RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALBERT HANDALY

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY
NOVEMBER 13, 1996

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Kurt Piehler: This begins an interview with Mr. Albert Handaly on November 13, 1996, at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Kurt Piehler ...

Pete Wasek: … And Pete Wasek.

KP: I would like to begin by asking you a few questions about your family. Your parents were originally from Greece.

Albert Handaly: … My parents came from Salonika, Greece, and my grandparents also were from there. My grandparents on my father's side were all killed in the Holocaust. We grew up with my maternal grandparents and that's, basically, our background. Our native tongue, so to speak, was Spanish. I'm a Sephardic Jew, which is a Jew descended from Spain, and that's why we spoke Spanish. It's a Ladino Spanish, which is similar to Castilian, and that's, basically, our background.

KP: What prompted your parents and grandparents to emigrate to the United States?

AH: I really have no knowledge of why they came, other than to find, probably, a better life than what they had in Salonika. My father was orphaned at a very early age. My mother, well, she had three other sisters who all came [over at] about the same time and my father was sort of a protégé of my maternal grandfather, who was a spiritual leader, although he was not a rabbi. He was a spiritual leader of the Sephardic community in New Brunswick, and, I guess, he took my father under his wing, and, eventually, he and my mother married, and that's our family.

KP: Why did they move to New Brunswick? Had they lived in any other communities before moving here?

AH: My father had lived in Raritan, but, was working in the knitting mills. I believe that also was in Raritan, and the Sephardic community in New Brunswick was growing, and people just sort of congregated here in New Brunswick. There's also a big Sephardic community in New York.

KP: Can you tell me a little bit about your mother's background? Did your parents meet in the United States?

AH: I believe they met in the United States, although the Sephardic community in Salonika was quite close knit, and, possibly, they knew each other there. I really have no recollection of that background.

KP: Your family was very active in the synagogue.

AH: We, in fact, [are] charter members, ... I, also, am a charter member, of Congregation Etz Ahaim, which is now located in Highland Park. When I was growing up, we were located on Richmond Street in New Brunswick, which has been torn down for the redevelopment, and we moved to Dennison Street in Highland Park.

KP: When did the congregation relocate?

AH: I believe it was in the 1970s. … That was about the time that they had the redevelopment in New Brunswick and, … with the exception of one synagogue, which became a historical site, that's the Poile Zedek Synagogue. It still stands on Nelson Street. Other than that, everything in that area was moved out.

KP: How observant was your family, in terms of dietary laws and keeping the Sabbath?

AH: Well, my grandfather, having been a spiritual leader, was quite observant. My parents were quite observant also. My generation has, I guess, drifted a little. We're Orthodox, but, we may not be as observant as some other Orthodox are. We're not as … observant as the Hasidic Jews.

KP: Your father was a grocer.

AH: He was a grocer, yes.

KP: Did he own a store in New Brunswick?

AH: Originally, he was in partners with my uncle on Hiram Street. The partnership was dissolved, way, way back, I can't remember when, and my father opened his own store on French Street. He was at the foot of Brown Street, which, at that time, was the emergency entrance to Middlesex Hospital, and he was there for quite some time, until the state put in the sales tax, and then, it was too difficult to maintain records, so, he closed up the store. It was just a small, family-owned, neighborhood store.

KP: When did he close the store?

AH: When the sales tax went into effect.

KP: Was that in the 1930s or 1960s?

AH: '60s, I believe.

KP: He owned the store for quite awhile.

AH: Oh, yes, yes. The store was there [for] quite some time.

KP: Did you work in the store?

AH: I did work in the store before I was drafted and, when I went into the service, my brother took over. He was classified 4-F and could not go in. So, he and my father were in the store all the time. When I got out of the service, I felt I didn't want to go into a small grocery store, so, I ended up looking for work elsewhere, and, through the GI Bill, came to Rutgers. I finished half of my education, and then, for one reason or another, I lost my benefits and dropped out. Twenty years later, I decided I needed my degree for advancement and I came back to Rutgers and finished up. … It was a much different experience.

KP: I want to ask you about those differences, especially since you returned to Rutgers in the 1970s.

AH: Well, when I started at Rutgers, I came pretty much as a lark. I knew I had the education coming to me, so, I figured, "Well, I'll give it a shot," and I was just an average student at the time. It was a queer thing that I lost my benefits, and I couldn't afford to pay for my education, so, I dropped out. About twenty years later, I was looking to advance my position in work and, wherever I went, they were asking what degree I had, and I decided, "Well, I'd better go back to Rutgers and get my degree." I came back and, with intersessions and summer sessions, I finished the balance of my education, which was fifty percent of what I had to do, in a year-and-a-half, I believe it was. I made the Dean's List at that time. Well, you can see, there was a difference in my attitude towards education. I was more of a … student my second time.

KP: You took your studies more seriously.

AH: Very, very much more seriously.

KP: When you were going to high school in New Brunswick, were you enrolled in the college preparation course?

AH: No. In high school, I was on a business course, which did not really prepare me for college. After high school, I just drifted from job to job. I graduated from high school in 1940, and, in 1941, the war broke out, so, we really didn't have too much time to find our way.

KP: Before the GI Bill came along, you had not really planned on going to college.

AH: … No, I had no intention of going to college.

KP: Did your brother ever go to college?

AH: No.

KP: What do you remember about living in New Brunswick in the 1930s and 1940s?

AH: … Well, I feel that, even though living was quite strenuous in those days, it was much easier and happier than it is today. I recall, New Brunswick was very busy Thursday nights and Saturday nights, and the town was really mobbed on those nights, and you could walk anywhere, leave your doors open, and not worry that the door was going to be stolen from your house. It was a … different attitude, I guess. You could be out at any hour of the day or night in complete safety and not worry about anything.

KP: Your father was a grocer during the Great Depression. Was it difficult for him to make ends meet?

AH: It was difficult, but, whatever my father could do for us, he did. I don't recall ever being in want of anything. Well, you know, having a grocery store, we couldn't starve. We may have had to do without other things, but, the food was there, always, on the table. It was difficult growing up in the Depression, and, of course, I realize, now, that what brought us out of the Depression was the wartime economy, and I don't know if it was a good thing or a bad thing, but, I know it did save a lot of people.

KP: It sounds as if your father, and, later, your brother, had an easier go of it after the war started.

AH: After the war.

KP: Yes. You did not want for anything, but, things were still tight. Did you ever go on vacation?

AH: I went on vacation with my cousin, once, to the Catskill Mountains and it was such a horrible experience, I decided not to do it anymore.

KP: Why?

AH: I don't know if you're familiar with the Catskills, but, they selected a place. He had gone there the year before and had a good time. The week that we went up there, of course, it was a long bus ride from New Brunswick into New York, and then, the bus from New York up to the Catskills, and I was a little bit sick … by the time we got there. We sat down at the dinner table, and there was a little woman sitting directly opposite me, and she just sat there and smiled. She didn't eat and she said, "Oh, you go ahead. I never eat." Well, having been sick from the ride and hearing a comment like that, I really got sick, and I went up to my room, and, later on, my cousin came up with something that the director had given him to settle my stomach, and I told him, "I don't care what you do. You can stay here if you want, but, I'm going home tomorrow,"

and, tomorrow, I went home, and I don't believe I had another vacation after that, until after the war.

KP: You had not traveled much outside of New Jersey.

AH: No. In fact, my first experience away from home was when I went into the service.

KP: Did you ever go to summer camp?

AH: No.

KP: Were you ever a Boy Scout?

AH: No.

KP: New Brunswick High School, in your day, served almost as a regional high school, where farm boys and city kids mixed. How would you rate your education at New Brunswick High School?

AH: I think the education in New Brunswick was pretty good. We had some good teachers. They were dedicated teachers. They weren't worried about salaries, or benefits, or anything like that. Their intent, at that time, was to teach the student, … period. That's what they did. I feel it was a good education in New Brunswick. I don't think anything was wrong with it. There was discipline in the classroom, nobody caused any trouble, and you could learn.

KP: What did you and your family think of the coming war in the 1930s? How aware were you of what was going on in Europe?

AH: Well, you've got to understand, we were young and really didn't know, although, we should have read the papers and understood what was going on. The media, of course, did not publish as much as they should have, nothing like what you see today, so, consequently, we didn't really know too much. All we knew was, December the 7th rolled around, and Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, and, immediately, the next day, everybody was gung ho to get into the service and beat the pants off the Japanese, and, of course, by that time, Germany was part of the Axis, … to whip everybody. So, to us, being young, it was a lark. You've got to understand, it was a popular war, because of all that was going on. We were going to save the world, so to speak. By the same token, they said World War I was the "war to end all wars" and it wasn't. World War II was supposed to be a big deal, too, and then, we had other things after that, too. So, I don't think there's ever going to be an end to war, but, if you want to know what our attitude was, "Well, we're going to build up and we're going to whip the pants off our enemies," and, of course, the Axis was our enemy.

KP: In the 1930s, within your congregation, were there any discussions about the plight of German Jews or the threat Hitler posed to European Jewry?

AH: They may have heard. I was young at the time, so, consequently, I didn't know what was going on, but, I would imagine the older generation was aware that something was going on. We were not too versed in what was going on in Eastern Europe, because my parents came from the Balkan countries, and they were affected by what happened in the Balkan countries, and what happened in Eastern Europe affected the Jews from Eastern Europe. So, there's where the difference would come in.

KP: You mentioned that a number of your family members were lost in the Holocaust. How much contact did your family have with those relatives?

AH: They had correspondence prior to the war, and, after the war, [the] correspondence dropped off, and then, my father's family was no longer there. We don't know what happened to them. …

KP: Did you ever try to find out what happened through the Red Cross?

AH: No, we didn't, and, in fact, at the present time, my wife and I are active in the Jewish Historical Society, and they have an excellent genealogy department, and I'm going to try to find out what I can through them. Of course, I haven't started into it, yet.

KP: It sounds like Pearl Harbor was quite a surprise for you.

AH: It was a surprise. I guess the people up in government knew it was coming, but, they kept it kind of quiet. … The average citizen didn't know until President Roosevelt said, "The day that will live in infamy," and that was the first we really knew about it.

KP: Where were you on December 7, 1941?

AH: Well, when we got the news, we were at a party and the party kind of fell flat after that. We had music on the radio. In those days, radios would play music, and we were dancing, and everything was nice, until we got the news. They interrupted the program. We felt it then.

KP: What was your initial reaction to the news? Did you think that you would be entering the service soon?

AH: Well, the draft was in effect at the time, already. ...

KP: Had you been called up?

AH: I had not been called. I was too young, yet. In fact, most of my buddies were a year older than I was and they got drafted in the first call. I wanted to go in with them, and, unfortunately, I was deaf in one ear, and I couldn't get in.

KP: You had tried to enlist before the war.

AH: … Well, it wasn't really before the war. The war had already started, right after December 7th.

KP: You had tried to enlist in December.

AH: December, January.

KP: You wanted to serve with …

AH: I wanted to get in with my buddies. Unfortunately, [laughter] I couldn't. My mother would have been very upset if I had, anyway. She didn't raise her boy to be a soldier.

KP: Really?

AH: Well, you know, that's … the old song from World War I.

KP: It sounds as if your mother really felt that way.

AH: Yes, she shuddered.

KP: How did your father feel?

AH: My father was very quiet and non-committal. … He was proud of me once I went in, but, he never said anything before.

KP: However, your mother expressed her views.

AH: Well, she didn't really express her views. You could see it. You could sense it. She had fear, like every mother would have.

KP: She was very anxious, especially when you went overseas.

AH: Right, yes.

KP: You were initially rejected on medical grounds.

AH: I was drafted the following year, when I became twenty-one.

KP: What happened to your medical problem?

AH: Forget it. [laughter] That was funny. When I went in for my draft physical, I told them I was deaf in my left ear. … When I was inducted, I told them I was deaf in my left ear. When I went to OCS, I told them I was deaf in my left ear. … When I went overseas, I told them I was deaf in my left ear. In all of those cases, they completely ignored it. When I was getting discharged, after the war was over, I was at Fort Dix, and they asked if I had any physical disabilities, I kept quiet about my ear. Wouldn't you know, that's the time they caught it. [laughter]

KP: You do not seem surprised by that.

AH: No, not really.

KP: You lived in New Brunswick for almost a year before you were inducted. How did the war change New Brunswick?

AH: The war started changing New Brunswick very radically at the time. What happened was, Camp Kilmer opened up, and, I don't know, in the brains of the people in charge of everything, they brought Southern soldiers into Camp Kilmer, gave them the free run of New Brunswick, and New Brunswick had a very, very large, mixed community of whites and blacks. Well, when these Southern soldiers came up here, of course, things down South were much different than … they were up here, and, invariably, there were numerous fights.

KP: Between black residents and white soldiers?

AH: The white, Southern soldiers picking the fights with the black civilians in New Brunswick.

KP: Did you ever witness any fights?

AH: Yes.

KP: What would happen in most cases?

AH: Well, at that time, the police department was located on Kirkpatrick Street in New Brunswick, and the military police had an area there where they pitched tents, and they lived … right with the police department, and, if anything came up, immediately, the military police were there with the police department, and the GIs would be taken back to camp.

KP: Were these fights ever commented on in the press?

AH: At that time, I wasn't reading the papers too much, other than to read the comics. [laughter]

KP: I once interviewed a Douglass alumnae who said that women were warned to be careful, especially at night, because of all the GIs. Were your mother or sister ever concerned about that?

AH: They had no concerns, but, at that time, I was driving, and I had a car, and I used to go out on dates and drop the date off at night, when I'd take her home, and, on my way home, I'd always see GIs hitchhiking. I always picked them up and drove them all the way to camp, instead of just bringing them into New Brunswick and letting them catch a bus. I took them right to Camp Kilmer and there were many people who did the same thing. The GI, in those days, was … like a king. You'd bend over backwards to make their life easier. You know they're away from home. So, we used to do that, but, I don't recall … any real incidents.

KP: Except for the problems between the ...

AH: … GIs and the black community, yes, the Southern GIs.

KP: New Brunswick was not a very large town then, relative to the number of GIs passing through Camp Kilmer. It seems like it was a lot for the community to absorb.

AH: … It was a lot, but, New Brunswick coped pretty well with it; at least I thought so.

KP: Where did you report to once you were drafted?

AH: I reported to Fort Dix and, from Fort Dix, I was sent to Fort Bragg for basic training. Fort Bragg was the field artillery center and, when we took our tests and everything, they felt I was qualified for OCS. So, I signed up for it and I selected, as my first choice, Air Force Finance, because my buddies were all in the Air Force. I wanted to get in there, too, but, when you're in basic training in a field artillery camp and you're going to OCS, you go to Artillery OCS. So, I ended up [there]. As soon as I finished my basic training, I went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and got my commission there.

KP: Did you go through basic training at Fort Bragg?

AH: At Fort Bragg.

KP: Was your basic training course sixteen weeks long?

AH: Something like that, yes.

KP: After basic, you were sent to OCS.

AH: For three months.

KP: Did you want to be an officer?

AH: Well, when the offer came, you know, by that time, … I could already see the writing on the wall, that the officers had it a little bit better than the GIs did. So, when the offer came, I said, "Heck, might as well take it." So, I did and it ended up being a pretty good deal for me.

KP: You mentioned your bad experience in the Catskills. Training at Fort Bragg must have been an interesting experience.

AH: It was interesting and it was nothing like going up to the Catskills on a hot summer day after a long bus ride. When I was reporting to Fort Dix, we went to the New Brunswick railroad station. That's where the train picked us up. The whole contingent from New Brunswick was going there and it was remarkable how many people from the community came to the station to see us off. I mean, the war was going on for a year already and they came to the station. I recall, some of my father's customers, they came and kissed me good-bye, and, you know, it was a real experience. It was something different.

KP: That seems to have made quite an impression on you. You knew that the entire community was behind you.

AH: Oh, at that time, yes, not like Vietnam, an unholy war. I feel for the boys that were over there. They came back and got nothing, nothing but abuse. We didn't get that. When we came back, we were heroes.

KP: There was a thriving black market in New Brunswick during the war. Did you have any inkling of the black market's presence, since your father owned a store?

AH: Well, when we saw the handwriting on the wall that the war was acting up, we had an Italian food store, and we were all telling our father, "Stock up on olive oil," because his customers were all first-generation Italians, and, you know, "You've got to give them the stuff that they are used to." Well, my father would not stock up on it, and he could have made a fortune if he did, but, he figured, well, he'll just buy as the people buy, and the prices kept going up and up and up. If he'd stocked up in the beginning, when it was still cheap, he could have made a fortune, but, he would not get involved in any black market.

KP: He would not even take advantage of the legal practice of pre-stocking.

AH: No.

KP: Did you know of any other merchants who were less than ethical?

AH: Oh, I'm sure there were plenty. … Yes, I can recall a few. … I'm not going to name names, but, I do recall a few other stores, Italian food stores, where they stocked up and did things. I also recall, we had the gas rationing at the time, and, when I used to come home on leave, there was a friend of mine who had a business, who was also 4-F, and we would go out on dates. He would supply the car, but, one of us had to drive, because, if he was driving, they would stop him, but, as long as a GI was driving, it was okay. [laughter] So, that's the closest I came to the black market dealings. [laughter] It wasn't really black market dealings. I mean, he had the gas rationing coupons, and he wasn't using them all, so, he used it, more or less, to entertain the GIs.

KP: What do you remember about basic training? You mentioned that the officers had it a little better. What did you think of the Army, your training and your drill sergeant?

AH: … They were tough, but, to me, it was an enjoyable experience. It was learning something new. For me, it was a complete change of diet. What I was eating there, I was introduced to a lot of things that I had never heard of. Also, we enjoyed getting up for calisthenics in the morning, before having breakfast. … I felt I was quite healthy when I was in basic training.

KP: Had you played any sports before the war?

AH: I played a little basketball, but, I was never too good at sports.

KP: The Army really whipped you into shape.

AH: Pretty much so.

KP: What did you eat in training that you had not eaten before?

AH: Well, you name it and we never had it. [laughter] I was introduced to apple butter, which I love to this day. The one thing that I can't stand is, of course, this was at OCS, the standard fare on Sunday afternoon was pork chops and I had pork chops up to here. I couldn't stand them anymore. I have never eaten a pork chop since then, [laughter] but, you know, it was wholesome food that we had at basic training, and it was pretty well-prepared.

PW: Other than the food, what was the most difficult thing for you to adjust to?

AH: I think the regimentation was the toughest thing to handle, but, before you know it, you're used to it, and it wasn't bad at all, after the first couple of weeks. It was enjoyable.

KP: You mentioned earlier that there were conflicts between white GIs from the South and the black residents of New Brunswick. What was it like to now live in the South?

AH: Fort Bragg is right near Fayetteville, North Carolina, and there happens to be, in Fayetteville, I don't know if it's still as active as it was, but, at that time, … a very active Jewish community down there. … You could go to a kosher restaurant, when you'd get a leave, … right in Fayetteville, and I don't think they're there anymore, but, we did tie in with the Jewish community there in Fayetteville, and they made us feel very welcome. I didn't see any problems between GIs and civilians down there that I saw here in New Brunswick. In other words, the white GIs from the North that went to Fort Bragg had no idea of starting a fight with a black man. It never entered their mind.

KP: Did you ever experience any anti-Semitism in the South?

AH: Maybe, there may have been some anti-Semitism, but, it was kind of kept quiet, if there was.

KP: If there was a kosher restaurant in town, there must have been a significant Jewish community in Fayetteville.

AH: … Right. We used to get our weekends off and, Sunday, we would take a bus into Fayetteville. The first stop we would make is the kosher restaurant and have a good, kosher meal, and then, we'd maybe go to a movie or do something, but, they had the USO in those days. There was always something doing.

KP: Where did you go for OCS?

AH: Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

KP: Oklahoma is part of the South, but, it is also part of the Southwest.

AH: I didn't really consider it part of the South, … more of the West.

KP: What are your memories of Oklahoma and Fort Sill? I believe Harry Truman was trained there.

AH: Yes, he was artillery. He probably got it there, too. Well, the regimentation … was much more stiff in OCS. We knew that we were going to come out of there [and] we were going to be an officer and a gentleman, and you put up with a lot of stuff that, normally, you would give it up and run away, but, I felt it was a real good, enjoyable experience, too.

KP: What did you have to put up with?

AH: Well, each class had a series of tactical officers. These tactical officers would watch you like a hawk. If you made one mistake, you heard about it immediately. What we did, we were divided into sections, and each class had its own section, and we would have to march from one class to another, real military style, and, "Don't look over your shoulder," because the tactical officer might be there, and, in fact, I recall one incident where we had this fellow from New York, was the section leader that day, and, as we're marching to class, a very attractive girl was walking the other way, and he gave us the command, "Eyes, left," and we all turned our eyes left, and, immediately, the tactical officer said, "Section Leader, stop that section," and he really laced into him. I mean, [laughter] "You're marching. Leave the girls alone."

KP: What was the washout rate like at OCS?

AH: Very few dropped out, very few.

KP: It sounds as if there was a lot of pressure there.

AH: Oh, there was pressure. I mean, if you couldn't take the pressure, don't go, but, you got that from basic training. It was instilled in you. … If you couldn't take the pressure, don't go. Most of the people that were offered [OCS] did go.

KP: What was the hardest part of OCS?

AH: I think the toughest part was the regimentation, but, other than that, the training was, I think, excellent. I mean, if you can take a civilian and, in ninety days, make him an artillery observer, which is what I was, never having done any math or anything like that, [that is a good program]. I was introduced to logarithms, how to locate the guns, how to locate where I'm firing the guns; all of that was excellent training. I mean, if they didn't have good instructors, I never would have made it.

KP: How much math had you studied before entering the Army?

AH: I could add a column of figures.

KP: You had not studied trigonometry.

AH: No algebra, no, I never had anything.

KP: Being in the artillery, you must have had to advance pretty rapidly in mathematics.

AH: Well, actually, no. I did not learn trigonometry as such. We were taught certain formulas that we would be using, like, for our survey, when we [were] locating the guns and spotting them on a map, or, when we were firing a mission, and watch a round, and we have to locate it. We

had certain formulas that we learned, and this is the way we directed fire, but, I did not have to learn a complete course in algebra, a complete course in trigonometry, or what have you.

KP: However, you still learned more math than you had been previously exposed to.

AH: Oh, yes, oh, much more.

KP: It seems as though you became pretty adept at math.

AH: Well, I guess figures came easy to me, at the time.

PW: Do any of your instructors stand out as excellent teachers in your mind?

AH: Not really. … In my opinion, they were all very good. … The only instructor that I can recall that I really liked was, I can't remember his name, but, he was my accounting instructor at University College. I had him for several years, and I thought he was great, but, as far as military instructors, they had a job to do, and they all did it very proficiently.

KP: There was a large Jewish community in Fayetteville that made your transition into the Army easier. What about in Oklahoma?

AH: I saw nothing Jewish in Oklahoma.

KP: What about the Oklahomans?

AH: We really didn't get into town very much. We spent most of our time at Fort Sill, and, when you did go into town, you usually went to [the] USO, which was a mixed bag, but, I don't know, I didn't think it was anything different.

KP: You were trained as a field observer. What was your first assignment?

AH: Well, we had … a delay *en route* from Fort Sill. I was sent back to Fort Bragg. There was a cadre of black soldiers and we were supposed to develop that cadre, and build a unit, and go overseas as a unit. So, we were in the process of doing that when I was shifted, individually, to Fort Meade, Maryland, for overseas shipment.

KP: How long was your second tour at Fort Bragg as part of the cadre for this black artillery unit?

AH: Just a few months.

KP: The Army was segregated during World War II.

AH: It was.

KP: What were your experiences working with black troops?

AH: We had no problems, no problems whatsoever.

KP: Among the white officers and NCOs in this cadre, how many were from the South and how many were from the North?

AH: That, I have no idea. I would say [that] most of the officers were Northern.

KP: Do you know why you were pulled out of Fort Bragg?

AH: No. What they were doing was, first off, I don't think that unit ever reached its maximum, but, what was happening, units were over in Europe already, and I guess they were talking invasion, so, they wanted to build up the units to full strength, and what do you do? You pick where you need people, you go to those units, and you pick, and that's how I got selected.

PW: Were you able to go back home before going overseas?

AH: Yes. I was stationed in Fort Meade, Maryland, until I got my shipping orders for what unit I was going [to]. Fort Meade, Maryland, is relatively close to New Brunswick, so, on weekends, I used to be able to come home, and I did that. I took advantage of every chance I had to come home.

KP: How long were you stationed at Fort Meade?

AH: I think I was there [for] about a month or two.

KP: You were without a unit.

AH: No, we were unassigned at that time.

KP: What did you do as an unassigned officer?

AH: Well, we still had to do our calisthenics. We had to do a few minor details, not pulling KP or anything like that, ‘cause officers didn't do that, but, we did have details that were assigned to us. One of the basic things they made us do at Fort Meade was, the officer in charge would come around and say, "Okay, how many cannot be off the post in an hour?" and nobody raised their hand. "Okay, we're coming by in an hour; you'd better all be gone. Now, what we suggest you do,” and they gave us maps, "go into Washington," which was relatively close, "and there are

these things to see." I had never been to Washington, and it was good for me, because I was able to see parts of my country that I never knew existed, but, you know, we went to see all the monuments that were erected. We went to the Mall. It was really something; it was.

KP: Your time at Fort Meade sounds almost like a vacation.

AH: Pretty much so.

KP: Especially since you were encouraged to go sight-seeing.

AH: Well, they wanted us [to]. We're going overseas to fight for our country. They wanted us to know what we were fighting for, so, you know, it was a good idea. I enjoyed that.

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

KP: Did you go anywhere else while on leave at Fort Meade?

AH: I tried Baltimore once and I was very unhappy in Baltimore and never went back again. [laughter] It wasn't my idea of a nice city.

KP: Did you ever attend religious services while in the military, particularly in the United States?

AH: … There were relatively few Jewish chaplains. Unfortunately, we couldn't get off the post when we wanted to, like, for Saturday services. We couldn't do that. There were very few Jewish chaplains, as I said. We had minimal Jewish services in the service. The only time I recall, when I was overseas, we had a Catholic chaplain and a Protestant chaplain. The Catholic chaplain was very aloof and he kind of stayed away from us. He dealt strictly with the Catholic units. The Protestant chaplain, on the other hand, came to me one day, he said, "Lieutenant Handaly, … I'm not trying to convert you or anything, but, I know we don't have a Jewish chaplain here, and we don't have Jewish services, but, I would appreciate it if you would come and sit in on one of my services," just to sit in, which I appreciated very much, that he took the interest in me.

KP: Did you attend one of his services?

AH: I did. Yes, it was very enjoyable to me. He was a down-to-earth guy.

KP: He was just reaching out to you, since he knew that you did not have a chaplain. He sounded very sincere.

AH: Right. Oh, yes, definitely.

KP: When did you find out which unit you had been assigned to?

AH: Yes, well, when I left Fort Meade, we boarded a boat in New York Harbor and it was at that time that I knew I was going to Sunny Devon in England. So, fourteen days on the water, zigging and zagging, we finally ended up in Barry Dock, Wales. Barry Dock, Wales, is the northern side of a little, I guess you'd call it an estuary, and Silverton was on the southern side of that. So, I had to take a train from Barry Dock, Wales, around this whole area and come back down to my unit. That's when I knew where I was.

KP: Which unit were you assigned to?

AH: The 953rd Field Artillery Battalion. It was Fifth Corps Artillery, First Army.

KP: When did you land in England? When did you actually join your unit?

AH: I left New York, it was February, 1943, I believe it was. We left in the worst storm that hit the area in the winter and we had rough going, all the way across, for fourteen days, because we couldn't run away from the storm. We were zigging and zagging; the storm was there, which was for our protection anyway, because there were submarines in the area, and the final day, when we arrived at Barry Dock, that's the first time I saw the sunshine, after that sea voyage.

KP: Did you get seasick?

AH: No, I was very fortunate.

KP: What kind of a ship did you travel on? Was it a Liberty ship?

AH: No, it was a small naval transport. I'll never forget the name. In fact, recently, we were down at Annapolis and the name came up again. It's the USS *Anne Arundel*. Anne Arundel was some big deal woman in Navy history and they named the ship after her. …

KP: How comfortable or uncomfortable were your quarters?

AH: Very uncomfortable.

KP: Even though you were an officer?

AH: Well, we were more comfortable than the enlisted men, because the enlisted men had bunks set up in the hulls, in tiers. We had bunks, but, we had a cabin. There were four to a cabin.

Normally, a cruise ship wouldn't even use that for a storage room, but, we had four … officers to a cabin, and it was not too bad.

KP: Not the most comfortable.

AH: Not the most comfortable.

KP: Especially in bad weather.

AH: Well, I consider myself very fortunate that I didn't get seasick. I've been a very good sailor. Maybe I missed my calling; I should have been in the Navy, instead of the Army. [laughter]

KP: You landed in England fairly early in 1943, and then, joined your unit.

AH: Yes, I joined them right away.

KP: Did you stay in England until D-Day?

AH: … Yes, we were in Silverton, which is a little village in … Devonshire, England. It's a few miles away from Exeter and we were there. We did our training. We went and did our firing up on the Moors and just continued our training, right there.

KP: Did you stay with this unit until the invasion?

AH: Oh, yes.

KP: You were not transferred again.

AH: No transfer.

KP: Was your unit at full strength when you arrived?

AH: Well, it was still building.

KP: When did they reach full strength?

AH: … Within a couple of months.

KP: It sounds like you spent almost a full year training for the invasion.

AH: Well, training was constant.

KP: What was your opinion of your commander? Where were you in the chain of command? What were your responsibilities leading up to the invasion?

AH: Okay. Field artillery is made up of batteries. Batteries are the equivalent of a company in the infantry. … In each battery, you have a commanding officer, you have a firing officer, you have an intelligence officer, and you have a service officer. Those four are basically running the unit. There are, generally, four batteries in a battalion, … A, B, C, and Service, and my battery was B Battery. I was the additional officer in the intelligence unit. Field artillery observers were connected with the intelligence unit, because we were up on the lines. We relayed information back. Basically, we had two additional officers, beside the standard cadre, … myself and [the] assistant battery officer, and this, generally, made up our unit. Our captain was a Captain Miller. … From being a college professor, he ended up in the Army, directing a field artillery battery. Our battalion commander was Colonel John Varian. I don't know what his background was, but, ... a very straight forward man, very good commander, and, basically, that's what our unit was made of.

KP: Were any of the NCOs or officers regulars?

AH: I would say some of the officers were. ... Captain Miller, I think he had some military background. Our battery officer was ROTC. A couple of the higher ranking officers were from the Military Academy. … Basically, the lower echelons were ninety-day-wonders, like me.

KP: Did the regulars and ninety-day-wonders work well together?

AH: [laughter] Well, we didn't really have problems, but, the only one that didn't let me forget his rank was our battery officer, the ROTC officer, but, he was the only one, but, he made it sort of like a joke, laughing it off. I don't know, to this day, if he was serious about it or what.

KP: What did he say?

AH: Well, like, when I got my promotion from second lieutenant to first lieutenant, I'll never forget, he got on the phone and he called me. He was a first lieutenant. So, he gets on the phone, calls me and says, "Now, Handaly, I want you to remember one thing; my bar has a date on it." [laughter]

KP: Meaning that, even though you had been promoted to his rank, he still outranked you by date.

AH: Yes.

KP: You were stationed in England for over a year.

AH: Yes, from then until D-Day.

KP: What was it like to be based in England for such a long period of time?

AH: Well, being in a small village, we got to know the people pretty well, and we were accepted, very gratefully accepted, and we enjoyed the people in town very much. When we wanted anything big, we had to go to Exeter and we used to run trucks in there, periodically.

KP: What did you think of the English people and their customs? What did you enjoy about England?

AH: Well, the English were not as, they're lively, but, not in the sense that the Americans were. They love fun as much as we do, but, their type of fun is a little different than our type of fun. Their sense of humor is a little different from our sense of humor. They would tell a joke; we wouldn't think it was funny, but, they would. You had to be very careful of your language. For example, one of the worst cuss words in England is, "Bloody," and don't you dare order a Bloody Mary, you know, because that's the Queen, and you can't cuss the Queen like that, but, all in all, the people were very friendly, and they accepted us, we accepted them, and we knew we had to live together, and, when we left, a lot of them had tears in their eyes.

KP: Did you or any of your men date any English women?

AH: Yes, yes. There was no non-fraternization rules at that time. In fact, I and one of the other officers, we used to date these two girls who were friends and we established a correspondence, all the time I was in the service and even after I got home. She married a military guy and most of the GIs had dates.

KP: Did you notice the war's impact on the British by the time you arrived?

AH: Well, the only thing that we saw that told us that there a war was on was, there was a lot of military [personnel]. As far as destruction, the buzz bombs were landing in London. We weren't anywhere near there, so, we didn't get to see that, but, basically, what we had was more military people, American and Canadian and British, and this is what we saw.

KP: What would take place on a typical training maneuver in England?

AH: Well, something typical would be, like, we'd leave our battery area, go to the firing range, get our guns set up in position, and be ready to fire on targets within a minimum amount of time. What we were basically trying to do was get our guns in position to start shooting as soon as we possibly could, always on the ready. It's not like a self-propelled battery, [which] would be a gun that's mounted on a tank, and they'd just pull into a position and start shooting. We, on the other hand, … had four guns in a battery, had to line them up in certain areas, have the guns, what we

called, “lay the guns by azimuth,” or by compass, and have them point in a certain direction. Now, the artillery observer would know the location of the gun. He would know the location of the target. He would know which way the guns were pointed and, from that, you had to maneuver the guns to fire on a target. Today, you don't have to worry. Everything is mechanically controlled. You say, “The target is here.” “Boom,” the gun goes. In those days, you had to direct each round.

KP: As a forward observer, a great deal of responsibility rested on your shoulders.

AH: Pretty much so. There were a lot of cases of friendly fire, hitting our own troops, but, thank God, I never did it.

KP: You were aware that mistakes could be made, regardless of how careful you were.

AH: Oh, yes. Mistakes could be made very easily.

KP: Did you deal less with the men in your unit since you were a forward observer?

AH: No, no. We were like a family. I recall, Thanksgiving Day, I happened to be up at the observation post and I didn't get back for quite awhile. When I did get back, the cooks had saved me and my crew turkey dinner, so that we would have something to remind us of home. We had a cook who was a wiz with mixing this powdered stuff. Powdered milk, I don't know if you've ever had it, tastes horrible. Well, he would doctor it up with eggs, powdered eggs, and we'd take a can of it with us, always had it in our jeep, and, when we would mix some milk, it really tasted like a malted. … We had that type of people. As far as the rest of the enlisted men, everybody was friendly with everybody else.

KP: It sounds as if your unit was more relaxed in terms of the officer-enlisted man relationship, that you emphasized teamwork.

AH: Pretty much so, except that we had to be careful when the higher ranking officers were around; like, if the Colonel was around, you wouldn't dare call one of the GIs by his first name. You always used his rank and his last name.

KP: However, when the higher ranking officers were away ...

AH: Well, we had a medic who treating me for frostbite. I'd call him, “Gus.” His name was Gus Svien. He was a corporal. One day, he was treating me and the Colonel happened to walk by. … When he was through, I said, "Thank you, Gus.” I heard about it from the Colonel. He says, “You're supposed to use his rank and his last name, no familiarity.” “Okay, the next time the Colonel is around, I won't use familiarity.” [laughter]

KP: Did the enlisted men always use proper titles?

AH: Oh, yes.

KP: The informality only went one way.

AH: Right. I was always known as "Lieutenant."

KP: Were there any discipline problems with the men in your battery while you were stationed in England?

AH: Fortunately not.

KP: There were no drunken fights in town.

AH: They'd go to a pub and, you know, have a couple of beers. How drunk can you get on drinking a few beers? Besides, they had curfews and they had to be back in the barracks.

KP: Did anyone go AWOL?

AH: No, not in our unit. There may have been some in some of the other units, but, no, we were very fortunate. We had a good crew.

KP: Once the invasion began, when was your unit deployed?

AH: D +3, we were on board boats. D +5, we're on the coast of Normandy, surrounded by other boats. We'd look around, and [there were] hundreds and hundreds of boats around, and there was this little Normandy Beach where we're all supposed to unload and get on land. Well, we made it. We got on; almost lost one of our ammunition trucks. He found himself trying to follow the route that he was supposed to. All of a sudden, he found himself on the front lines, and he's not supposed to be on the front lines, so, they chased him back. Luckily, we all got together all right.

KP: Landing on D +5, the sheer size of the invasion was apparent.

AH: Very, very much so.

KP: Did you see any dead bodies in the water?

AH: Yes; not in the water, … not landing. I saw them later on.

KP: Which beach did you land on?

AH: Normandy.

KP: How soon after landing were you sent into battle?

AH: Oh, the next day, we were shooting.

KP: You landed on D +5; then, on D +6 …

AH: We're shooting.

KP: After such a long period of training, what was it like to actually be in combat?

AH: It was scary. It was very scary. In fact, one thing that really scared us, back in basic training and training in the States, we were taught, when you're doing guard duty, you yell, "Halt," three times, and, if they don't stop, you shoot. Well, that doesn't hold true when you're at war. … A crew of our observers were up on-the-line and we had several people deployed around them as a protective area. So happens [that] a German patrol came through, got past the lines, and one of our men yelled, "Halt." He yelled it once and he was dead. So, that taught us a lesson, you don't yell, "Halt," anymore, you look. If he's not a GI, you shoot, and then, you ask questions later.

KP: It sounds like someone had to get killed before ...

AH: Somebody had to get killed before we learned, but, we learned darn quick.

KP: As a forward observer, how many men did you take up to the line with you? How close were you to the frontline?

AH: Well, I had my jeep driver, my radio operator, and the three of us would be on-the-line. … When we used to go up to the frontlines, we used to stop at the infantry command posts, ask the officer in charge what the situation was up front, and he would ask us where we were establishing our observation post, and he would tell us if it's safe or it's not safe. I found one thing, that when the GI saw an artillery observer up there, he loved him. We got more protection than anybody you could ever hope to see, because the infantry knew that if they had a target out there, they would tell us, and we'd get the big guns firing on them. So, they gave us real good protection.

KP: Did you have any other protection?

AH: Not really, no. So, we had to be a little bit careful.

KP: What kind of weapons did you carry?

AH: My men carried carbines, .30 caliber, and I carried a .45 automatic, and we also had additional carbines in the jeep.

KP: Did you ever have to shoot your weapon? Did you ever have any close calls?

AH: No. …

KP: Was your position ever overrun?

AH: Not ours, no.

KP: Were any other observers in your unit less fortunate?

AH: I don't recall any of our units being overrun. The only overrunning I recall is the Battle of the Bulge and they overran everything then.

PW: What was your first experience in combat like?

AH: It was scary, but, you have to put on a show, because I had infantry up there with me, and my mission was, … if they told me there was a target out there; first off, you've got to understand, we were corps artillery, which means that we had only selected targets. There were only certain things that we could shoot at, because we were .155 mm howitzers. So, when the infantry gave us a target and we got permission to shoot at it, I had these guys standing around me, watching those rounds land out there on the target. I wanted to make sure I had my guns shooting at that target in the quickest amount of time, with the least amount of adjustment, and then, fire for effect and destroy the target, and, even though it's scary to be up on-the-line, when you've got all this protection and you're, more or less, putting on a show for the infantry, you've got to hide some of your fear.

KP: You felt that, even though you were scared, you should not show it.

AH: You can't show it. You can't. If you show fear, it's going to catch on.

KP: Did you learn that yourself or were you told that in training?

AH: No, I learned that myself.

PW: Did you ever see the areas where your ordnance fell?

AH: When we were able to advance beyond that point, yes, I did see some, and I didn't like it, but, heck, you had to do it.

KP: What was a typical day in combat like? How long would you be on-the-line?

AH: Well, usually, you would be up from daybreak to sunset and, if there was a lot of activity, you could spend the night there. ... What we did [was], we looked for the highest ground. We'd look for an area where we would have cover, and, in many cases, what we did [was], we went into a hayloft, on high ground, and we slept there. We could be up there two, three, four days, and then, go back to the battery.

KP: When you were away from the battery, what did you eat?

AH: K rations.

KP: Did you ever scrounge off the infantry?

AH: There were times you had to, … like, I had detail; at one time, I had to take a truck load of men from one point to another. It was lunch time, so, I stopped at a place. I asked the commander if he would feed my men. They were very glad to do it. There's plenty of food for everybody. Unfortunately, we found out later, it was a Graves' Registration unit. Had we known, we probably would not have stopped there, [laughter] but, you know, if somebody came by that needed food, there was plenty of food to go around. …

KP: You were in the artillery, but, you had a lot of contact with the infantry.

AH: Most of our contact.

KP: What did you think of the infantryman's life? Were you glad to be in the artillery?

AH: … Yes. It's a dirty life. Of course, we participated in part of it, but, those poor guys had to get into a position, dig a hole and get under cover. By the time we got there, the protection was already there. We were better off than they were.

KP: When you were at the front, your life was very similar to an infantryman's. When you returned to your battery, it was not the Waldorf, but, ...

AH: It's better.

KP: It was not great by any measure.

AH: Right, it's better than what they had.

KP: Did the men in your battery sleep in foxholes also?

AH: I used to sleep under the half-tracks and hope that they wouldn't get up and drive them in the morning. [laughter] You pretty much lay your head down wherever you can.

KP: However, you had more places to sleep.

AH: Oh, yes.

KP: What kind of food did you have in the battery area?

AH: We had hot meals.

KP: You were not living on K rations, like the infantry.

AH: The infantry, periodically, got a hot meal. We, back at the battery, had hot meals every day.

KP: It was not a treat to get a hot meal, it was standard.

AH: It's not a treat to get a hot meal, but, it was a treat to get some of the hot meals that they gave us.

KP: I know that infantrymen often went an entire week without a hot meal.

AH: They could go more than a week.

KP: How often did you get an opportunity to shower?

AH: I would say we averaged maybe once a month. Shaving was done using your tin hat for water. Once a month, we would get to a shower point. We'd strip off our clothes, go through the shower, come out the other side, and get a new issue of clothes, even though, being an officer, I had to buy my own clothes, when I dumped it, I got new clothes.

KP: Were you charged?

AH: No, because it was even exchange. [laughter]

KP: Did you stay with this unit until the end of the war?

AH: Not this unit. I was transferred towards the end. After the Battle of the Bulge, I was transferred to the Ninth Armored Division, Third Armored Field Artillery Battalion, and I stayed with them until the end of the war. We went on police duty after the war was over.

KP: Until 1945, you stayed with ...

AH: With 953rd, … B Battery.

KP: Did your unit suffer any casualties?

AH: We suffered casualties, well, like that one sergeant that I told you of, and we had a couple of people who had nervous disorders, had to be sent back. We were in one position once, and we thought the area had been cleared of mines, and, as a jeep was going by, this one GI stepped aside to let the jeep go by, stepped on a Teller mine. We picked him up off a tree. There were a couple of other situations like that.

KP: Did you ever come under artillery fire at the battery?

AH: … Not at the battery, when I was up on-the-line. Yes, there were several times.

KP: How frightening was an artillery barrage?

AH: Giving out is not like taking in. It's a little bit different. They had what they called the "screaming mimis," it's a rocket that they were using. You could hear that thing whistle from when it started off. Well, when you heard that whistle, you'd better hit the ground, because you never know where it's going to hit, and, when it hit, it was devastating. … The other observer in our unit was at this … observation post and he had the BC scope, which is two eye pieces with the lenses going up. While he was there, … he heard the screaming mimis, and he turned the scope to the direction where it was coming from, because we wanted to get a reading and try to locate the gun, and he took off and ran downstairs. When he came up, one of the shells had hit the roof of that barn, and right between the two eye pieces was a shell fragment, right in there, and, had he stayed on that scope, he would have been dead.

PW: Did you have any near misses?

AH: Do you mean [from] enemy fire?

PW: Yes, where you would have been hit if you had stayed in one position.

AH: Well, I recall one position where the artillery incoming was really devastating. They fired without stopping. There I was, in this infantry command post, and we're sitting there, and we just couldn't do a thing. It was nighttime. We couldn't do a thing. Those shells kept coming in; … like, every few seconds, another shell would land. All you could do was sit and pray. You couldn't take any other cover.

KP: You mentioned that several members of your battery cracked up under the mental strain. What happened to those men? What sparked their breakdowns?

AH: Well, you've got to understand, we were a civilian army. None of us were really geared for wartime and some of us … just couldn't take it. … There were a couple of guys, … they sent them back, and they gave them treatment, and they ended up going home. I had one driver, he didn't crack up, but, one day, he goes on sick call, and he had a heart murmur. So, I lost my driver. They sent him home.

KP: You really got to know those two men, since you spent so much time with them.

AH: You live together. …

KP: Did you stay in touch with them? What were their backgrounds?

AH: I lost contact with them, Wilson. I remember his name very well. He was a young, blond kid and, as he was being taken away, he says, "I'll be back, Lieutenant. I'll be back." "Okay, when you come back, your job is here," and he never did come back, but, I remember him very well.

KP: Was the Battle of the Bulge the toughest part of the war for you? Did you have any closer calls before the Bulge?

AH: Well, the Battle of the Bulge was the most devastating, because we knew absolutely nothing about what was happening. At that point, we happened to be down in [the] Seventh Army area, fulfilling another mission. When we got the word that the Battle of the Bulge had started, the German Army had attacked, … our battery commander called us in, he says, "We don't know what we're getting into. What we have to do is, we're going to take up a position and fire into the pocket." I don't know how familiar you are with the Battle of the Bulge, but, the German Army went in in a pincer movement and separated us. Had they gone a few miles further, they would have gotten our ammunition dumps, our fuel supplies, and they would have been able to go all the way back to the coast, but, they didn't. Fortunately for us, we stopped them, but, we turned around. I was then pulled up to, you've heard of the Malmedy massacre? We took our position in Malmedy after that happened. Now, that was one unit that was overrun and they were completely annihilated.

KP: How much did you know about the Malmedy massacre?

AH: At that point, we didn't know.

KP: You did not see the bodies.

AH: No.

KP: Did you hear any rumors?

AH: No.

KP: What mission were you performing before the Battle of the Bulge?

AH: Well, we were supporting the Seventh Army. We were corps artillery, and, wherever they came into a position where they needed heavy weapons, they would take corps artillery, which was the bigger guns, and that's what we were doing. We were down in Seventh Army area.

KP: Then, you were moved north.

AH: We came right back up to the First Army area, circled around and came down, facing south.

KP: You moved around quite a bit.

AH: We're constantly on the move.

KP: For you, the Battle of the Bulge was a matter of getting on trucks and half-tracks, not of being overrun.

AH: For me, the Bulge was getting into position, shooting our guns, and stopping the German Army. That's all it meant to me, because we knew that if they broke through, that would have been the end of the war for us.

KP: Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge always comment on how cold it was.

AH: … Freezing.

KP: You were a field observer, so, you were up on-the-line. How long were you on-the-line during the Battle of the Bulge?

AH: You say, "On-the-line," but, you see, you've got to understand that not all [of] our observer's positions were on-the-line. … Sometimes, if you could get into a location where there's a building that's on high ground and has good visibility, that's where you're going to set up your observation post; try to stay off the ground as much as possible.

KP: Were you able to find a building during the Battle of the Bulge?

AH: In some cases, we did. In Malmedy, we found a place.

KP: Was it difficult to do your job in such cold weather?

AH: I think the adrenaline keeps you warm.

KP: Really?

AH: The guys down at the guns, they moved fast. When a fire mission is called, you want the shells out there as quick as possible, and you yell, "Fire mission," in the gun battery and everybody moves, and they move fast.

KP: It sounds as if your unit was very effective. Except for a few people being removed for mental breakdowns, you did not have any real problems in your unit.

AH: No. I don't think we had any problems at all, so to speak.

KP: For example, when you gave orders to fire, your unit ...

AH: Oh, they were there. They were ready.

KP: During the Battle of the Bulge, were you aware of how grave the situation was or were you just confused?

AH: In the beginning, we were confused, but, then, as things worked out, we learned what was going on. They didn't keep secrets from us, you know. When the word would filter down through the Colonel to the batteries, … we would be told.

KP: How soon after the Battle of the Bulge were you detached from the 953rd?

AH: Well, this happened after the breakthrough, after we contained the Battle of the Bulge and started moving back. Then, I guess what happened was, the armored divisions needed personnel, too, and, since our mission … [had] relatively ended, so to speak, they took the excess and moved … us over.

KP: Do you remember what month that was?

AH: Not really.

KP: The war had not ended yet.

AH: Oh, yes.

KP: You were sent to an armored unit.

AH: Right.

KP: What were your duties there?

AH: I was an observer there, too.

KP: Your duties were very similar, except that your guns were more mobile.

AH: Right.

KP: You would go out with your driver …

AH: Yes. Well, the war ended shortly after I joined that unit. So, actually, we were more on police duty than anything else.

KP: Which part of Germany were you policing?

AH: We were all the way into Czechoslovakia, a little village called Cheb, and that's where we ended up.

KP: You patrolled the towns.

AH: Well, we patrolled our area. Our senior officers were in charge.

PW: What were some of your specific duties?

AH: Well, … there were displaced persons' camps in the area, and what used to happen is, the civilian population used to go the displaced persons' camps and start stealing the rations, and we had to make sure that they didn't do that. We had to maintain discipline in the civilian population and protect the rights of the displaced persons, more or less.

PW: What were the displaced persons camps like?

AH: They were not like the concentration camps. What they were were, these people who had been prisoners of the German Army, until we were able to get them back to their country, were put into these camps where they provided clothing, shelter and food for them. … There were people who would try to locate their relatives' country and get them back to where they belonged.

PW: In effect, you liberated these camps.

AH: No, we didn't liberate them. We protected them once we were there. In fact, those camps were established after the war.

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

KP: This continues an interview with Mr. Albert Handaly on November 13, 1996, at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Kurt Piehler and …

PW: … Pete Wasek.

KP: Did your armored unit liberate any concentration camps? Did you encounter any concentration camps?

AH: … No, we did not see any concentration camps. …

KP: When were you fully aware of the Holocaust's magnitude, the fact that the majority of Europe's Jews had been murdered?

AH: When I saw the newsreels; I guess it would be after they were liberated.

KP: However, you were not fully aware during the war.

AH: … I may have known, but, I was not aware, really.

KP: How long did your policing duties continue?

AH: It continued for awhile, until they were transferring me to the Pacific. I was supposed to ... come home for a thirty-day delay *en route,* then, go to the Pacific Theater. The war was still on over there. We went to what was called Camp Lucky Strike in France and boarded a boat and we were halfway back to the States when we heard about the Japanese surrender. Now, we're already afraid [that] they're going to send us back to Europe, but, they brought us home, and we waited for our discharge.

KP: In a way, you were lucky to be on your way to the Pacific, because the point system may have kept you in Europe longer.

AH: Would have, yes.

KP: Obviously, you did not want to serve in the Pacific, but, did you know anything about the war in the Pacific? Did you know if you were going to stay with the armored unit or be sent back into the artillery?

AH: No, I was detached from the armor. I was no longer with that unit. I was detached and I was going to join another unit over there. I don't know who. We had heard of what was going on over there, but, from what I understand, I think I was better off where I was, rather than in the Pacific, because that was, I think, a little rougher war than what we had.

KP: Did you give any thought to staying in the military when you returned home?

AH: [laughter] Not at that time. At that time, I wanted out.

KP: Not even the Reserves?

AH: Not even the Reserves.

PW: Why not?

AH: Well, by that time, I was already educated as to what was going on in the world, but, … the military was not for me, so to speak.

KP: Did you have any contact with the German people during the war?

AH: There was the non-fraternization clause. ... We took over these houses as command posts. Now, we did not throw the people out. We let them stay in certain areas of the house. It was their home, and we did have conversations with the people that we came in contact with, but, we tried to discourage the men [from] dating any of the German women, because, at that time, there was, as I say, the non-fraternization clause, and there was a lot of venereal disease going around then, so, we had to be careful of that, too.

KP: It sounds as if you were very cautious, that this was something that you had to deal with.

AH: We had to. We were there.

PW: How long were you on occupation duty in Germany, approximately?

AH: Approximately six months, and then, I was detached and was coming home, and then, going to the Pacific.

PW: Did any of your men do any looting or take any souvenirs?

AH: Well, let's put it this way; we went into one position. We found an abandoned house, and we used the attic of that house as our observation post, and, laying on the floor, there was a beautiful accordion. I don't know where the people were that were in that house, but, one of the kids back at the battery played the accordion very well. We brought him back a present. It was laying there, you know. [laughter] …

PW: Did you bring any souvenirs home?

AH: I had two pistols, the P-38 and a Mauser, brought them home, and, when my mother saw guns, she said, "Get rid of them." So, I got rid of them. [laughter]

KP: Your mother did not like the idea.

AH: No.

KP: How often did you correspond with your parents?

AH: We used to correspond every day. I have a suitcase at home of all the letters that I sent and my sister saved. … The one time I'll never forget, and I never did it again, for … every holiday that would come by, I would send a telegram home. Now, in order to send a telegram, you had to put it in, like, a week or two before, so [that] you're guaranteed delivery for the holiday. Well, I happened to send one just before the Battle of the Bulge. I sent a telegram home, wishing them all a Merry Christmas. The Battle of the Bulge breaks out and Western Union's going to deliver the telegram. My mother would not accept that telegram for love or money. She just wouldn't touch it. The kid that delivered it said, "Madame, there's no black border on it. It's good news," because, you know, those telegrams had the black border on it. She wouldn't touch it. My cousin had to come from next door and accept the telegram. Since then, I never sent a telegram again.

KP: Your mother realized how serious the Battle of the Bulge was.

AH: Well, she knew war. She knew it was pretty bad.

KP: Did you ever get a chance to go to any of the USO shows?

AH: Officers kind of shied away from USO shows, because they were mostly for the GIs' entertainment, and we didn't want to interfere. If you saw an officer walk in, immediately, the GI gets back a little bit.

KP: The idea was to leave the men alone.

AH: Let them enjoy it.

KP: Did you make use of any of the USO clubs?

AH: I personally didn't, because, when I was at camp, I just stayed at camp and did my thing. When I was home, I had my own territory.

KP: Did you ever get any passes while you were in Europe? Did you do any sight-seeing?

AH: There was a friend of mine [who] was stationed near Paris, and I had a three-day pass, so, I went to Paris, and I visited him. I stayed with him, and he was billeted in one of the houses, and I stayed with him. … We also had some friends in Paris, whose address I had, and I made contact with him. I had dinner with the gentleman once and, basically, that's the only time that I had a pass. No, I take it back. In Belgium, I had a pass to take a group of men to the mineral baths. That was an experience. Big, copper tub with this water in it, I don't know what was in it, but, you sank in that tub, and your body was tingling. You could feel the dirt coming out of your pores, and, you know, I was ready to get out of the thing, but, … these women would come and wash your hair, and they had these beautiful, warm terrycloth robes, … they take them out of the heating unit and wrap you in them and dry you off. It was an experience.

KP: Coming out of combat must have added to the experience.

AH: Right.

KP: Did you have any contact with French or Belgian civilians?

AH: Mostly in Belgium. When we were at the Battle of the Bulge, we established this observation post in one house, and … the family that owned the house, they were still there, and they were so happy that we were there that they treated us royally. Christmas Eve, we're singing *Silent Night*. They gave up their beds for our comfort. … They were that type of people. In fact, after the war, I had to take a group of men from one unit to another, and I was passing by there, and it was getting late in the day, and I happened to remember that we were there, so, we stopped in, and, immediately, Betty gave up her bed for us, even though her little boy had diphtheria. She gave up her bed, and we scattered our men throughout the whole area, and they fed us. It was really nice.

KP: Have you ever been back to Europe?

AH: I couldn't afford to do that trip. I've always wanted to. I want to go step-by-step and follow the map that I have.

KP: You never returned to Europe.

AH: I've been to Europe, but, ... I've been to Ireland, I've been to Spain, I've been to London.

KP: However, you have never gone back to Belgium, France or Germany.

AH: France, we only hit when we changed planes.

KP: When you returned home, did you join the Jewish War Veterans immediately?

AH: I was active in the Jewish War Veterans, but, then, I was starting to get active in too many groups, and I kind of concentrated my activity with the synagogue.

KP: When did you learn about the GI Bill?

AH: When I joined the Jewish War Veterans, we had a very, very excellent service officer, who happened to be a lawyer in New Brunswick, Gabriel Kirzenbaum, he was really a crackerjack, and he explained [the] things that we were entitled to, and [told us] what we should do, and he helped us apply for things.

KP: You were not thinking about the GI Bill before you returned home.

AH: Not really. It was pretty much that some of my buddies said, "You've got the education coming to you. Why don't you go take advantage of it?" Finally, I broke down and did.

KP: You mentioned earlier that you entered Rutgers as a lark. Obviously, it was easy to find out about Rutgers because you were from New Jersey.

AH: Well, my wife used to work for Rutgers.

KP: Was she working here at the time?

AH: Yes, she was working at the time.

KP: Where did she work?

AH: ... Where was she working at the time? She had several jobs. I can't really remember, but, it was on the New Brunswick campus, and she got involved in things where she had contact with admissions. … Well, when I first started, it wasn't through her. It was when I went in later that it was through her.

KP: Was she here in the 1940s?

AH: No. We didn't get married until '54.

KP: You entered Rutgers because the service officer encouraged you to go.

AH: He, and my buddies pushing me.

KP: They told you that you should really go to college.

AH: Right.

KP: You were not really considering it.

AH: Not really, no.

KP: When did you enter Rutgers?

AH: I have my transcripts somewhere in here. [The] first entry is Fall 1948.

KP: You entered late. You did not enter in 1946 or 1947.

AH: No.

PW: What did you do between being discharged and coming to Rutgers?

AH: Well, believe it or not, for the first year, I was on what they'd called the 52/20 Club. I used go to unemployment and get twenty dollars a week, … for fifty-two weeks. That was your GI entitlement. I went fifty weeks, and, finally, they got tired of seeing me around, and they sent me for a job. [laughter]

KP: Where was your first job?

AH: My first job after the war was at Penn-Jersey Auto Stores, in retail sales.

KP: How long did you stay there?

AH: … Several years.

KP: Did you attend Rutgers full-time?

AH: No, I went evenings. I was University College all the way.

KP: You were not in Rutgers College.

AH: No.

KP: Did you consider becoming a full-time student?

AH: Not really. Going to University College did not require as much of my time as going full-time would and, since I was not really all that interested in it, there was no point in my taking up space, so to speak.

KP: What was your major?

AH: Accounting.

KP: Why?

AH: I felt that that was the field to go into. I liked figures. …

KP: How well did you do in college?

AH: Well, [looking at his transcript], I see "1"s, ["A"s], and "2"s, ["B"s], and "3"s, ["C"s], average student, average student.

KP: You were not having academic problems.

AH: No. … The reason I dropped out is, you see, you were entitled, when you're on the GI Bill, … to two absences, consecutive. If you have three [and] you have a good reason for it, it's okay. Otherwise, you lose your benefits. Well, I had a chance to go to Florida on a vacation. Now, I knew I was going to miss three classes. I went to all my professors, and I told them what the story was, and I said, "[If you] report me out three, I lose my benefits." Everyone assured me that I would be okay, I wouldn't have to worry about a thing. One of them turned my name in, so, I lost my benefits. I couldn't afford to pay for it myself, so, I had to drop out.

KP: Why do you think the professor did that?

AH: Probably forgot.

KP: Do you think he was out to get you?

AH: No, I don't think so.

KP: How many semesters had you finished under the GI Bill?

AH: Well, I was there until Fall of 1952, so, that took me halfway through, and I went back in 1971 and graduated in '74. I made the Dean's List in that course, but, even then, my grades were better.

KP: Did you try to appeal for your lost benefits?

AH: No, at that time, I really was not that interested in it.

KP: You were willing to accept whatever happened.

AH: Yes.

KP: Did you ever use the GI Bill Mortgage?

AH: After I got married, yes, bought our first home with the GI Mortgage.

KP: What were the circumstances that led you back to University College?

AH: … Well, I had worked … at Penn-Jersey for awhile. Then, I went to work for an outfit called the Watermaster Company, and I was there for twenty-one years, and I wasn't getting anywhere. When I first started there, it was very nice to get a five dollar raise at Christmastime, because, at that time, five dollars meant a lot of money, but, this was standard fare; every Christmas, a five dollar raise. In later years, five dollars didn't mean that much. So, I went to work for Professor Horowitz, with his magazine. … It was *Sociology* Magazine, that he brought from St. Louis.

KP: The *Society* Magazine.

AH: Well, that's what it's called now.

KP: However, it was another ...

AH: Another name before then, and I worked there for a year, and I started making my moves, and, wherever I went, they seemed to be interested in a degree. So, I said, "Well, I'd better get back to school." At that time, my wife was working for Rutgers. She knew this fellow in admissions. It was right near the end of admissions time that she pushed me, and I went, and he got me in, and, as I said, from then on, it was all downhill.

KP: You mentioned that you were far more determined the second time at University College.

AH: I needed a degree, let's put it that way. I had something to work for. Before, it didn't matter.

KP: How did getting a college degree affect your career?

AH: It helped out in several places and, when I went to work for the State of New Jersey, it helped me out, because it made me eligible for certain Civil Service exams, which I took and passed with flying colors. It helped me advance in my position with the State.

KP: Which position did you land?

AH: I was with the fiscal officer in the Department of Agriculture in Trenton.

KP: Did you stay with the Department of Agriculture?

AH: I stayed there until I retired.

KP: You really used your accounting degree.

AH: Right.

KP: Did you ever take the CPA exam?

AH: No, because, by the time I got my accounting degree, I was a little bit old already, and I felt I was too old to try to go for CPA, plus, the fact that I was raising a family at the time, and I would have needed certain other courses which I really couldn't afford the time or the money to take, so, I just stayed with what I had. Had I gotten my degree when I was younger, probably, I would have gone for CPA.

KP: Do you ever regret not finishing your college degree the first time?

AH: I don't think I regret it, because I feel that, had I completed my courses when I was younger, my life would have been different than what it is, and I'm perfectly happy with my life as I lived it.

KP: When did you meet your wife?

AH: I met her at an April Showers Dance at the YMHA in New Brunswick. I believe it was 1952 or 1953, and we started dating, and, in 1954, we got married.

KP: You were here at Rutgers in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and then, you came back in the 1970s. How had the campus changed in that twenty-year gap?

AH: Well, Rutgers had grown in that time. I recall, we used to, in the '50s, … drive up in a car. We had one class over here and [the] second class would be ... down on George Street. They used to have smaller buildings there, and we'd have class there, and then, have to come back here, and it was, always, get out of the class in a hurry, hop in the car and fly over there, get there first, so [that] you get a parking space. Later, when I started back in the '70s, … most of my classes were in this area, so, I found a parking space. I came right after work. I brought … [myself] a sandwich, or, if I didn't bring one with me, there was plenty of places to buy something, had a snack, and then, took my classes, but, it was always one parking space, and that was it.

KP: How would you compare the students of the late 1940s and early 1950s to the students of the 1970s?

AH: In the '50s, they were all more my age, even though University College was for people who were out in the working area. In the '70s, I felt like the grandfather of the class. [laughter] I almost felt like I was the oldest one in my graduating class.

KP: Were there older people in your class?

AH: No, I understand that there were some people that were older than me, not much. [laughter]

KP: When you first started at University College in 1970, the Vietnam War was still a major issue. What do you remember as a World War II veteran on the Rutgers campus at that time?

AH: I don't think there were any demonstrations at that point. … When I came, there were no demonstrations. No, I don't think there was anything that would have affected me in any way.

KP: Nothing seemed that different.

AH: No, no.

KP: As a veteran, what did you think of the Vietnam War?

AH: I don't think we should have been there. I don't think we had any business being there.

KP: Did you think that at the time or did you come to believe that later?

AH: I think I believed it then, but, you know, I resented, also, … of course, I was not a GI at that point, but, the treatment that the people gave the Vietnam veterans, I felt, was uncalled for.

PW: You received the Bronze Star medal.

AH: Yes.

PW: Was it for a specific action?

AH: That was a specific action at Saint-Croix in France. What happened was, we had been advancing and advancing and advancing. This one day, I went down to the infantry commander and I said, "What's the situation up front?" and he said, "Where's your observation post?" So, I showed him on the map where it was. He says, "I don't think I'd go there if I were you," but, it had good visibility. It was on the forward slope of a hill, overlooking whatever area we wanted to see. What he failed to tell me was that, during the night, where the infantry had been up ahead of that area, they had pulled back during the night, to a safer position. Well, we, like fools, went ahead and established our observation post. We came under mortar fire, constant mortar fire. I had two of my men wounded. ... We used that observation post for a couple of days, but, when it got really untenable, I brought my men back, got them to the aid station, got them taken care of. They got Purple Hearts and we went back to our unit. It was then that I found out that the infantry had pulled back, and here we were, in no man's land, unknowingly, and that was where … myself and the rest of my crew got the Bronze Star award. … Besides my two men, I had a wire crew bringing up a telephone line for me, so, there were like six of us all together that got the Bronze Star at that time.

KP: Did you ever get ahead of the frontline again?

AH: Well, it's funny, we kept moving and kept moving and kept moving, and, as long as the situation was static, they kept our guns in position. We had work to do. … When General Patton broke through the hedgerow country, they pulled us off the line and used our vehicles to haul gasoline and ammunition for General Patton, because he was going. I mean, there was no stopping this man. So, we went off the line, and we went into a position where we maintained our weapons, cleaned our guns, and did all the maintenance that we had to do, and, while we were there, we thought, "Gee, back here, we could have been killed. In this place, we could have been killed," and where we had no fear before, now, we're already starting to have a little fear, and we're going to be a little more cautious when we do anything from now on.

KP: That was when you really realized how dangerous the situation was.

AH: Right. When you have time to think, you think a lot of things.

KP: When you were at the forward observation post, you did not feel that way.

AH: We had a job to do, you know. We were doing our job and nothing else came into our minds.

KP: Do you remember any instances where you were more careful?

AH: Well, I always made sure of my position before I moved into it.

KP: You would ask the infantry if they still held that position.

AH: Yes, more or less, not in so many words. I made sure that there was infantry there, because I'm not going to go into no man's land again, [laughter] no way in the world. We were pretty careful.

KP: How would you rate the medical care that your men received?

AH: We had an excellent medical officer. Our first aid guy was also a very caring person. … For what we could have in a combat unit, I think we did pretty good.

KP: Did you stay in touch with any of the men from your unit?

AH: We did keep in touch. There was a crew from Headquarters Battery. They lived in Newark and we used to keep in touch. This goes way back, and then, I finally lost contact with them, too, but, they came into New Brunswick to visit. I was out bowling. They came to my house and everybody came looking for me. [laughter]

KP: You met …

AH: … Met them again.

KP: Did your unit hold any reunions?

AH: We had one reunion, like, a couple of years after the war. It was in New York. That was the last reunion we had.

KP: You have lost touch with everyone you served with.

AH: Right.

KP: Did you ever encounter them through any veteran's associations?

AH: No, because … I was the only one from this area.

KP: Where were most of them from?

AH: Mid-West, West.

KP: You were the Easterner.

AH: Right. …

PW: You mentioned that many of your buddies, who were a year older than you, had gone into the Army Air Force.

AH: Right.

PW: Did you ever get in touch with them during or after the war?

AH: Well, we corresponded and, of course, after the war, they're all back in town. … We do keep [in] contact. In fact, to give you an interesting side light, a friend of mine, a guy I grew up with, he was home on leave, I was home on leave. He was a GI, I was an officer. He's getting married. So, what do you do during wartime? There's no preparations or anything. So, I want to give this fellow a … military wedding. There were three canteens in New Brunswick. So, I went to all three canteens, and I told the women in charge, "A local boy is getting married," and I told them where and when, and, if any of the GIs would like to come, you know, we'll give him a military wedding. Well, we had an army of GIs come to that wedding. [laughter] He had to march through a columns of twos all the way. I don't think they ever forgave me for that. [laughter]

KP: Are they still married?

AH: They're still married. [laughter]

KP: How did the war change New Brunswick? Did you notice any changes when you came back?

AH: The town was starting to grow. It hadn't grown yet, at that time, but, you could see that it was starting to grow. The main streets in New Brunswick were changing. It was no longer a place where people congregated. The post office used to be on the corner of George and Albany Street and they had this beautiful walk through there, with hedges growing around it. They had benches in there. It was really a beautiful place. Well, they closed that place up and they moved to Bayard Street. Now, everything is all built, rebuilt and redone.

KP: It sounds as if New Brunswick today bears very little resemblance to the town you knew.

AH: Very little. See, I was born on what is now Memorial Parkway. At that time, it was Burnet Street. I was raised on Hiram Street, which is no longer there, and New Street is still there, but, that's changing. George Street is still there, where I used to live, but, that's also changing. In fact, that building has changed. So, things are really different, now they are.

KP: What do you miss?

AH: I just miss the old town, the friendships that there were, the freedoms that there were. It was like country life.

KP: The New Brunswick that you knew was more of a small town.

AH: Well, it was the county seat of Middlesex County, but, I think it was a much better town than it is now. Although, I wouldn't move out of it. [laughter]

KP: You remained in the area.

AH: No, I stayed in New Brunswick, Highland Park, and, now, I'm in North Brunswick, but, always in this area.

KP: Did you ever think of moving elsewhere?

AH: Not really.

PW: Are there any other articles that you would like to discuss?

KP: This newspaper clipping is from 1994.

AH: *New Brunswick Home News*. In fact, there's one here. … This one, I'm proud of. I think it's this one. Yes, this is where I got a write-up. I'm in the center of the page. Unfold it and you'll get the whole article. No, it's on the other side. You opened it up.

KP: I see.

AH: … There I am, in the center.

PW: What is this article about?

AH: Wartime experiences and about receiving the Bronze Star, a little bit of my military history.

PW: How did you actually receive the Bronze Star? Was there a ceremony?

AH: I received it on the field, so, there was no real ceremony.

KP: The article mentions that you lost four close friends during the war.

AH: Yes.

KP: Not in your unit?

AH: Not in my unit. One was lost in the Battle of the Bulge. One was lost flying the Hump, and I guess you've heard of flying the Hump, the China-Burma-India area, and a couple more were in Europe, European Theater, in Italy, Anzio. This is the history of the 953rd Field Artillery Battalion. One of the captains had the detail to make this. If you'll open that up, I think that has the map [of where we were]. … If you follow [the] First Army, that was my route.

PW: Did you find out about your friends during or after the war?

AH: During the war, I found out about a couple of them. The others, I found out after I got home.

PW: What was your reaction? Did it make the war more personal for you?

AH: It made it a little more personal, because, you know, it's bad enough to lose a friend, but, to lose them in a war is a little different, made you want to get revenge, but, what can you do?

KP: Is there anything else that we forgot to ask?

AH: I don't think so. I think you've covered everything pretty well. I don't know if I mentioned [this] before, I was awarded, also, the New Jersey Distinguished Service Medal. ... I think I have something on that.

PW: What was that award for, specifically?

AH: This gives a little explanation of it. This is an award that, three years before I got it, the State had come up with this idea of giving an award to anybody who had the Bronze Star or better, and they would get this state award.

PW: When you went up to that observation post, did you think that you would end up with a Bronze Star?

AH: It was just something we did. We had no idea of getting a medal for it. The fact that we got it, we were happy. What it meant was five more points towards discharge.

KP: In this article in the *North Brunswick Post*, November 26, 1992, you mention that you wanted to get away from the military and some of the veterans are too militant.

AH: … I don't think I meant to say veterans. Some of the military people leave a lot to be desired.

KP: How so?

AH: ... I notice, in some, there is some arrogance.

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

KP: You viewed the military as a job.

AH: Yes, it's a job, like any other job. It may be more dangerous than some, but, it's a necessary thing, but, sometimes, you think the level heads that are supposed to be level heads are not so level, and I may disagree with some of their decisions, but, I'm in no position to do anything about it.

KP: You learned that lesson from personal experience.

AH: Pretty much so.

PW: Do you have any specific examples of it?

AH: No, it's just what I would say is a part of my growing up.

KP: You are very proud of your experience in the war, justifiably so, but, it sounds like the war was a very important part of your life.

AH: I am proud of it, because, ... you see, there is a difference between a popular war and an unpopular war, and that was the most popular war you could think of. I'm proud of my accomplishments in it. I'm proud of the fact that I managed to live through it and come home in one piece. I'm sorry as hell that some of my buddies went the way of all flesh, but, those are the things that have to be expected. You become a fatalist after awhile

PW: Do you think that any of your war experiences helped you in your post-war life?

AH: I think, maybe, in some cases, it would help me through stressful situations. If anything came up that was stressful, I think my wartime experience would help me cope with it a little better.

KP: Did we forget anything?

AH: I don't think so, but, if there's anything else you need, just give a yell.

KP: Thank you for coming. We appreciate it a great deal.

AH: I'll be looking forward to seeing the transcript.

KP: I cannot make any promises on exactly when we will get it done, but, I can assure you that we are working as fast as we can.

AH: Well, whatever. Is this going to be published in anything?

KP: It will be posted on the Internet.

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

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 1/13/02
Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 1/15/02
Reviewed by Albert Handaly 2/02