate enough, we were in the cool compartment, we didn't have to go out on deck, but other guys did.

KP: So, in many ways, you found the British ship pretty comfortable?

RF: Yes, and you got three meals a day, too. … It was a larger boat, too.

KP: Did you gamble at all?

RF: Oh, everybody gambled on the boat. I didn't. I've got stories of a friend of mine, we got together in Missouri, in Jefferson Barracks, and he was from New York, from the garment district, and he couldn't do anything. He didn't know how to lace his, you know, you had to have your leggings laced up properly, and all, when you fell out there, or else you'd get demerits, and all that business. He couldn't lace them up correctly, and you had to fall out and you had to be in there at a certain time. His name was Cohen, and mine was Fischer, so we were next to one another. I guess, we slept next to one another, and I remember falling out, he didn't know how to put his pack on. He didn't know how to lace his leggings, and I used to help him lace his leggings, and all this. So, we became good friends, and going over on the boat, on the Liberty boat, they had all kinds of games, you know, dollar game, five cent game, this is poker, and penny game. He used to be in that quite a bit, and he used to give me [a] ten dollar bill, he says, "Fischer, no matter what happens, don't give it to me." You know, and he'd come begging me for it, and I wouldn't give it to him, and he'd be down to the penny game and lose, so forth.

KP: Did he ever win big?

RF: No, he never won big.

KP: He always lost?

RF: He always lost, but he was quite a guy. So, finally, to shoot ahead, he finally went to Calcutta, he was a radio operator, and he got in touch with me. He had sinus problems and they sent him home.

KP: Really?

RF: Yes, that's what happened to him. He was a good guy.

KP: It sounds like he made the voyage much more pleasant.

RF: Oh, yes, yes, yes, and, in fact, on the Liberty boat, we had a hypnotist, and he gave us a show every night. You know, hypnotize the guys, whoever wanted to be hypnotized, would be, and make them think, you'd get drunk, they think they're drunk, you know. "Your canteen is a bottle of

wine," and they told a guy to insult an officer, or something like that, or trade a penny for a dollar any time, you know, so, that was entertaining.

MM: Were you ever hypnotized?

RF: No, I didn't. I didn't go for it.

KP: You were sent to a base outside of Bombay. How long were you …

RF: Back then, that was just another holding area, it was an English area, but we were the only ones there, the Americans, and they gave us English food. It was a pretty high class area of Bombay, the Parsi people lived there, and they were pretty wealthy, and it was, more or less like, the Shore area, about like the area where I came from.

KP: So, you didn't see a lot of grinding poverty?

RF: Oh, yes, you see that. Not there …

KP: You would see it but not there.

RF: But, then when you well, our first, when we left there, I mean, there was also a European club, a swimming club, where you could go, they allowed us to go there. Of course, they discriminated against Indians, the Indians couldn't go there to swim.

KP: White soldiers could go?

RF: White soldiers could go, yes. We didn't have any blacks with us there.

KP: Did you ever encounter any black soldiers when you were in the States?

RF: Oh, yes. Yes. In fact, when we left Missouri, Camp Crowder, Missouri, we had a black with us, and we stopped in Springfield, Missouri for supper, I guess, and we went to a restaurant, the Army had arranged this, and let us go in, and they wouldn't serve the black with us. We were pretty sore at that.

KP: What did you do? What happened?

RF: I think he stayed, we kept him with us.

KP: Had he been part of your training?

RF: No, well, he was a, we were all independents, so to speak, we were all trained. We all got a radio repairman MOS, something like that, and we were going to Florida, I believe.

KP: So, he was part of the group that was going to Florida?

RF: To Florida, yes, yes.

KP: Did you have any other black troops in the States?

RF: In the States, no. Well, of course, there was the black training regiment, it was called Company O, and, I guess, they did the same thing we did.

KP: In radio?

RF: In radio, where they could have been radio operators, or something. I don't know what school they go to. In the particular classes I was in, at the time, it was, I didn't run into many of them.

KP: You said Bombay was a holding area, how long did you stay, and when were you finally shipped out to your squadron?

RF: Well, that's another story.

KP: It's not that simple, in other words?

RF: No. Well, from there, then we were assigned to various outfits. As I said, my friend Cohen, he went to Calcutta as a radio operator. They took thirty of us, all with the same MOS, FM radio repairman. We were only there about, a few weeks, and Corporal Bauer was on top of the list, so he was put in charge, and we were told we were going to the 51st Fighter Control, and so they put us on a train in Bombay, and this was a third class train, you know, open windows, and all of that. That's when I first, you know, you see the poverty, going through the streets of Bombay, towards the station, and whatnot, and then you see, in the train station, you see these people, hanging out, sitting on top of the cars, hanging out the cars, and all the trains coming and going with them. But anyhow, we were assigned to a car, all thirty of us to a car, and we were given rations, B rations, boxes of canned food, and so forth. That's the first time I encountered an aerosol bomb. They gave us an aerosol bomb in a sturdy metal can. Like Flint, and we had that, there was a case of those, and a few cases of food in the middle, and so Corporal Bauer was told, "Whatever station we stopped into, he was to go to the station master, and he would give us orders … to go to the next station. So, we did that, and we went across India that way, took about a week, I think.

KP: So, you really saw India.

RF: Well, you didn't see it. We were on a railroad track, and then we got side-tracked and left. We'd sit on the side of the car, and just look at the passing scene. We went to Alhambra, and various cities across India. We didn't get off the train until Calcutta, and we ate when we wanted to, because we had the rations there, but there was cockroaches in the car, and it bothered us. So we, when we were side-tracked, we'd pull all [the] wooden blinds down on the car, seal the car up, and let a couple of these aerosol bombs go, in the car, and we just stayed outside the train, and we went in there, after a couple of hours, and, boy, we swept out cockroaches that long.

KP: Huge cockroaches.

RF: Yes, and that was about it. We got to Calcutta, and then we stayed at a girl's school, Raven College, or something like that. We didn't go out in town, we … just stayed there overnight, and then we got on another train, a narrow gauge train. We went into Upper Assam the following day. That was a narrow gauge railroad and it brought us up.

KP: Did you finally join your squadron there?

RF: Well, finally, we got up to Chabua, and there's these guys in a six by six truck …

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

KP: This continues an interview with Mr. Robert J Fischer, on February 7, 1996 at Rutgers University, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Kurt Piehler and Maria Mazzone.

KP: So, you saw these six by six trucks with these guys and …

RF: With the campaign hats, all folded in, as though they were cowboy hats, and no shirts, nothing. They brought us into camp, and the camp was in the middle of a tea plantation, we'd call it at Kanjikoah, and there, we were introduced to the company, 51st Fighter Control. They were ready to go home, they were on the water, when the Japanese struck. I have the history of the squadron here of that. So, they were "old hands."

KP: They were on their way home when Japan struck, where had they been stationed?

RF: No, no, no, they were out in the water. They were …

KP: Oh, okay.

RF: Well, anyhow, they were there for about … two or three years.

KP: So, they were really old hands.

RF: … They were glad to see us, replacements for the first time, you know. They greeted us with open arms, and they were all CW radio operators, while we were radiomen. So they sent us there, and we didn't know anything about code, we couldn't, we're not code operators, and they were all [code operators], that's what they wanted.

KP: They didn't get that.

RF: No, they got radio repairmen, which they didn't want. … So, they says, "Oh, my God." So, what they did was, the chief radio operator, he got us all in a room, and he taught us code. He says, "I'm going to teach you code, and when, the first one who gets to ten words a minute, gets to go into a station." So, we were there, and he taught us code for about, a couple of weeks. … You know,

he'd teach you clear text, something like that. He says, "Everybody who can read this message, you can go to chow now." Well, I was the last one out. I was very poor at taking code, and so they, finally, I finally got to ten words a minute, and they sent me out. But I was the last one to go, so, I went out to a station, in Tingkawk Sakan, Burma. It was a control net station, I had five stations coming in to me, and those operators, they were all fast, forty words a minute.

KP: And you're here limping away …

RF: I give them a QRS10, that's, "slow down the net." The whole net had to slow down to ten words a minute for me, and they'd come back, "Good God, you're slow," and they helped me along. The guys, who were at the station would guide me with procedures, mainly control reports. The statuses of airplanes, fighter planes, in the area, and where they were, what they were doing, and what's on hand.

KP: Where you were stationed in Burma, how big was the station? Was it a base?

RF: It was a strip, an airstrip. It was a group of about five or six fighter planes, and a C-46 would come in, every once in awhile.

KP: So, you're pretty much out there, in the middle of nowhere, Burma.

RF: Oh, yes. It's just coming in by air, I mean, you'd go on the strip, and it'd be all jungle around … a dirt air strip, that was it.

KP: How many people were stationed there?

RF: Gee, I don't know. Well, our outfit, we had about five or six guys

KP: The pilots?

RF: There would be pilots, and there were Mustangs, you know, Mustang aircraft, and about five, five of them.

KP: So, it's not a graveyard.

RF: Oh, no, no, no, no. Nothing like that.

RF: My friend Cohen there, in Jefferson Barracks, bivouac, I don't whether you'd be interested or not, but we were on bivouac and it was cold, and the rules, in cold weather, you take your shoes off when you go to bed. We each pitched a pup tent together, and I was a Boy Scout, so I made him put pine boughs underneath us, and a canvas we found, that and our overcoats, underneath.

KP: So, you knew what to do.

RF: I knew what to do, but Cohen, he didn't care for nothing. He says, "Fischer, I'm not taking my shoes off for nothing." So, we went to bed, and he's a tall fellow, and his feet were sticking out, his shoes were sticking out, and he was cold. In the morning, the whole inside of the tent was white from our breath and he couldn't feel his feet, and he says, "Fischer, we're in heaven. We must've gone to heaven, I have no feeling in my feet," you know, and "the white thing," so that was pretty funny, but he was quite a character.

KP: He sounds like someone who has lived in New York and had never seen green grass, except for Central Park.

RF: Yes, yes that's him. A Woody Allen-type of man.

KP: Going back to Burma, it's just Air Corps people, did you have any infantry guarding your perimeter?

RF: I don't know. I got stories there, too. I guess, it was monsoon season when I was there. It was rainy and wet, and they were just building the Ledo Road … there. It was under construction there, and there when we ate we got bread. They baked bread in these ovens, you know, outside, and each company mess was assigned a couple of guys to go and pick up the bread everyday, and take turns, and you got a hundred loaves of bread on a stretcher. You had to carry that, so the fellow and I went to pick it up, and it was raining, and the mud on the road we had to go was up to our knees, and we got the bread loaded up and we started to walk back, and walking through that thick mud and with carrying a hundred pounds between us, it was rough. We couldn't make it. We were struggling all along, and these coolies they had building the road, Chinese coolies, and all, were laughing at everything. So, we said, "Come here, help us, we'll give cigarettes, we'll give you a package of cigarettes," and these guys, they put the thing on their heads, and bum, bum, bum, bum, and we went along with them. So that was a little story there of how things went, so. They were adept at carrying things like that and we couldn't do it. It was pretty rough because it was rainy and the mud …

KP: It sounds like it was a pretty miserable place to be stationed.

RF: … There was a lot of leeches, you know, you walk in the area to where our tents were, and you went through the weeds, or something, and you'd walk out, and you'd have leeches all over your legs, and you had to sit there with a cigarette and burn them off, and that was quite prevalent, yes. Our latrine was just a log, and a ditch underneath it, and you could slide off. There was a crook in the log, and it was around ten foot long, or something. Guys were falling in, slipping off, falling in, and so on.

KP: What about the food?

RF: The food was no good, it was British rations, Indian coffee, and corned beef, ("corn wooly"?), they called it, that's about it.

KP: So, you ate this regularly?

RF: Everyday there, yes. I guess, we had other rations, too, but that was prevalent, and potatoes, I guess.

KP: So, you didn't see greens or anything like that?

RF: No, everything was canned.

KP: Everything was canned and …

RF: Yes.

KP: What about, such common things like as a newspaper or a magazine?

RF: No, didn't know what's going on. They had what they call a *CBI Roundup* newspaper, I don't know whether we got to it then, I don't know. I didn't know what was going on, really.

KP: How long were you at the strip before you got off for a furlough?

RF: There was no furlough.

KP: So, how long did you stay there?

RF: It wasn't long, let me see, June to August, oh, I guess, it was about two or three months.

KP: This was June of 1945 to August 1945?

RF: Yes, yes, June 1944 to August 1944.

KP: Until the end of the war.

RF: Oh, no, no. This is only the beginning.

KP: So, this is still '44?

RF: Yes, this is the first year over there. … Then they broke up that camp, and we went back to the base camp in Upper Assam, and there, they changed over from this type of reporting to direction finders, and we stayed there and studied, learned. They gave us a direction finder truck, and we had a crew, and we got together and we learned. Because a couple of fellows were trained in that, in the States, … I wasn't, and they taught us how to operate that, and then when we went out to another air strip in Upper Assam, we operated a homing station, you know, bring airplanes into that strip.

KP: How big was that strip?

RF: Oh, no, it was a small strip. It was an asphalt strip, though. Not to many people there, I guess, they did have planes that flew the Hump, taking off from there, C-46s.

KP: Were the living conditions as primitive in the Assam sight as the one in Burma?

RF: Well, in Upper Assam we lived in what they called a basha, which is a straw covered hut, bamboo hut, that wasn't too bad. In this particular one, we lived in a tent, and down in Tingkawk Sakan, we lived in tents. There were about three tents to our outfit. That's about the living conditions.

KP: So, it was not too comfortable.

RF: Oh, no, we didn't mind it. I didn't mind it at all. … We preferred a basha to the tents.

KP: That was much better, the one in Assam?

RF: Yes, yes, and then later, we went to a couple of places, too, with the direction finding outfit, the Digboi, that's at the head of Ledo Road.

KP: So, you were moved around several times.

RF: Oh, we moved several times, I guess, we were just practicing more or less, and … homing planes from the Hump. … Then after that, the outfit moved down, Myitkyina had fallen, the headquarters moved down to there, from Upper Assam to Burma. We went down with the station to Mogaung, which is a little west of there. We took over another outfit, the 96th Fighter Control, we replaced them, at Mogaung, with a direction finder. They had operated a direction finder there previously, but the 96th was moving on to China, or something. They were going down to Bhamo. So, we were in the Mogaung, and we operated there for a few months, and that was just our crew. Now our crew consisted of … two guards, a medic, a cook and about four, five, or six operators, and we were supposed to operate two men on duty; one man sensing, and the other man calling into the plotting board in our outfit. We used to operate one guy. … In the Mogaung, we were out in the woods, more or less, adjacent to us was a Signal Corps radar station. For some reason, or other, we operated there for a couple of months, and then we moved to Sahmaw, on a hill, by ourselves, and this was out in the woods, and we were by ourselves. We operated all right.

KP: It seems like you didn't mind these experiences.

RF: No, the only thing was, you missed home, that's all I missed. We had all kinds of snakes and whatnot. We just maintained the equipment, kept the power units going to operate the equipment, and we got dropped food.

KP: So, you were air dropped food?

RF: Oh, yes. We were air dropped food and they gave us a PX rations, toothpaste and cigarettes and beer. They gave a case of beer to a man. …

KP: So, you could drink in these isolated posts?

RF: Well, they gave you beer. Officers got a bottle of liquor, we didn't have any officers, we had a staff sergeant in charge.

KP: So, you had no officer in charge.

RF: Oh, no. No, we had one fellow in charge, he was a tech sergeant. I was the second in charge, I was a staff sergeant, and the operators were all buck sergeants.

KP: There were no privates?

RF: The privates were the guards, we had two guards, and a medic. I don't know what he was.

KP: Were the guards guarding anything?

RF: They were guarding us. No, while we were on duty, or something, in case anything happened. I mean, we got raided a couple of times, when we were in the Mogaung, Chinese soldiers raided.

KP: Raided your food supply?

RF: Yes, raided our food supply. See, we had a basha set aside with just the food in it, and, I guess, a soldier would sneak in. Prior to our going in there, with the 96th, they killed a guy. They caught him in the mess room, and he ran away, and they hollered, "Halt, halt, halt!" "Bang!" Shot him. They were worried, you know, so they went over and got MPs to go over to the Chinese establishment and tell them what happened, and they said, "You killed him, you bury him." That was it, and so they buried the guy there. That was before we came in. …

KP: You really weren't worried about Japanese at all in terms of the guard?

RF: We were set up there. In the Mogaung, they had an automatic rifle set up there, you know, you could run and go to it, and the guards patrolled the area all the time, especially at night. So, we weren't too worried, but we were aware that it could happen.

KP: You were a pretty small unit, so it wouldn't take much to overpower you.

RF: Oh, no, no, … we knew it would only be a small outfit around, if anything. You know, a sniper, or something like that, but we had full command of the air and everything at the time so … we weren't that concerned.

KP: Could you get help pretty quickly if you were in trouble?

RF: Yes, I mean, we carried rifles with us. We were armed at all times. If we go off, of course, we shot deer too.

KP: Did you eat the deer?

RF: Oh, yes, that's why we got them, for fresh meat, because we only had canned meat otherwise. We go out with a flashlight on a truck, a jeep, and we'd have … an old headlight, and a guy would shine it, and hold the eyes, and then everybody over your head would be shooting.

KP: So, you ended up using your Boy Scout shooting?

RF: Oh, yes. Well, more or less, it isn't that significant.

KP: Who would skin the deer?

RF: We would. We had a cook, too, with us. The cook was from West Virginia, so he knew what he was doing. We killed a deer, we had all kinds of deer; we had the barking deer, which is small, about as big as a dog, and then the sambar deer, which is like a mule deer, which is about the size of a mule, or a horse. We couldn't keep it, you know, you get a big deer like that, well, you give it to the natives. We take the tenderloin out; let the natives have the rest of it.

KP: So, you had contact with natives?

RF: Oh, yes, quite a bit. A lot of stories there.

KP: What kind of relationships did you have with them?

RF: We would go up to the hill of Sahmwa, and these were Kachin people, they had the knives. They carried the knife with the wooden scabbard, and they hold the bottom of it, and they pull it out. The knife would be shaped. When we got dropped food, these people were notified, by pamphlet or something, "Whenever you see parachutes come down, you go and you can barter any fresh chickens, or whatever you have, for those parachutes," which were nylon parachutes of all different colors, red, green, blue, so forth. They dropped gasoline to us, gasoline drop and food drop, with that, and they know that, and the first day out in the field, where we laid our panels out to be dropped, it was in a clearing, and I go to the edge of the clearing and the plane coming over, and all of the sudden, these natives all come. I didn't know where they were, but then they appeared, and those parachutes that went up in the tree, I would send them up, to go get them. Tell them, "You get it, you can have it," and so they came and they helped us get the things, carry them up to the camp, and whatnot. We traded with them. So, we asked the headman; the headman always had a rifle, they had given him a rifle, and we asked him if anybody could work for us, and the work was something like a rupee, we gave them a rupee a week, or something like that, and rice and tea. Because the rice they dropped in bags to us, and we give them a certain allotment for it. They came around, and so we got two or three people to work in them, do KP, and work around. Actually those people … they used to come through camp, and everything, and we'd sit around the table, invite them to dinner, and they'd eat with us.

KP: So, you really got to meet a different culture.

RF: Yes, but we couldn't speak to them, though. We had to speak in sign language and "pidgin" English and give them names. We gave them names, but we got by.

KP: Was there ever any tension between you and them?

RF: Oh, no, no. It was great. Actually, a lot of people, too, were in the 101st American Irregular Army, which were natives, which were consigned by the government, and they let them go out and meet the enemy, so to speak, and they were proud. They gave them a fatigue suit, a rifle, taught them drills, and they're young kids, too, twelve, fourteen years old, and they'd say, "I got three Japanese," things like that. They were interesting. So they were good and we'd invite them to dinner and they'd sit down and eat.

KP: In some ways it sounds like this post was a good one.

RF: Oh, I enjoyed it, more or less, being out, twelve guys by ourselves, do what we wanted more or less.

KP: You had no officers to give you trouble and grief.

RF: Oh, they used to come. They used to want to come and go hunting, you know, and they'd make an excuse, "We got to look for a new site," or something. "Get a better site," and so an officer came, and I went with him to look for a new site, and we went down below, in a jeep, and he stayed in our camp a few nights, and we brought him out hunting, and so forth. We got a big sambar deer. He enjoyed that, and then we went down, he wanted to put us on a hill in a certain place, and I said, "The main thing we want is water." … When you're out there by yourself, you got to have water, and there was no easy access to water, where he wanted to put us. So, we went down to Katha, that's just opposite Bhamo, and, just he and I, we went down there one day, and came back, and we decided not to put up camp there.

KP: You must have gotten to know these people very well, since you spent so much time with them on this little base.

RF: Oh, yes, you know them and you get aggravated with them, too.

KP: What were their backgrounds? You mentioned the cook was from West Virginia. Where were the other people from?

RF: Okay, Flaherty, he was in charge, he was the tech sergeant in charge, he was from Boston, he worked for the *Boston Globe*. He was a compositor with the newspaper, and he was a little bit older than us. Well, Flaherty and Fischer, we were in line together, so we got to know one another quite well. He became a good friend of mine. He liked to drink beer, and I didn't drink beer at all, so I used to trade him the beer for a coke, for his cokes, or cigarettes, he smoked, too. That caused a little friction among another fellow from Boston, he wanted the beer, too. He wanted to know why I wouldn't give him the beer, but I had always given it to Flaherty. So, he was annoyed with

me on that. Unfortunately, he either got drunk, or something, he went into town, into the Mogaung area, and he fell off a bridge and broke his neck. I don't know whether he had arguments with natives, or anything, but he died.

KP: He died?

RF: Yes, and so that was about it. The other fellows, we had a guy from Ohio, he was a plumber. Another fellow from Chicago area, Foster, he was a truck driver. He drove a truck. We were all young people, I mean, early twenties. Another fellow called Hanson, he was a mechanic, mechanically inclined, he was Chicago area, and then there was Corporal Bauer, he was with us, he's from Milwaukee, I believe, and Young, he was the plumber. … Our guards, one guard was from New Jersey, from New Brunswick, in fact. Yes. The other fellow was from Brooklyn, who was a guard. We had a medic, … he was from Maine, that's about it.

KP: It sounds like they were an interesting group, you had some characters.

RF: See, the thing is, like these fellows, who were interested in trucks and automobiles, see, we had to keep power units going, and so through them, we were able to do it, and they, in turn, taught me and a couple of other guys. I was more interested in the radio and I kept the radios going, took them apart and, back and forth. But, of course, we liked to hunt, you know, go around, and explore the areas, go through foxholes, or something, dig up souvenirs, and things like that.

KP: Did you ever have any close calls while you were stationed there?

RF: No, not really. I mean, as far as the enemy goes really, nothing like that.

KP: You mentioned someone broke their neck …

RF: That was the only tragedy that we were involved with, of course, there were snakes around, the cobra, and kraits, kraits are more deadly.

KP: How close did you get to the snakes, or how close did they get to you?

RF: Well, close. I mean, we had a tarp, and a fellow, Young, was fixing the rope, and this krait come right around his arm. Now before that krait hit the ground, one of the Kachin boys had his knife out and cut him in half. Another time, we were down to a stream, walking back, me and another fellow, and there was a krait going right across the path, maybe twenty feet in front of me, and I had a carbine on my side and I just flipped it up, and I hit him. So, we got him, and then another story with the snakes is, it was in a jeep and coming around the hill, up to our camp, and those on the jeep, they had been out to a show or something, and they come back, and this cobra was right in the middle of the road, and fellows were sitting on the front of the jeep, and all, and, boy, they couldn't get back fast enough, and the fellow driving the jeep couldn't put it in reverse fast enough, or anything, but they shot it, the cobra, and, snakebite kits, we kept asking for a snakebite kit.

KP: You didn't have one.

RF: Oh, no. We didn't have anything like that.

KP: But a snake bit no one?

RF: No, no one got bitten. Another case, this fellow, Foster, he got a fever so bad, and this was just about when we were about to break up camp. This was after the surrender in Europe, and we were going to break up camp, and we were going to go to China, that was the rumor. He came down sick, he was sick as anything, and our communications were all down. We had to set them all up again, to tell them he had a problem. So, we had to take him to Sahmaw, there was another airstrip there, it was about ten miles away, where we could take him and have him picked up. We couldn't get through … so I went down to Sahmaw, because there were telephone lines there, and they were abandoned, the whole place was abandoned.

KP: But the lines were still up?

RF: The lines were up, maybe about fifty telephone lines, so I got a telephone, and I started hooking all of them, and ringing somebody. Finally, I caught somebody, and they, in turn, I told them to get in touch with our outfit, and to set up a radio, so we could talk to them and tell them what happened, and get the doctor to tell us what to do. Because the medic was there and he gave him, I don't know what he gave him, but he was worried, the medic was worried, so he called, so we got into communication at the base, at our camp, and so the doctor told us what to do, bundle him up and bring him down to the air strip, the nearest air strip, and they'd pick him up. … It was monsoon then, too, it was rough. We had to build a damn corduroy road, more or less, part way over mud puddles, halfway, … cut down trees and everything, so we could get the jeep carrying him, all wrapped up through there, and so we got him there, and he did all right, he had a fever of undetermined origin.

KP: They never did diagnose his fever?

RF: No, not that we know, but he was in the hospital at the main camp for quite a few weeks.

KP: You mentioned that you took the jeep and went to a show, so in other words, you could get to places?

RF: As I say, the Sahmaw Airstrip, that's where they had quite a few fighter planes, Lockheed Lightnings, and so forth. … They had shows, and so we'd get on a jeep and go the ten miles.

KP: So, you weren't as isolated as in Burma?

RF: This is in Burma, and Burma is more rustic then the others. Where I told you, in Tingkawk, where I first went, there was a road down to there, but we had to go in by airplane, and then coming back to the Mogaung area, which was on a railhead, and then the Sahmaw area was an airstrip, maybe it was ten miles from Mogaung, and another ten miles from where we were, on a hill. Now

the hill station was all jungle around us, and all, but it was a clearing on top of a hill where we had our radio beam go out.

MM: Do you remember how you felt on V-J Day after the bomb was dropped and Japan surrendered?

RF: Yes. Everybody was glad. We were back at Myitkyina headquarters.

KP: You were expecting to go to China?

RF: Yes, that's the rumor, we would probably go to China. A different type of operation, where we'd be with a jeep, and we'd call in targets, or something like that. We were just sitting around, lounging around, more or less in the area, wondering where we were going, and then the news came through, which was August 5th, or something like that. August 5th stands in my mind because that's when Myitkyina fell the year before, where we were, so, about the same date.

KP: Did you have a lot of points?

RF: I had points, we had points to go home.

KP: But some people had more points than others. The guys that had been there for five years probably.

RF: Oh, they were gone. When we moved in, they went.

KP: So, how long did you stay in Burma?

RF: January 1945 to September 1945.

KP: How long did you stay after V-J Day?

RF: (One month.) Let's see, that was August, and I didn't get home until the next year, '46 … January, February '46. So, after that … we stayed around, and then we knew we were going home. We had to find a boat, or something. … We broke up camp, and I was assigned to the final demolition. What we did was, we set everything on fire in the area, took all the equipment, our radio equipment and all, motor generators, and so forth, put a stick of dynamite in the motor and a stick of dynamite in the generator and blew them up. Blew up all the radio equipment.

KP: Did you think this was a terrible waste of good equipment?

RF: Yes, but what are you going to do with it? We always said, "Well, why not leave it to the country, or the natives?" Well, the natives didn't care. The British soldiers, they were still there, and when we were blowing up the small power units, they didn't have any lights, or anything, and they wanted [to have them], so we gave them a small power unit, a one and a half kilowatt power unit, we had a bunch of them.

KP: So, those didn't get blown up.

RF: … A lot of them did. So, all this pile of junk was made, and then a bulldozer came and plowed it under, and then, we burned up the camp. The natives were around and they wanted the tarps, … so, I gave a fellow a tent for a knife. He gave me a little homemade knife I have, I have that at home.

KP: Do you still have it?

RF: Oh, yes. So, I gave him the tent, so, he cut it down and he packed it up and went away and we burned the rest of them. In fact, unfortunately, I had a lot of souvenirs, you know, jade, and so forth, in a duffle bag, and since the natives were roaming around, we put our duffle bags in the mess hall, which was a pretty big area, and we could watch them, while we were going about burning things, and then we got so engrossed, we burned down the mess hall, so I left the bag. … I left it all there. The other thing I had left was a musette bag, we were the last truck out, me and another fellow, … that was it.

KP: So, you literally saw the American presence disappear, in what had been a fairly big base.

RF: Well, when you say a big base, it was a big area. I mean, of course, the Myitkyina Airfield was finally paved and all, it was pretty big, but nothing like Newark, or anything like that. … Now, we were friends with a general, who was over there, and a couple of years ago I was talking to him, and he had gone back over the Ledo, he flew over the Ledo Road. He says, "It's all grown together now, you'd never know, it's just like it was."

KP: You would never know there had been a road.

RF: Right.

KP: Looking back on it, it sounds like you would have never gotten this experience if you had not been in the military.

RF: Yes, of course, I wouldn't have traveled, or anything. When we came back, we went outside the Calcutta area, where we waited for a boat. We thought we were going to get on a boat out of Calcutta, but that didn't happen, so then they had to send us to Karachi, to the other side of India, and then we had to fly over there.

KP: So, they didn't put you on the train to Karachi.

RF: No, no, Karachi we flew, the whole outfit flew, and then, we went over Agra, the Taj Mahal area, and the pilot said, "Well, … you're in India, you might as well see the Taj Mahal," so we looped around the Taj Mahal one way, and then for the other side of the airplane he looped around the other way.

KP: So, you got to see the Taj Mahal.

RF: So, we got to see the Taj Mahal, from the air. Then we went to Karachi, and we waited at Karachi.

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

KP: So, you were in Karachi in December of 1945, waiting for as boat to get home.

RF: Yes, waiting for a boat to get home. In Karachi harbor, there would be all these general ships loading up troops, and so forth, and we'd hire a fishing boat, for a couple of rupees, and you go out and catch these little fish in the bay, or wherever it was, and you'd go by these boats and you'd see them loading up, and hoping maybe that one of them was yours. We just had to wait. Finally, the day came and we got aboard a general ship and came home.

KP: What type of ship did you come home on?

RF: General, what they call a general troop transport, I guess. It was designed to carry the troops.

KP: How did that compare with your other two previous, the Liberty ship and the British ship?

RF: I don't know, it was pretty big. Of course, you got back to two meals a day on an American boat, and we had to go down below in the deck … to eat. I mean, you stood up … ate beans; in the Navy, of course, you ate beans at all times. But going down one of the decks, you passed the officers dining deck and there they had silverware on the table and they had these waiters in white coats waiting on them, "How would you like your eggs this morning, sir?" Stuff like that, and you had to stand by that station, in line, to go down below to get your meal.

KP: Which was not the same quality.

RF: That's right.

KP: Did it surprise you that officers had waiter service?

RF: I thought it was a little bit too much, really, all the guys did, you know. Of course, they made fun of it, and all. It didn't make any difference.

KP: Not that you could do anything about it, but it sounds like you resented it.

RF: I didn't resent it. … This was too much, and there was no way of doing anything. Then I got KP, see, I was a staff sergeant then, and I got KP. But they put me in charge of the KPs.

KP: So, you told people what to do.

RF: Yes, to see, that this is done, or see that that's done. If the guys weren't good enough at it or something, I just pitched in, because we had these big cauldrons to clean out on the boat, you know, these huge things where they cooked the vegetables and the potatoes and whatnot. Another thing was, they had ice cream, that was the first time I had ice cream in a long time, and milk, they knew how to make powdered milk. Our cook, we never could make powdered milk, it'd be all lumpy and whatnot, but here it was made very well. So, you ate well, too, on KP.

KP: So, there were some advantages.

RF: Right. But it's always a long grueling, the main thing about KP is, you get up early in the morning, and you go through later in the evening, it was a real drudge.

KP: The route you came home, did you go through the Pacific?

RF: Yes, we came home by the Pacific, out Karachi, down below India, and there was a water spout off to the side, we could see that, and then we came up through the Straits of Malaysia, and over to Pearl Harbor. We docked at Pearl Harbor for the night, or something, while they refueled. Then went to Seattle, Washington, Fort Lewis, and then train across the country to Fort Dix, and then home.

KP: Is that where you were discharged from then?

RF: Fort Dix.

KP: Had you thought of staying in the Air Force?

RF: No.

KP: You don't say that without any reservation.

RF: No, I had opportunities to go to Officer's Training School. … They also had a training program, where they send all the troops to colleges or something, ASTP or something like that.

KP: You decided against ASTP?

RF: Yes, I wasn't interested.

MM: Was the transformation back to civilian life easy, or did you have a hard time?

RF: Oh, no. There was no problem. No, I came to this school.

KP: What was it like to be back at Rutgers? You hadn't seen it in a number of years now, and you'd been around the world, quite literally.

RF: Yes, I did, circumnavigated the globe. I don't know, well, as I said, in the beginning, I wasn't doing too well in school, and rather than come back in the middle of my sophomore year, I said, "I'll go back to the beginning." The curriculum was changed a little bit in ceramics. Of course, it became part of the engineering department, where it was just a department by itself before. So, they had it in the curriculum, surveying and a few other courses, which weren't in our old curriculum, so I decided to round it out, and make-up the courses for that. Prior to coming back, I came back in the summer, and I took physics and calculus in the summer, which were something I wasn't doing well in before, so I figured, "let me concentrate on them." But it was still pretty rough, because it was concentrated, but I worked very hard and I did well. Of course, I was more mature now. It was a lot easier. I could just focus on those things.

KP: How important was the GI Bill?

RF: It was very, very important.

KP: Do you think your father, at that point, could have still kept supporting you?

RF: No, he wasn't doing that well in relation to how he stood before. The Depression was over now, and there was more competition, and the nature of the work he did, the salary didn't rise.

KP: Things were more expensive.

RF: Yes. Well, the things didn't exist, I guess, like automobiles were hard to get and things like that, but we did all right. So, the bill, the GI Bill was quite beneficial.

KP: You decided to stay with ceramics?

RF: Oh, yes, yes. I liked it. I was interested in it. Yes, so it was all right, I mean, I did pretty well in it, after that. As I said, I'm more mature, and I could apply myself to it, I still worked hard.

KP: It wasn't as hard as before it sounds like.

RF: Right. No, things like math and physics and chemistry and all. In fact, I did well in organic chemistry; I got a hundred in it. But I know nothing of it now.

KP: When did you start seeing your wife, was it after you came back in '45?

RF: Right, yes. Yes, I started to go with her then.

KP: When you were overseas, how much mail did you get? How often did you write?

RF: I didn't write often enough.

KP: So, your parents must have worried about you.

RF: Yes, they did, and that was a fault of mine. For example, when I went over, in Oran it was such a mess to get mail out, or something like that, I didn't bother, and during that time, the invasion approached, and they didn't know where I was, and they didn't know whether I was in on the invasion, you know, the European invasion, or not. So, I don't know, I guess, sometime after I got in India, I wrote to them, and let them know where I was. Somewhere in India, somewhere, that's all they knew. I wrote V-mail, and so forth.

KP: Coming back, did you take part in the social life anymore, or were you still just as busy?

RF: I was still just as busy; I didn't bother with any social life. I wrestled in Rutgers, I wrestled before the war.

KP: You continued …

RF: When I came back I, that's another story, too. During the sophomore year, I guess, you had to take PT [physical training]. In my schedule, PT was eight o' clock in the morning, and you had to go up to the pool and jump in the pool, at eight o' clock in the morning, and that was no good, and then I was told, "If you're out for a major sport, then you don't have to take PT," and Coach (Cahn?) used to give the PT, the calisthenics in the gym, so I went out for wrestling. Eckel talked me into going out for wrestling, so I went to Coach Cahn and I said, "I'd like to go out for wrestling," and he says, "How much do you weigh?" and I said, "A hundred and thirty pounds." He says, "All right," because he didn't have a hundred and twenty-eight pound wrestler. … I didn't know anything about wrestling, but since I was that weight, he used to teach me quite a bit, he spent a lot of time with me, and he put me on the team. So, I got out of gym. … As a wrestler, I was no good, at all, but he used to say to me, "Bob, go in there and don't get pinned." Because if they pinned you, you get five points, and you lose the decision, you only get three points for the team. So, my object was not to get pinned.

KP: Not to win, but not to get pinned.

RF: No, try to win, but he knew … so, that's all right, I did that. In fact, the first match I wrestled I had a tie, a draw, so that was good. Then I met some pretty good guys and I got pinned quite a bit. But, anyhow, so after that I liked the wrestling, and when I came back I went out for the team again, and we did all right.

MM: So, being married was a positive impact on your education, it matured you?

RF: Not being married, no, I didn't get married until my last year in school.

KP: Where did you live your last year? Did your wife come down here?

RF: No, I commuted.

KP: From Deal.

RF: Yes, I made the commute.

KP: What about the years you came back, '46, '47? Did you commute?

RF: No, no. I lived in Kilmer, Camp Kilmer. During the summer time, I lived in Hegeman Hall, then at Camp Kilmer, and where else did I live? Gee, I can't think of it, I can't remember where I stayed. I did go back to Hegeman Hall again, too.

KP: After graduating, what career plans did you have in mind? Where did you think you would go?

RF: Well, I was going into ceramics, I knew that. Well, don't forget the ceramics department was pretty good.

KP: Yes, I know, it still is a leading ceramics department.

RF: Good as far as getting jobs goes, and everything.

KP: People say that in the Depression, it was one of the few majors you could really expect to get a job.

RF: Yes, well, especially with John Koenig, head of the ceramics department. … John Koenig came after the war and he had contact with all the captains of industry, you know, he twisted their arms and said, "Give this kid a break," or something.

KP: So, you were fairly confident you would get a job.

RF: Get a job, well, I was the last one to get a job, really, from the class, because I had been given a job in Milwaukee, because I was married, she didn't want to move out to Milwaukee, so I refused that job, and, I guess, Koenig got a little sore at that.

KP: That you didn't take this job?

RF: Yes, here he had a job, he had this kid taken care of, you know, … but I didn't. So, finally, I waited the whole summer, and a tile plant started to open up in Massachusetts, and he called me in for an interview, and he accepted me, so I went there. That was my first job, with the tile plant, and getting back to the marriage, we got married within the last year, my last year, so I commuted.

KP: You would become a father before you graduate.

RF: I did, I had a boy.

KP: How long did you stay with the tile company?

RF: One year. I didn't like it up there.

KP: In Massachusetts?

RF: Yes.

KP: It was more the Massachusetts, than the company?

RF: Well, more the Massachusetts, yes, I didn't like it.

KP: Where in Massachusetts were you located?

RF: Milford, Massachusetts. It's west of Boston, west of Framingham, just near Framingham, okay. I was up there a year, … I was married and, again, there wasn't a decent place to live up there, really. I wasn't making much money at the time. So, I commuted every other week back home. One of the fellows in the tile plant was from the Trenton area, and he came home and I came home with him. So, I was there about a year, and then I left. I tried to get into the government at Fort Monmouth, and it took about a summer to do that, I did that a couple of months, and then I stayed there.

KP: So, you worked at Fort Monmouth?

RF: Yes. Electronic ceramics, research and development.

KP: You were always based in Fort Monmouth?

RF: Yes.

KP: What type of projects did you start with and work with over the course of your career?

RF: Oh, quite a bit. We were involved in electronic ceramics. So, at that time, right after the war, they were interested in insulating-type materials. So, we developed them, and worked on the development of those materials, and that's when alumina became the universal, more or less, insulating material, ceramic insulating material, and from then we went into the capacitor materials, high dialectric constant materials, and the Army was involved in making things smaller and smaller, so the higher capacitance, smaller capacitors and that. The development of the piezoelectric ceramics, ferroelectric electric ceramics, and that's about where we were. Again, in the capacitor industry, and whatnot. I was finished there, and this is when fiber optics was first coming into being, and they abandoned the ceramics at Fort Monmouth, and toned down even the fiber optics, but I stayed with it. … A fellow I worked with, he's still there, he's retired, but he works as a consultant in fiber optics, and we come up to Rutgers here, all the time, and take part in the fiber optics symposium, and so forth.

KP: So, you've stayed active in your field.

RF: Well, more or less, very active. I'm always interested.

KP: Yes, I mean, you haven't lost your interest in ceramics.

RF: Oh, no, no.

KP: I know some people who have told me they've retired and that was it.

RF: Oh, no, no. I come here all the time, well, to the Center for Ceramic Research, we attend their meetings, and things like that, and I belong to the Ceramic Association of New Jersey, and I don't belong to the American Ceramic Society anymore, because it cost me too much money. …

KP: It sounds like you also liked Fort Monmouth, working there, the projects they gave you.

RF: Oh, yes, yes, again, I'm on my own, more or less.

KP: So, in a sense, you got projects you could really work with on your own?

RF: Oh, yes. Do whatever we wanted to do, read, study, and so forth, it was great.

KP: Have you ever thought of going for an advanced degree at any point?

RF: I did. I took advanced courses here at Rutgers, and at Fort Monmouth I took math courses, through Fort Monmouth, at Fort Monmouth, and then internal training, I'd say coworkers gave courses in infrared technology and wave guide transmissions, which I was interested in because of the fiber optics, and so forth. Yes, more advanced math courses, just for the fun of it.

KP: You were at Fort Monmouth in the '50s when there was a lot of criticism by Joseph McCarthy and others. What were you're reactions to it, and how did it affect you, directly or indirectly?

RF: No, it didn't affect me. I just knew a couple of people whom it did affect. It didn't mean anything to me either way. No, I didn't know the people personally who were affected, I just knew of them, knew who they were.

MM: If your sons had served in the military how would you have felt about that?

RF: How would I have felt? I didn't want them to go, my sons, we more or less kept them out, tried to keep them out of it, I mean, they went to school, you know, for the Vietnam War.

KP: So, you didn't want him to fight in Vietnam?

RF: No, I was glad he got out. … He went to Catholic University in Washington, and, at that time, of course, he was up for the draft, and all, and his number was fairly high, and he got out of it. You know, they kept being deferred, and so forth, because they were in school and they got a relatively high number, or something, in the draft, and, fortunately, he avoided it, and then my younger son, he had to report, but this was at the end of the war, so he wasn't called. He had a pretty good

number too, a low number. Fortunately, he wasn't called, and we were glad of that. Because that was a shooting war and we didn't want to get him into any shooting area. But, on the other hand, if I knew there wasn't any danger involved, I'd recommend a kid to go into the Army. In fact, I recommend after high school, depending on the maturity of the guy, "go into the Army and see what it's all about." But, then again, now, the Army is now, I don't know, a lot of guys I know, who graduated West Point, were officers. As soon as they did what they had to do, they got out of the Army. They didn't care for it. In those times, in the Army, when a colonel was in charge of a post, they could learn more. It would be better off for a guy, teach him a bit more little discipline, and, maybe, today, kids need a little bit more discipline.

KP: Did you ever go to any reunions?

RF: No.

KP: Did you ever stay in touch with anyone from any of the units you served in?

RF: You mean, in the Army?

KP: Yes.

RF: No. Around here, … there was only one fellow, he was from Keyport, and I didn't run into him, or contact him, no.

KP: Did you ever join any veterans' organizations?

RF: Yes, my mother joined one for me when I was in the Army; I was a charter member of the local VFW.

KP: In your hometown?

RF: In my hometown, yes, but I never followed through. We went to a few meetings the first couple of years I was home, and then it just died out.

KP: When your kids were growing up, did you ever tell them about your experiences in Burma?

RF: No, not really. They didn't care. I mean, I have no experiences to tell them, really.

KP: Well, you had seen a lot of things that were very different from what most Americans see. You were not seeing a tourist's view of Burma, you were living among the Burmese.

RF: Yes, I was there, as I said, we got jade. I was in the jade country, and we went to a village there where they made the jade rings, and whatnot, out of coin silver and all, which was interesting. Even in India, and in Burma, to watch them melt down the coins, and then pull them out, strands and whatnot, and pound them into rings, and that was interesting. I always watched them in the bazaars.

KP: Is there anything we forgot to ask you? Anything we didn't ask you about the military or your Rutgers years?

RF: I don't know, I can't think either.

KP: You still live close to where you grew up.

RF: Oh, yes. I wouldn't want to move away, I mean, I like the Jersey Shore where I am. I like New Jersey. My relatives, my wife's sisters, in fact, they moved to Arizona, trying to talk us into going out there, we just go out there to visit, that's good enough.

KP: So, even though you've seen different parts of the country you still preferred New Jersey?

RF: Oh, yes. Yes, sure, you have everything, you have a temperate zone, and whatnot. If you want New York, you can go to New York, I don't want it. If you want Atlantic City, go to Atlantic City. Today, I just as soon stay right where we are.

KP: Did you ever return to any of the places you were overseas, North Africa, Italy?

RF: No. As I said, I don't fly. … No, I'd go; my wife wouldn't want to, I'd go by boat, or something. I guess, I could've gone to Vietnam, if I had wanted to.

KP: During the War?

RF: Yes, I chose not to go. I didn't volunteer to go. I keep saying, "I'd like to go back to Burma and see places," but, now, as I get older, no point in doing that. Burma is a bad place to go to now, anyway, with the drug business, and all. But Burma was a nicer country than India, I'd prefer living out there in the woods.

KP: As opposed to the urban?

RF: Yes, and squalor, and whatnot you see in Calcutta, and places like that, or even in the small villages, the way the people lived and all.

KP: The squalor in India, did you expect it or were you shocked by it?

RF: I wasn't shocked, you know, the picture you have of India before that was, you know, you see these elephants with the maharajas on them and they go tiger hunting, and you see palaces, and whatnot, and then you don't see them anymore, and, as I say, the Taj Mahal. You see, it's a glistening thing, but when you get around to the back of it, by the river, it's a dark, black, moldy back to the thing. You see pools, I don't know if they're holding pools, or bathing pools, or whatnot, they're green. The water is green, and people are in there drinking it, and also washing with it, and drawing it for water. You don't like that. Then you go out in the villages, it gets better, you know, and then finally, when you get out into places like Burma, in the jungle, or something

like that, it's better yet, it's clean. The people are cleaner. Everyday at four o'clock they wash in the river. The girls in Burma they got these tube-type dresses on and they go, and you look, you don't see nothing. They wash one, and the other one comes on and off, … but four o'clock, everyday, they go down to the river and they wash.

KP: It sounds like you were very impressed with the people out in Burma that you encountered.

RF: Well, again, with the Kachin people, who were different from the Burmese people. These were like the hillbillies, more or less, and I was impressed with them.

KP: The Kachin.

RF: Because they carried a knife all the time, and they knew how to use it, and they were pretty good. However, they were dirtier looking than the Burmese people you see, but they were all right. They wear a turban type of thing on their head; I should have brought pictures of them.

KP: You took pictures of them?

RF: I took a few pictures, not enough, but I do have some pictures. Where else do we want to go?

KP: I'm trying to think if there's anything we missed.

RF: I don't know what this is going to sound like.

KP: It'll sound good, you've had a number of good stories, and we've really appreciated it.

RF: I thought you'd want more action, you know, things like that.

KP: Well, most people in the military don't see action, so that's actually more accurate for most people. I mean, there are people I have interviewed who have seen a lot of action, but most people haven't. Most people were also not in as exotic places as you were.

RF: Well, I don't know how exotic they were, but I enjoyed the camping and the open-air business and all, it's a lot better. Like I said, from Atlantic City I would go down to Camp Crowder, and it was better than that.

KP: Well, thank you very much. I think you've given Maria a good first interview.

RF: Maria's disappointed because I didn't say my wife had an influence on my career. The only influence she had was "you don't go there," or "take this chance," or "that chance."

KP: So, your wife was the more conservative of the two of you.

RF: I guess so, yes. See, my wife is of Italian descent, and she is quite family oriented.

KP: So, moving away from New Jersey was really out of the question.

RF: Yes.

KP: Even Massachusetts was too far.

RF: Yes, she would've gone.

KP: But Wisconsin was clearly too far.

RF: So family is a big thing, and she influenced me by making me more family-oriented than I was before.

KP: Well, that's a good note to end on.

RF: All right, so I won't take anymore of your time.

KP: No, we could stay here for a while. Did any of your reading on the subject of Burma relate to your experiences there?

RF: No, not that with my experiences, but I knew about them, such as the gliders going down on the purple plain, and things like that, I knew. Then there's the Merrill's Marauders, there's a book called the *Merrill's Marauders*. [*Spearhead* by James E.T. Hopkins]

KP: Yes, of all the things that have been written about, it's the Merrill's Marauders that have gotten the most publicity.

RF: Well, that's where the action was. What was the other one, The Mars Task Force. … They replaced the Merrill's Marauders. You've heard of the Mars Task Force? They were the ones, who came after the Merrill's Marauders, and they had Indians, too. I guess, for communication purposes, or something like that. We were waiting for the boat in Calcutta … there was a group of American Indians, they were waiting, too. They used to get drunk and whatnot, so that's about all I remember about them.

KP: They were American Indians waiting, like you, to go home.

RF: Don't forget, when you're ready to go home, man, you've been away for a couple of years, you want to go home, and guys would be more careful, they wouldn't get into fights, so that they wouldn't get hurt, or anything, or something. "Nothing doing, man, I'm going home," you know. That's how you felt and when you went over there, you didn't know if you were ever going to come home. In fact, you'd give a million dollars for, if you'd be home in ten years.

KP: That is what you thought.

RF: That is the attitude we had, and the other thing, you know, when you went into the army and everything, you were talking to the fellas. They were all making a hundred dollars a week, because that was a big salary then, you know, that's what they said, you know, they bragged, and then, you come out of the army, and you're in civilian life, again, everybody was a lieutenant, you know, everybody was better then what they were, actually.

KP: So, people raised their ranks?

RF: Yes, right, right. Going in they made a lot of money, they had a good job, and they got called into the service, and then afterwards, everybody was a lieutenant. That's just an observation I make. Well, thinking back at things, you know, you overlook a lot of things.

KP: Yes. I often think of questions I had meant to ask, and some people have even written to me saying, "I forgot to tell you this."

RF: So, these are just little anecdotes I tell you, I remember.

KP: Well, thank you very much, we appreciate it.

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

Reviewed by Nicholas Molnar 10/30/04
Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 11/20/04
Reviewed by Robert J. Fischer 3/24/05