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NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD F. PLECHNER

FOR THE

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

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: This begins an interview with Mr. Richard F. Plechner on September 20, 2007, in Metuchen, New Jersey, with Sandra Stewart Holyoak and ...

Mary Lou Strahlendorff: ... Mary Lou Strahlendorff.

SH: Thank you so much, Mr. Plechner, for allowing us the time to talk with you today. To begin, could you tell us, just for the record, where and when you were born?

Richard Plechner: Well, I was born in, actually, ... Murray Hill, because that's where the hospital was, my family lived in Bay Ridge at the time, November 25, 1932, and we lived in Bay Ridge for about a year after that. My father worked for National Lead Company and their laboratory was in New York, in Brooklyn. [Editor's Note: National Lead was established in 1772. By the mid-1920s, it was the principal lead company in the nation.]

SH: Let us talk then a little more in detail about your father, if you would. Can you tell us what his name was and a little of his family background?

RP: Yes. His name was Walter William Plechner. He was an only child, in that he'd had an older sister who died many years before he was born, died in childhood, which was not that uncommon back then, and he was born in Philadelphia, but he was raised primarily in New York. He went to City College, CCNY. Well, before that, he went to Townsend Harris High School, which was really a prep school for City College, and no longer exists today as a school. There is a school by that name, but it's a whole different set up, and there's a building by that name at CCNY, but they run things differently now. He graduated from City College with a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering, then, he received his ... ChE ... from City College, and then, went on to Columbia, where he received a master's and a PhD, and ... the subject of his thesis and a bunch of his studies was titanium dioxide. He was one of the first people involved with titanium dioxide. So, he went to work for ... the Titanium Division of National Lead, and remained with them and was still, really, in their employ when he was killed in 1943. They paid him the difference between his Army pay and his civilian pay up until the time he was killed.

SH: Before we go into that, what about his family, his mother and father? Where were they from?

RP: Well, they were from New York. My Grandma Plechner, actually, who died in 1945, at the age of eighty-three, had been born in Bohemia, in what was then Austria-Hungary. Every so many years, these places change names. [laughter] They were German. They were *Sudeten Deutsch*, came over here when she was one year old, so, obviously, could not remember anything about Europe, [laughter] and my grandfather was also born in Austria-Hungary, Grandfather Plechner. He was around the same age, I don't know exactly, and he died before I was born, so, I didn't know him. I knew her, because she lived with us when I was a little boy, and he came over here right after [he] graduated from *gymnasium* in Vienna, in Wien, and he was in the clothing business, primarily. ... Then, he became secretary, corporate secretary, of a copper mining company, and some subsidiary copper mining companies, all of which, subsequently, went broke at the end of the '20s, but there was a period in the '20s when copper mining, in the West and in Mexico, was a very big thing.

SH: Did he travel to the West?

RP: I don't know. This was before I was born.

SH: I just thought maybe there were family stories of him being out West.

RP: Yes, I have no idea.

SH: Your father, as you said, went to work because of his expertise in titanium dioxide.

RP: Titanium dioxide, yes, TiO_2 .

SH: TiO_2 , okay. [laughter] What did he do? Did he work in the smelting end of it?

RP: No, they didn't smelt it. Titanium dioxide is a whitener. I don't know now, but it used to be, and probably still is, [for producing] very white paper, high quality paper; you use it, [in] paint, you use it, it's a pigment, titanium pigment, and titanium is a relatively recent product, all kinds of titanium, including titanium metal. ... He did his doctoral thesis on it and, obviously, was very interested in it and held a number of patents in the use of it, through his work. He worked, he was in research, his entire work life. ...

SH: Was his work right in New York?

RP: Well, at that time, when I was born, we didn't live there long, he worked in the National Lead Company labs, which were in Brooklyn. Then, he left National Lead Company, I guess [in] 1933, something like that, because he had a better offer from Southern Mineral Products, which either then, or subsequently, became part of General Cyanamid; not General Cyanamid, American Cyanamid, I'm sorry, American Cyanamid. ... We moved to Piney River, Virginia, and he was director of research and production at that plant. He was with them about a year and he got a better offer from National Lead, went back with them, and we moved to Plainfield, [New Jersey], and we were there, oh, approximately a year, and then, we moved to Metuchen. We've been here ever since. So, I've lived in Metuchen, basically, since I was three years old.

SH: When World War II broke out, was he already in the Reserves?

RP: Well, he'd taken ROTC in college and he was called on active duty in 1940, when they called up all the Reserves and National Guard. He had been attached to the same unit, First Infantry Division, from around 1934, '35. I don't remember the exact years. I was only a little kid, and he would go for his summer training with them. He would also go in, you know, regularly. He was what, today, would be called a MOBDES, mobilization designee. He was assigned to them and, upon mobilization, would go with them, which is exactly what happened. He was called up on active duty in December 1940, for one year. Of course, by December 1941, nobody was getting out, [laughter] and he stayed with them. He was with First Division when he was killed. [Editor's Note: The First Infantry Division, the US Army's oldest division, organized in 1917, fought in North Africa and the European Theater during World War II.]

SH: Why do you think he was mobilized prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

RP: Because everybody was.

SH: Prior to the bombing?

RP: Oh, yes. The Reserve [and] National Guard were activated mostly in 1940 or the early part of '41. Everybody could see a war was coming, and it would have been unusual not to have been activated at that point.

MS: ... I'm sorry, when you say everyone was, do you mean everyone in his division or everyone in New Jersey?

RP: No, everybody in the country, pretty much, knew there was going to be a war. [United States President Franklin D.] Roosevelt had cut his deals with [British Prime Minister Winston] Churchill, whatever they were, and we were sending so-called lend-lease products to England, or to the UK. You remember the fifty destroyers that were sent over. [Editor's Note: In September 1940, the United States traded fifty US Navy destroyers to the British in exchange for land in their overseas possessions on which to establish military bases. The United States began supplying large quantities of war materiel to the Allies after the passage of the Lend-Lease Act in March 1941.] So, that did not make us too popular with the other side, and it was fairly obvious that, sooner or later, we would be in a war with both Germany and Japan.

SH: This mobilization was across the country with the National Guard units.

RP: Yes, and Reserve. He was not National Guard; he was Reserve.

SH: Reserve.

RP: Yes, same difference.

SH: He was nearly forty years old.

RP: Yes. He was thirty-nine when he was killed.

SH: Okay.

RP: Well, he was a lieutenant colonel when he was killed. So, that's not unusual.

SH: He was mobilized with his unit.

RP: He was mobilized, he was a captain when he went on active duty, and then, got promoted to major, and then, [in] 1942, to lieutenant colonel.

MS: Before you talk about his time overseas in combat, ... I don't remember the specifics, but you tell some interesting stories about ... officer Army life, about the interesting people who he associated with, his peers, and stories about your contact with them as a child. ... Do you know the stories that I'm referring to? Can you [tell us some of these stories]?

RP: Yes, I can tell you some of the things that happened.

SH: That is part of the background that we would like to hear about World War II, especially from a child's perspective, but, also, how these units mobilized.

RP: Well, ... the First Infantry Division, pre-World War II, was, together with most, with all infantry divisions, an old, what did they call it? rectangular division, rectangular structure. There were four regiments to the division, four infantry regiments, and there were, at that point, three artillery regiments, also, to a division. Each artillery regiment had two battalions, each infantry regiment had three. Now, he was with 16th Infantry Regiment, which was part of First Division. First Division, pre-war, was split up, the Army was very small, and they were partly at Governor's Island, Fort Jay, on Governor's Island [in New York Harbor], Fort Hamilton in New York City [in Brooklyn], and Plattsburgh Barracks, in Plattsburgh, obviously, [laughter] Upstate New York. They were one of the first, if not the first, I think they may have been the first, division to convert to triangular. That meant they lost or dropped the 28th Infantry and there remained the 16th, 18th and 26th Infantry Regiments. Somewhere around that time, around the time he was called up, he was transferred from the 16th Infantry to Division Headquarters, and he was with Division Headquarters, in the "three shop," G-3 shop, until he was killed. [Editor's Note: G-3 refers to the division operations officer and their staff.]

SH: In this mobilization, did you and your mother remain in Metuchen?

RP: Yes, we lived in Metuchen and we used to go up, on weekends, to Fort Devens, in Massachusetts, to visit with him. [Editor's Note: Fort Devens became the reception center for all New England draftees in 1940 and the First, 32nd and 45th Infantry Divisions trained there.] I used to stay; they had a BOQ for Division Headquarters, bachelor officers' quarters, that took up most of the building, in the old, wooden barracks everybody's familiar with, and, on the first floor, about a third of the first floor was a small officers' club for Division Headquarters. The rest was accommodations for the officers. He had his own room up there and I would get to sleep in his room and he would go to a place in Leominster or Ayer, or wherever, in Massachusetts, with my mother for the weekend, and I would stay there, because I loved being in there. ... He had his pistol hanging on the wall, which I wasn't supposed to play with, which I did, of course. [laughter]

MS: I hope it wasn't loaded. [laughter]

RP: No, and the other equipment. I had a grand time going through all of his equipment. ... They had a bar there and Corporal (Koches?) was the bartender.

MS: How old were you?

RP: I was about eight years old, and I was the assistant bartender. I helped Corporal (Koches?). [laughter] That's how they got me out of trouble, kept me out of trouble, and I was in charge of the rum Cokes, because that was kind of easy, you know, and anybody who wanted a rum Coke, [I made it]. They were quite popular at that time. In fact, there used to be an old Andrews Sisters song, *Drinking Rum and Coca-Cola*, and I would make the rum Cokes. [Editor's Note: The song was called *Rum and Coca-Cola*, made popular in 1945 by the Andrews Sisters, who entertained troops both in America and abroad during World War II, although versions of the song had emerged earlier out of the Caribbean calypso genre.] ... There were some very interesting people in the "Old Army" at that time. One guy, who's a very good friend of my father's, that fascinated me, he was James Warner Bellah, who was a well-known writer. He's dead now, of course. ...

MS: Just for the record, for those who might not know, tell [us] the things that he wrote. ...

RP: Well, Bellah wrote, most of his better known stuff was right after the war, he wrote *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, he wrote *Fort Apache*, he wrote *Rio Grande* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, among others.

MS: ... Were they originally novels before they became movies?

RP: Some were novels, in the sense that they were books, and some were ... stories in the *Saturday Evening Post*, or serials in *Saturday Evening Post*. At that time, the *Saturday Evening Post*, different from now, was very much a literary magazine, pop literature, ... nothing very deep, but quite good.

SH: Did he, in fact, write any of the screenplays for the movies the books were turned into?

RP: Yes, he did. Yes, we kept [in] contact with him after the war, a little bit. He was transferred out of the division, ultimately made colonel and was liaison to Lord [Louis] Mountbatten, in the China-Burma-India Theater, and he was a very handsome guy. In fact, he was in ads, "Gentlemen of distinction drink Lord Calvert," which was a rye whiskey, and there'd be a picture of him, yes, and they had other well-known people. ... He was quite a playboy, I guess you'd say, because he was all involved with Hollywood and all that sort of thing. ... Every weekend, he'd have another gorgeous girl with him up there. This fascinated me. [laughter]

MS: You wanted to know how to accomplish that.

RP: "How do you do this? That's what I want to be when I grow up," [laughter] and he knew these girls and he, I think that was [when] he was between wives at that particular point.

MS: That's good to know. [laughter]

RP: But, he was interesting. There were other interesting people, Ted Roosevelt, Jr., again, was a friend of my father's, and he commanded ...

MS: This was the son of the President.

RP: Son of the President. ...

SH: Right, Teddy Roosevelt, Jr.

RP: Yes, and he was commander of the 26th Infantry, which he had been in in World War I, and he was a Reservist, but he'd served in World War I, in First Division, and in World War II, and he was a tough, little guy and he died in Normandy. He was a brigadier general at the time he died and he was a colonel at the time, ... this time, pre-war, Fort Devens. I knew some of the others, Norman Cota, who was my father's boss, who later became Chief of Staff of the division, and then, subsequently, won a Distinguished Service Cross in Normandy, as Assistant Division Commander of the 29th Division, and then, later, commanded the 28th Division in [the] Hurtgen Forest and the Ardennes. I knew Clarence [M.] Eymer, who had been with the division forever, and also been with them, I believe, going to World War I, as well as World War II, was the G-4. [Editor's Note: As First Division's Assistant Chief of Staff G-4, Lieutenant Colonel Clarence M. Eymer was in charge of logistics for the division.] I remember, one time, my father, Eymer and Bellah, and I think Cota, were heading south to North Carolina, for maneuvers. ... The division was going, and they would move by motor vehicle, at that time. The roads would be loaded with these convoys--this was true all during World War II--and they stopped at our house for breakfast.

SH: This is prior to World War II.

RP: Yes, this would have been around 1941, or possibly the beginning of World War II, I'm not sure, '41-'42 timeframe, and they stopped. ... They had a driver, and I went out and told the driver to come on in for breakfast, and he didn't want to. He'd rather sleep in the vehicle, which is understandable. He didn't want to be having breakfast with all these officers, you know, and then, it was time to go to school and they sent me to school in the staff car. ... I thought that was the greatest thing, [laughter] going to elementary school, I was in second grade or something, being chauffeured up there in an Army staff car, and then, yes, it was Cota that was there, because Cota lost his glasses. He left his glasses at our house and my mother had to ship them to him down in North Carolina, because he couldn't see too well without them. ...

MS: Why did your father, if you know this, become involved in the military at that time? Were there the same incentives that there are today, where you get tuition assistance?

RP: No.

MS: No. So, he was there ...

RP: He liked the Army, he liked the military, he believed in the defense of the country, you know. He was a conservative Republican and he, as I say, took ROTC in college and just continued with it over the years.

SH: Before the call up, do you ever remember any social occasions that you or your parents went to, any military balls or dinners?

RP: Well, they did various things. I didn't, because I was only a kid. [laughter]

SH: Right, but do you remember them getting all dressed up?

RP: I remember going out to Fort Jay, or it might have been [Fort] Hamilton, I'm not even sure which, to polo matches before the war. The Army was big on polo; not my father. We couldn't afford that kind of thing, but some of these officers had money. ... At that time, General [Donald] Cubbison commanded the First Division. A subsequent commander, who took them overseas, General [Terry de la Mesa] Allen, [Sr.], was a polo player, for instance. I mean, some of these people came from money and they kept a string of polo ponies, and I remember seeing Tommy Hitchcock, [Jr.], who was ... subsequently killed in World War II, as a major, and who was a world-champion polo player, representing the United States at the Olympics on numbers of occasions, and, probably, the best-known polo player that's ever lived. I remember seeing him play, and I had a polo ball for years that I got, sitting, watching the polo match, and one of the officers, on horseback, came over and tossed it to me. That was a real treasure. I had this wooden polo ball around the house. ... As you can tell by looking at the house, I'm an inveterate collector of everything, and I think some time while I was away at school or something, my mother got rid of that one. [laughter] You know, the house gets overloaded.

SH: I think that is kind of the vision that I had of the pre-World War II Army, with quite a social life.

RP: There were a lot of social [aspects] to it. I remember going into New York City and watching the Division parade on Armistice Day, through New York City, and my father, at that time, I think, was a company commander, or whatever, and I remember going to see parades and various things out at Fort Jay or Fort Hamilton. They wore the old Sam Browne belts then and the pinks and greens, and the; now, I get confused, which are leggings and which are puttees. [Editor's Note: Puttees are long pieces of cloth wound around the leg from the knee to the ankle. Leggings were leather covers over the lower leg and were worn by the officers.]

SH: You cannot ask me, because I do not know. When I see the pictures, I just assume they are all called leggings.

RP: I think the leggings are what ... my father and other officers wore in leather. I think the puttees are the wraparounds the enlisted men wore.

MS: Your father was a working person; he didn't come from the same sort of social class as Teddy Roosevelt, Jr.

RP: No; well, not many people did. [laughter]

MS: But, yet, they all had cordial [relationships]?

RP: Well, they were all very loyal to First Division. The whole attitude of the division was that that was really the Army, the rest were support troops, [laughter] very patriotic. Ted Roosevelt

was one of the "good Roosevelts," as opposed to the Hyde Park Roosevelts, [Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt's branch of the family], and there was no love lost, apparently, between the two branches of the family. [There have been] a number of interesting books on the Roosevelts.

SH: When you were at Fort Devens, in the BOQ, were you going down and having chow in the officers' mess when you were there? I know you were bartending.

RP: Yes, or we'd go to town. I remember the bartending more than the food, [laughter] but where did we eat? I guess we probably ate right there at that little officers' mess, or go to town, though, Ayer, Massachusetts, was not exactly Manhattan, or Leominster, which was the other little town there.

SH: As an eight-year-old, how old did you perceive these people to be? You were talking about some of these characters, like Bellah.

RP: I don't think I gave it much thought.

SH: Really? They did not seem to be very old.

RP: Well, they didn't seem to be very young or old. Bellah would have been in World War I. Eymer had been in World War I.

SH: I was just going to say, so many of those ...

RP: Cota had probably been in World War I. Roosevelt certainly was in World War I. Roosevelt was very highly decorated in World War I and got the Medal of Honor in World War II, at one point, was the most decorated American soldier that had ever lived.

SH: Really? I am thinking your father, though he was nearly forty, he must have been considerably younger than these other men that we are talking about.

RP: Maybe five or six years younger.

SH: He would not have been old enough to have been in World War I.

RP: No, he graduated from college [in] 1925. So, he would have been in high school during World War I. So, that's why I say maybe five or six years' difference

SH: I thought maybe you had looked at them as being more mature, gray-haired or ...

MS: Ancient.

SH: Ancient, than your father.

RP: No, I never really noticed it.

SH: Most kids, at eight years old, think their dads are on the edge.

RP: Yes, I never gave that that much thought at that point.

MS: Now, I remember being a child and thinking no one could possibly live past thirty.
[laughter] ...

RP: Well, again, as an only child, I was around when my parents would entertain, so, I was used to older people, and talking to older people, and I used to help serve the drinks and things [when] we had people at the house. My parents used to entertain fairly frequently, and I don't really remember this, but you don't know what you remember and what you've been told, of course, from when you're young, but, when I was quite young, this was before my father was on active duty, my parents had people over and they were drinking Manhattans, [which] were very popular at that time. ... They had a cherry in them and a lot of people wouldn't eat the cherry; they would just drink. So, they went into dinner and I was left to my own devices and I went around and emptied all of the Manhattan glasses to eat the cherry. I was rather tipsy by the time my mother caught me, [laughter] but that would have been, like, in 1939, or something like that. I was probably six years old or something.

SH: Do you remember the news when you found out that your father and the unit would be going overseas?

RP: Well, ... it would not have been in the news.

SH: No, when you heard your father would be going.

RP: I remember, ... okay, when I heard, I was going to say, because, nowadays, everything is in the newspaper. They have embedded reporters and everything else, I think too much. Back then, they didn't. They were supposed to keep things [secret], you know, they had ads in the magazines, "Loose lips sink ships," and all that sort of stuff. Yes, I remember. We, of course, expected him to go overseas as soon as the war started.

SH: Maybe I jumped ahead. I should ask about the reaction that you remember in your world, at that point, to the news of Pearl Harbor. Do you remember where you were?

RP: Well, I was in Metuchen, and it didn't really come as a shock. I'm not sure who broke the news to me. We were approaching a war; at that point, we were in a war, and we knew he'd be going overseas. First Division had been the first to go in World War I, first to go in World War II, subsequently, the first to go in Vietnam. It was the First, the Big Red One. He went overseas July 1, 1942, which was not too long after the war had started, and went to the UK. He was with the advance party. The rest of the division came over several weeks later, and he went over to set up for them, and then, they were [there until they embarked for Africa]. ...

SH: Where did he set them up? What part of England were they in?

RP: I believe they were in the north. I don't remember exactly where; Tidworth Barracks, but I'm not sure where Tidworth Barracks was. [Editor's Note: Tidworth is approximately thirty miles north of Southampton in Southern England.]

SH: That is okay. We can look that up.

MS: What sort of things was he involved in setting up? What sort of activities did [he do]? Were you aware of that at all?

RP: Well, he was in the G-3 department. He was assistant G-3 at that time. ...

MS: Which means what?

RP: Operations, planning, getting ready to go fight. [laughter] ... Then, they left England and they landed in North Africa, on November 8, 1942, and that, I guess, was the first major offensive in World War II. ... They landed in Oran, and then, went up through Algeria, into Tunisia, and he was killed March 4, 1943, at Sbeitla, and he used to, you know, ... write to us every day. [Editor's Note: Sbeitla is located in Tunisia, a city the Americans occupied during the North African Campaign.]

SH: Did he?

RP: It used to puzzle me that, sometimes, we'd get a letter that was three weeks old and there'd be other letters that were more recent that had come before it, and they used to write regular mail and they had what they called the V-mail, "V" for victory. ... They were small photographs of the letter, and one page, and much reduced in size. Now, because he was an officer, and [it] may have been because of his position with the division, his mail was not censored. He would censor his own mail.

MS: And he was very conscientious about doing that.

RP: Oh, yes, very much so.

SH: Prior to them being shipped down to North Africa, did he talk about England and how they were faring at that time? Did he talk about what conditions he faced or other obstacles?

RP: Well, I do remember, at one point, as I indicated before, the National Lead Company kept paying the difference between his Army salary and his civilian salary, which helped, you know. They didn't pay soldiers much then. ... He had a three-day pass, or something like that, and went to the National Lead branch over in England and worked there for the three days, because he felt he owed them, you know, the time. He was very conscientious about that. National Lead was very good to him. He was assistant director of research and they had a large operation over there in Sayreville, which was how we happened to ... come to Metuchen, and he did other things for them, when he was over there, to bring together, as much as anything, the English part of the company and the American part of the company.

SH: He was actually wearing two hats at different times.

RP: Yes. He felt he owed the company, the company was good to him, and he didn't want to just be taking money and not doing anything for them.

SH: Did he talk about how England was faring, after having been at war now for quite some time?

RP: Not that I recall. I've got bundles of letters upstairs.

SH: Do you?

RP: I haven't looked at them in years.

MS: Where are they? [laughter]

RP: Various places.

MS: Obviously, very safe, very well-kept.

RP: A lot of them are in the attic, in that little, tin cabinet.

SH: They would be wonderful. You should preserve those.

RP: And one or two are in that suitcase of my mother's, and one or two may be in that little ...

MS: So, obviously, they're very systematically organized.

RP: Yes.

SH: Did he write letters specifically to you or were they always to your mother and you?

RP: Both. He was always telling me I should do better in school. My mother always told me that, too, [laughter] and she'd write to him and blab on me.

SH: Were you able to write to him? Were there any little projects that you remember doing?

RP: Oh, we have some pictures of me [when] I first got glasses. That was a big event. I must have been eight years old at the time. This was before he went overseas, and I have a picture, somewhere, of me sitting on my new bicycle. It wasn't new. Actually, I wanted a bicycle. My Uncle Frederick, my mother's brother, had an old bicycle, but it was a racing bike. It was no good for a kid, but I traded that in, you could do that back then, and we bought a new one. I remember, it cost thirty-five dollars, the new one, all together.

MS: Which was a lot of money back then; thirty-five dollars for a bicycle? wow.

RP: That was a major deal, and it had chromium fenders and that was pretty flashy. I was the only kid in the neighborhood with chromium fenders, [laughter] and we used to ride our bikes all the time around here, because the traffic wasn't the way it is today. At that time, I lived on what was then called Walnut Place, it is now Library Place, behind the library, only a couple blocks from where I live now, and we would ride out to Roosevelt Park, [currently in Edison, New Jersey], we would ride into Plainfield, we would ride into Highland Park, just ride and come back. You wouldn't dare do that now, between the traffic on Route 27 and ...

SH: It would be worth your life.

RP: Yes.

MS: Do you remember, were there any substantive changes in the day-to-day life, with your father being overseas, that affected you personally or your mother? ... How did your life change with him overseas?

RP: Not terribly much.

MS: Which just means your mother did more.

RP: Yes. ... Well, she wasn't working then; she was a housewife. She had worked up until I was born.

MS: I think you might want to go on the record now and tell about your mother's credentials. She wasn't just a housewife.

RP: Yes. Could I take a break first? [laughter]

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Before the break, we were discussing your mother. Could you tell us about her and her family background? That would be wonderful.

RP: Well, she was from Newark and her family was from Newark since around the 1850s, I guess, and she went to NJC, now ...

SH: What was her maiden name?

RP: Coppersmith. NJC is now ...

SH: Douglass.

RP: Called Douglass, and I think it's been abolished, or is in the process of being abolished by the present regime at Rutgers. ... She majored in chemistry, minored in math. [Editor's Note: Douglass College, formerly New Jersey College for Women, became the Douglass Residential College, part of the School of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers University, in 2008.]

SH: That was quite uncommon for a woman in that era.

RP: Not as uncommon as ...

SH: We think?

RP: People think. They had a lot of people in her class. I think the majority of them went on to graduate school, certainly a large portion of them did, and women were educated.

SH: Do you know where she went to high school in Newark?

RP: Yes, Barringer. I think that was the only high school in Newark at that time, as a matter-of-fact. [laughter] She graduated from NJC in 1923, so, subtracting four years from that ... [Editor's Note: Originally established as Newark High and as an all-boys school in 1838, Barringer High School was the first high school in New Jersey. The school was renamed in 1907 after Dr. William Nathan Barringer.]

SH: 1919.

RP: Yes.

MS: And that was a public high school, Barringer?

RP: Yes.

SH: Barringer has had many famous graduates, and one Rutgers alumnus is trying to write a history of Barringer.

RP: Oh, that's interesting. Yes, ... I think that was *the* high school, and then, between, my uncle, who's also deceased now, was ten years younger, he went somewhere else. They had a new high school by then, ... and she graduated in '23 from NJC. ... Well, then, she taught school for about three years, to qualify for certification, in case she ever needed it, and then, went back [to school] and went to Columbia [University] and got her master's and her PhD from Columbia, in chemistry. That's where she met my father, obviously. [laughter]

SH: I was just going to say, is that where she met your father?

RP: Yes. He was chemical engineering, she was chemistry, but, you know, very similar, and the schools were much smaller then than they are today, and then, she worked for Bristol Myers [pharmaceutical company] until I was born, and then, she was a housewife until after my father was killed. Then, she went back to work, because we needed the money to live. [laughter]

SH: Before that, as a young woman who was majoring in math and science, was her family or her father involved in the sciences?

RP: No, her father was an accountant. He was assistant auditor for the City of Newark, and he had a private accounting practice. He went to NYU, and my Uncle "Bunk," we called him, because some kid along the way had named him that and it stuck; that's all I ever knew him as, Uncle Bunk. His real name was Ferdinand, [laughter] which I can understand the problem there, yes; a bunch of old Germans, they had these old German names, you know, and he lived with my Grandmother Coppersmith. He was her brother, of course, and he had pernicious anemia, which, back then, they didn't know what to do about. He had to eat liver three or four times a week, and so that whenever anybody else was eating, Uncle Bunk always ate liver, which was kind of fascinating to me. I've always liked liver, but not three or four times a week, [laughter] and he was a lawyer. He'd graduated from NYU, a very bright guy. He was very, very much interested in history and in languages, which I'm terrible at. History, I liked; so, I used to sit up in his room with him and talk about [history]. He had books everywhere, stacks and stacks of books, and, when he'd been a young man, living in Manhattan; well, when he graduated from law school, as I say, he went to NYU, and, back then, you didn't have to go to college first. You'd go straight to law school, or medical school, or any of the professional schools. He couldn't take the bar [exam], because you had to be twenty-one to take the bar. So, what he did [was], he lived with various immigrant families in Manhattan, of course, there were a lot of them back then, and learned the language. So, he spoke around seven languages.

MS: How did he come to live with these families? Did he board with them or did he pay them?
...

RP: I guess he boarded with them.

MS: So, he rented rooms from them, basically.

RP: Yes, and learned the language.

SH: He did this specifically to learn the language.

RP: Yes.

SH: Oh, my.

MS: Rather than just looking for it; his primary goal was not a place to live.

RP: No, his primary goal was to learn the language, and you had all sorts of immigrant communities in New York. I'm talking around the turn of the [twentieth] century. My Grandmother Coppersmith was born in 1878, in Newark; he was a year younger. He would have been born in '79, and the added problem with this time lag [was], back then, when the kid was old enough to go to school, the kid could go to school. We didn't have all these regulations you have nowadays. So, their mother, my great-grandmother, who I didn't know, died before I was born, sent them both off together, you know. "They'll [the school] take them, get rid of the kids, you know, get some free time for myself," you know. [laughter] ... So, he was, I guess, around fifteen when he graduated from high school, because he was younger, and my mother was

sixteen when she graduated from high school, and I guess her mother was sixteen, but he was fifteen, and he went on to NYU, and then, he took the bar, became a lawyer.

SH: Did he practice in New York?

RP: Yes, in New York.

SH: Did he have a specialty?

RP: He did a fair amount of entertainment law, I think, which would have been a big thing in New York back then, and he was an old bachelor and, when I knew him, he was sort of semi-retired.

SH: When did he come to live with you and your mother?

RP: Well, he didn't live with us. He lived with my grandmother, his sister.

SH: Okay, I am sorry, I misunderstood.

RP: And he was tired all the time, because this pernicious anemia affects you that way. ... As I say, he ate a lot of liver.

MS: So, did he ever make use of the languages that he learned, other than his own personal use? Did he make professional use [of these languages]?

RP: Well, he read books in those languages. He was very much interested in history.

MS: Do you remember what the languages were?

RP: Probably not, German, Polish, because my grandmother's maid spoke Polish, and she was Polish, obviously, and he would talk to her in Polish, Italian, I think Spanish, your various European languages.

MS: So, your larger immigrant groups at the turn of the century.

RP: Yes, because, if he was born in '79, it would have been in the 1890s when he was learning these things, and he would continue to read in those languages, and he read a tremendous amount of history. He was a very, very bright guy and he spent all his spare time reading.

MS: Now, you talk about your grandmother's maid, but these were not wealthy people; your grandmother.

RP: I was going to say, I don't know if my grandmother's maid was wealthy or not. [laughter]

MS: Maybe she was looking to learn the language. [laughter]

RP: Yes. [laughter] ... No, they were, you know, just normal people.

MS: But, when you think "maid" today, you think of people who have money.

RP: Well, yes, but that wasn't true then, and we always had a maid, when I was growing up, until World War II, and then, people that were doing that sort of thing went out and got jobs in the defense industry, which paid a lot better, because there was a shortage of labor, and that was the end of it, plus, my mother went to work and we couldn't afford these things, but we always had a maid, when I was a kid, growing up. ... On the third floor, we had the maid's room. That's where the maid lived.

MS: But, that was not this house.

RP: No, no. ... Oh, I told Sandra before, that was over on Walnut Place, which is now Library Place.

SH: Your parents met when they were going to school in New York. Your mother had one brother and your father was an only child.

RP: Yes, well, other than a sister that died many, many years before he was born, as a child.

SH: Right, but, other than your grandparents, were there other family members that you visited as a young kid?

RP: Oh, yes, a lot of them, my great-grandfather, who lived in Newark, and then, his second wife, who was, I always felt, ... my great-grandmother, then. My real great-grandmother was Louisa Bauer, and she died very young, and then, he married her best friend, Ellen Smith, and that's [the] one I always called my great-grandmom, because she's the one I knew. He died, finally, when he was about ninety-two, and she was about eighty-nine when she died. So, I remember them. They were relatively old; well, more than relatively old. [laughter]

MS: Well, it depends what point you're at. Now, who is Aunt Carrie?

RP: Yes, they did impress me as being old. ...

SH: Okay, good.

RP: My great-grandmother, I remember when they moved, they had a house in Newark and a summer home up in Mountain View, [New Jersey].

SH: Okay.

RP: On the river up there. There used to be; I mean, New Jersey has changed so much and these places weren't so overpopulated then, because my mother was raised canoeing up and down whatever the heck that river is there and they had canoes and all sorts of fascinating things. Now, my great-grandfather died, this must have been around 1939, or something, and I

remember, ... they sold the house he lived in, in Newark, and they moved to the summer house. ... My Aunt Jessie, who was my grandfather's sister, lived with my great-grandmother, because her husband had died quite young, Marshall was his name, and they lived together, the two ladies. Now, you just asked me something.

MS: Yes, ... who was Aunt Carrie?

RP: Aunt Carrie was Uncle William's wife.

MS: And what do you remember about her?

RP: Well, she was the oldest member of the family. I used to go see her. I was fascinated with the old lady. She died at 102.

SH: Oh, my word. Back then, that was remarkable.

RP: Yes, and she'd been born in Newark in 1850 and lived in Newark her whole life and she married my uncle, who was my grandmother's mother's brother, right after he came back from the Civil War, and they all lived in Newark. ... His side of the family, the Wolfs, had come over from Germany some time around 1849. They had what they call in this country "Achtundvierzigers," "Forty-Eight-ers," which were people that came over from Germany because of all the rebellion in Germany and all the problems that were going on there. [Editor's Note: Thousands of German immigrants fled to the US after the failed Revolutions of 1848.] They got here in time for a rebellion here, you know. [laughter]

SH: It is all in the timing. [laughter]

RP: So, you know, this is what happened, and he was in the Civil War. He was in the 54th New York [Regiment]. [Editor's Note: The 54th New York Regiment was recruited in New York City and Brooklyn in 1861, composed of mainly Germans, and discharged in 1866 at Charleston, South Carolina. They lost approximately 145 men.] He enlisted at the very end of the war; he was down around the siege of Charleston, South Carolina, [where] he served.

MS: He enlisted or he was drafted?

RP: No, he enlisted. Now, his regiment, the 54th New York, they were all German. They spoke German. They gave commands in German.

SH: Did they really?

RP: You had, in the Civil War, ... a lot of, oh, they call it "segregated" now, back then, ... there was no political correctness; it was a lot of Germans in one, a lot of Irish in one, and so on, and they liked it that way, I mean, nothing wrong with it. They thought it was good, and the 54th were called "*Die Schwarze Jaeger*," after a regiment from Brunswick, *Braunschweig*.

MS: So, that's the Black Light ...

RP: Black *Jaeger*; a *jaeger*'s a hunter or light infantry. So, it would really mean, ... literally, it'd be a hunter, but, translated, would probably be "The Black Light Infantrymen," because they wore black uniforms, and his brother, Uncle Dave, who was his younger brother, enlisted when he was seventeen, first in the First Militia Regiment, which was ... organized and activated for the defense of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. When the Rebels came up through Pennsylvania and invaded Pennsylvania under [General Robert E.] Lee, the Governor of Pennsylvania requested the Governor of New Jersey ... send troops to help defend the capital of Pennsylvania. So, New Jersey sent a regiment of about 677 men, at that time, to Harrisburg, and to dig in on the Harrisburg side of the river. The Rebels never got that far, because the Battle of Gettysburg came, further south, and they [the South] lost and had to retreat. In any event, he got back to New Jersey. They were in for one month, got back to New Jersey, and, at that time, the 33rd New Jersey [Regiment] was forming, which was a *zouave* regiment.

MS: A what regiment?

RP: *Zouave*.

MS: What does that mean?

RP: [It] means they wore fancy uniforms. *Zouaves* were basically French colonial troops, which had nothing to do with New Jersey, but they wore baggy pants and fezzes and fancy uniforms, and it was thought that if we raised regiments of *zouaves* for the Union Army that this would attract recruits, particularly young recruits. ... Apparently, it attracted Uncle Dave. [Editor's Note: The term *zouave* was borrowed by the US for volunteer regiments during the Civil War from the French troops who fought in North Africa. Their uniforms were generally quite ornate.]

MS: Because he wanted to wear a fancy uniform?

RP: Pardon.

MS: Because he wanted to wear a fancy uniform?

RP: Did he want to wear one?

SH: No, did he wear one?

MS: Did he?

RP: Yes, they all did. They had to. [laughter]

SH: There are great photographs or paintings of this unit.

RP: Yes, they're very [conspicuous], you know.

SH: You do not realize that it was in the Civil War.

RP: They're the ... old French colonial uniforms that were adapted here. Now, what happened [was], after awhile, they wore out and they just wore the same blue uniforms everybody else did. Now, his unit first went into action at Chattanooga, [Tennessee], and then, they were the XX Corps. They were in the XI Corps originally, but the XI Corps merged, I forget who they merged with, and became the XX Corps and they went down through Georgia. They took Atlanta, and he was captured at the Battle of Peachtree Creek, [in Georgia], and spent a couple of months in Andersonville, [a Confederate prisoner of war camp in Georgia], which was a nasty place, apparently, and then, was exchanged, rejoined his unit at Atlanta and went on down to Savannah. ... They were in the siege of Savannah and they went up through the Carolinas, and then, by then, the war ended, but he saw a lot of combat all through, [with] Sherman, all through Georgia and he was only seventeen. I guess he was nineteen when he got out. He was a corporal when he got out. So, I used to go, as a kid, go and talk to Aunt Carrie and she would tell me stories that Uncle William and Uncle David told her from the Civil War. That fascinated me.

SH: I imagine.

RP: And she told me also, when she was in high school, in the City of Newark, the train carrying Lincoln's body went through Newark, on its way back for his burial in Illinois, and all the kids got out of school and went down to the station to pay their respects to the President's body, which is kind of interesting, shows how short our history really is.

SH: It is.

RP: And I often think about that, I mean, here's this old lady who was my great-great-aunt, or whatever, ... who I knew and who saw Lincoln's body, which is an important part of history.

SH: It is, and I think that this is something that helps to document that. For you to be able to recall this, from hearing these stories firsthand, is great.

RP: Well, I was always very interested in history and I was always very interested in military, because there were a lot of military connections. My Grandma Plechner's brother, Joe Lindauer, and my Grandpa Plechner's brother, Camille Plechner, served together in the Spanish-American War. Now, they never got overseas. They were stationed at Chickamauga. The old Chickamauga Battlefield was turned into an encampment, and it was just vacant land, lost an awful lot of people to disease. [Editor's Note: Chickamauga Battlefield in Georgia is the site of the last Confederate victory in the Civil War. It became the first national military park in 1890.] Many more people died in the Spanish-American War of disease than died of actual fighting; very few died fighting. ... Joe Lindauer, Grandma Plechner's brother, contracted malaria down there, because they didn't know what to do about it, and that's one of these diseases that you never get rid of. It would be better, and then, worse, then, better, then, worse, and he had that until he died. He died relatively young. I did not know him. He died before I was born, but my grandma used to talk about him. Now, again, she, my Grandma Plechner, was one of either eleven or thirteen kids, I don't remember which. She was the only one ... who grew up, got married and had ... any children.

SH: Really?

RP: Some of the others grew up, got married, didn't have children. A large majority of them died as children themselves, and that was not unusual then. That's one reason people had so many kids as they did back then, because they wanted some of them to survive, you know. [laughter]

SH: It is true.

RP: But, where was I? I got off-base somewhere. You wanted to know who Aunt Carrie was. ... I was really fascinated with the old lady and she lived in Newark. The neighborhood where she lived was very rundown by then, but her house was a beautiful house and she had all kinds of antique furniture, naturally, when you're that antique yourself. [laughter]

SH: Anything stayed with her.

RP: And she was a little, tiny thing and very healthy. One time, she went up in the attic and she had one of these old steamer trunks and she was looking in it and the lid came down and she got caught in the trunk, and her daughter-in-law, Mamie; there was a Mamie and Arthur, Arthur was her last remaining child, and he was in his eighties. ... It used to interest me, too, that here's a guy in his eighties and his mother's still around. You know, that's kind of unusual in itself. [laughter]

SH: You do not think the daughter-in-law ... [laughter]

RP: But, at any rate, ... she had to pull her out, but she ... lived a good, long life, and then, she just went to bed one night and didn't wake up.

SH: Amazing.

RP: So, you know, some people luck out. [laughter]

SH: We are going to fast-forward to talk about what you remember about living here in Metuchen as a young boy. In school, what references were made to World War II? Were there scrap drives and bond drives?

RP: Yes, there were all those, scrap drives, bond drives. I remember, I guess, kindergarten or first grade, or whatever it was, we used to have stamps, savings stamps, ... like, you'd get ten-cent ones and twenty-five-cent ones, whatever, and, when you'd fill a book, the book would be all of whatever denomination it was, you had enough money for a bond. A bond was eighteen dollars and seventy-five cents for a twenty-five-dollar bond, and, after ten years, you got twenty-five bucks, and there was a lot of advertising, a lot of push to get people to do this, helps finance the war, and there were scrap drives and we'd go around, as kids, salvaging scrap. We used to have to flatten tin cans, open both ends and step on them, and the town, I guess the town, picked them up. I'm not sure; maybe we brought them down. I know, some of the stuff, we used to take down to; I think the guy's name was Joe, but I couldn't swear to it. He had a bicycle shop and

that was a collection point. ... Oh, and some things, you got paid for, like a penny a pound, that sort of thing, and that was a big deal. I remember getting thirty-two cents one time. [laughter] I felt I was pretty rich. I found an old hose and that was heavy and that was rubber and they paid you for rubber, and I don't know what else I brought down with it, but that was my one big triumph in that, and I remember, they brought a captured Japanese submarine to New Brunswick, in a bond drive.

SH: Did they bring it up the Raritan River or was it on a truck?

RP: No, it was on a truck. It was one of these mini-subbs that had been sunk at Pearl Harbor and captured, and you could go up, they had stairs that go up, a platform, of course, and down, and they had cut windows in the sides, so [that] you could look in. ... They had dummies in there, it was a two-man sub, of the commander and the other fellow, and that was a big event, and I think you had to buy some savings stamps or something, was the cost of admission. I couldn't swear to that, but they were selling them anyway; I got some. We used to always have [bonds], I used to always buy bonds, all the kids bought bonds, or we bought stamps. We didn't have a lot of money as kids, obviously, bought stamps, and then, later, traded them in, got bonds.

SH: Did rationing affect your household?

RP: I probably still ate too much. Gasoline rationing, and we had a "B" or "C" status; I don't know what else you'd call it. We could buy so much more because my mother went to work. In other words, they had different classifications, and, if you needed gas to go to work, you were a "B," instead of an "A." I think "A" was the bottom, "C" was the top, and I remember, she got extra gas because she had to commute to work. She went back to work, oh, within a couple of weeks of my father's death. ...

SH: What do you remember about receiving the news of your father's death? How was it presented to you?

RP: Well, they called us up. I was ten years old. I was getting ready for bed and we got a phone call from Western Union, that they had a telegraph for us, that my father had been wounded, and I was upset, naturally, and my mother was upset, and you don't really think this kind of thing is ever going to happen until it does. ... Then, I don't know, it must have been some time around midnight or one in the morning, something like that, we got another phone call from them and another telegram saying he'd been killed.

SH: Did they read you the telegram over the telephone?

RP: Yes; well, not to me, to my mother.

SH: Then, did somebody physically come and tell you?

RP: No, not back then. They called you up and they said, "You know, your husband's just been killed," kind of thing.

MS: ... That seems rather cold, you know. Western Union calls and gives you the news.

RP: Well, there was a lot of unhappiness about that. Then, eventually, they adopted the system they have now, where they have someone come around and they don't notify you in the middle of the night in any event, I don't believe, but that was it, and then, he was subsequently buried at ...

MS: The American Cemetery at Carthage.

RP: At Tebessa, Algeria, initially.

SH: Where?

RP: Tebessa.

MS: Tunisia.

RP: No, Tebessa is in Algeria, ... and, at the end of the war, you had a choice. You could either bring him home or he could be buried in the American Military Cemetery in Carthage, [Tunisia]. ... He had said, before he went, he'd told my mother that if he was killed, he wanted to be buried where the rest of the men were buried from the division, and there was a lot of division loyalty there, and he's buried in Carthage. Mary Lou and I went over there a few years back to see the cemetery, which is a beautiful, beautiful cemetery.

SH: Is it well-maintained?

RP: Oh, wonderfully maintained. We've got a picture of it somewhere.

MS: I'll go upstairs and see if I can find it, but it's just [that] the markers, the grave markers, just gleam. They're white marble. I mean, the grass is lush and it's really impeccably manicured, and, when we went and inquired, a young man took us right to the particular grave. There was no wandering around, looking for it.

RP: Everything was very well administratively maintained, as well as physically maintained. They have a, I think it was a master sergeant and a sergeant, first class, who were in charge, and then, the rest were local employees, Tunisians, and they took us out, and then, they took us right away to where his cross was. ... I took some pictures, and then, they took sand and put it into the cuts where his name and what-have-you was on, and so [that] you could see it better for the picture. They were very, very helpful. ...

SH: Was there a memorial service here in Metuchen, New Jersey?

RP: I don't know. I don't recall. I'm sure something was done at church, but I don't really recall.

SH: Did your mother have flags or black draping in the windows?

RP: No, she didn't really believe in doing that.

SH: Because there were certain customs like that.

RP: People had, you know, like, Blue Service Stars and Gold Stars and whatnot. She was not the ostentatious type at all. ... [Editor's Note: Service Flags, displayed by families with members serving in the US Armed Forces, featured a Blue Star for each living family member and a Gold Star for each deceased family member.]

SH: I know that some people, when they had lost someone, would do the black draping.

RP: Yes. No, we didn't do any of that. I remember, we went out to Fort Jay again, Governor's Island. I've got a picture of me. I really looked weird; she told me to get a haircut. So, at that point, I think I might have been going to Rutgers Elementary School at that time, just started there, because it seems to me it was in New Brunswick I went to a barbershop, asked for a haircut. He really skinned me. I looked so weird, and because we had to go out and he received the Silver Star and the commander there presented my mother with the Silver Star on his behalf, and they had a parade for him. ... We got the Silver Star in the commander's office, because she didn't want to get up in front of all those people and receive it. ... She was not that type.

MS: You talk about receiving your father's effects that were with him when he was killed.

RP: Well, they mailed them. They'd sent them back, a big case with all his things. Some of that was done badly, I mean, broken, bloody glasses that he'd been wearing when he was killed and clothing that hadn't been washed. They'd been out in the field, obviously, and they only got to bathe once every few weeks.

SH: They put this in a box and mailed it back home.

RP: Put it in a box and sent it, yes, and it was filthy. They should have just thrown it out. It wasn't worth it, you know, what good is it?

MS: Yes, comparable with the, you know, Western Union calling with the news.

RP: Yes, ... everything was very matter-of-fact.

MS: Just put the bloody effects in a box and shipped them home.

SH: Other than uniforms and such, were there books or anything else that you kept?

RP: Well, I have his little Bible that he had with him, and, basically, it's a little New Testament, New Testament and Psalms, so, it would fit right in your pocket, and, oh, a notebook he had, a couple of notebooks he had with him, which they had censored before sending back, and, primarily, that's it. The rest was just uniforms and stuff.

MS: Do you still have those notebooks?

RP: Sure.

MS: And you said he wrote often; what sort of things? You say that he was very conscientious about censoring himself. What sort of things would he talk about?

RP: "Richard, you'd better do better in school," [laughter] things like that. "Listen to your mother. I understand you did this wrong and that wrong."

MS: Was there anything that he would [put in] about life, you know, in the war zone? Was there anything that he talked about at all? ...

RP: Not very much. Now, he was in the hospital from some point in December, I think Christmas Eve, December, for about a month ... with amoebic dysentery, which was very serious, particularly back then.

SH: This would have been in North Africa.

RP: In North Africa, yes, in North Africa. This was during the slow period. They weren't fighting that much then, so, why not go in the hospital? ... He was quite ill with that and it takes quite awhile. They were giving him, I guess; I forget what they were giving him.

SH: I think it is arsenic.

MS: Arsenic. That was from just drinking the water?

RP: Well, you get it from water, drinking it, even brushing your teeth. It's ...

SH: In the food.

RP: The amoebic [form], the amoeba, of course, were little buggies.

MS: Microscopic.

RP: Yes, [laughter] and it was a very serious problem back then. Nowadays, we have more things that'll prevent that, and he had a bunch of books, [when] he was in the hospital. ... Ted Roosevelt, Jr., brought over a bunch of books for him, visited with him, ... but I don't know what [happened]. Those books did not come back. I don't know what happened. He probably left them in the hospital for the other men to read.

SH: Did your mother send him things? Did he request things?

RP: Yes. In fact, he received, not from my mother, but from the Red Cross, a little bag with all kinds of things, like band-aids and toothpaste and that sort of thing. ... That came back with his belongings when he was killed, but the interesting thing about it was, it was from the Metuchen Red Cross. Out of all the Red Cross chapters all over the country, making these little bags,

putting them together and sending them over, it was a little, olive-green bag, with a red cross, he got one from Metuchen, New Jersey.

MS: That was completely coincidental?

RP: Yes. So, there was a thing in the newspaper about it, after that. I guess my mother must have mentioned it to somebody and they put it in the newspaper, and I gave up the bag to the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society about a year ago. I had it and I figured, "What am I going to do with it?" and that this would be something of interest, and I gave them a Photostat of the article that had been in the newspaper, I guess it was the *Home News* back then, the *Daily Home News*, ... but she used to send him goodies, you know, while he was over there.

MS: What sort of things did she send?

RP: Oh, I don't know, food stuff and what-have-you. Books, she was always looking for books and things to send him, you know, paperbacks, because he liked to read, and, obviously, he couldn't buy much in Algeria or Tunisia to read in English. [laughter]

SH: Did he talk about the difference in the culture, things that stand out in your memory as a young man that were either exotic or romantic?

RP: I don't think so. I don't think it was terribly exotic or romantic where he was, you know, even today, you know.

SH: I thought something mysterious.

RP: Yes. I don't [think so]; think of where he was, you know, ... Humphrey Bogart and what's her name?

MS: Ingrid Bergman.

RP: Ingrid Bergman didn't show up. [Editor's Note: The speakers are alluding to the wartime classic film *Casablanca* (1942).]

SH: They were not there yet.

RP: They weren't there. [laughter]

MS: ... I don't know if you want to talk about this now, Sandra, but, a few years ago, you went and visited the areas where he fought. ...

RP: Yes, we were all through there, ... and we went to Carthage, just as I said before, to see the graveyard. ... Well, Mary Lou and I are both interested in antiquities and in ancient civilizations, and there are so many wonderful things to see in Tunisia, and North Africa as a whole. So, we went around, saw those, and, also, we saw some of the areas where he'd been fighting, down around Kasserine Pass, [Tunisia], for instance.

SH: Did you get there?

RP: And I don't think Kasserine Pass has changed a heck of a lot since then, you know. It's mountainous, with the river going through, and not very hospitable territory, but wars in general are not fought in hospitable territory. [laughter]

SH: Were you informed of the circumstances of his death or was it something you needed to research later?

RP: No. The Army; well, he received the Silver Star for gallantry in action and the citation tells how he was killed, and, also, Colonel Charles Ficke, who was another good friend of his, wrote to us about it and we also got a letter from General Allen. ... Basically, he was, he and two other officers were, on a patrol, which was apparently not as unusual then as it would have been later in the war, but you didn't have that many trained people. You know, we were totally unprepared, as we always are, for war, and he and a Major Ogie and a Captain Bennett went out on a patrol and part of what they were trying to do is find a mine-free path across a bridge demolition. ... They left Captain Bennett back with the jeep, and Major Ogie and my father went forward on foot. ... They were under enemy fire and they hit a mine. ... They got back to the jeep, ... very badly wounded, and back to an aid station. ... Subsequently, Tom Lancer, Colonel (then Captain) Lancer, who just happened to be in the aid station, came in to see how well one of his men was doing ... who had been wounded. He was the division provost marshal at the time. So, they came in according to Colonel Lancer [while he was there]. Nowadays, they probably could have saved them; back then, they didn't have the equipment or medical knowledge to do that. Colonel Lancer, a sort of tragic thing happened; he was in his nineties, spent the whole war with the First Infantry Division, saw a lot of combat, a regular Army officer. He had a law degree from St. John's, I think. ... He may have practiced law for a short time in the 1930s, but went, finally, on active duty in the Army and stayed there until he retired, and, after all the combat he had been through, he was killed in an auto accident, in his nineties, down in Virginia. He lived down by Fort ... Eustis.

SH: There is Fort Eustis down there.

RP: Yes, I'm just trying to think. I think it was Fort Eustis, where he lived, but, [at] any rate, he [Lancer] saw him at the aid station when they brought him in, they brought him and Ogie in, but that was basically it. ... When he was killed, he was at Sbeitla, and this was right after Kasserine. They'd fought through Kasserine and the American troops were, at this point, advancing, and that's what happened.

SH: Did anyone come to visit you and your mother after the men returned home?

RP: Well, we knew some; you mean people we knew? We kept in touch with Colonel Ficke. He was a Reservist, and he went back to practicing law in the Bronx. We heard from some of the people, Bellah, but that was basically it. It wasn't like today, where they have somebody come, present the flag and all that. They mailed us a flag from the burial, overseas. We received a letter from General [George C.] Marshall, partly because General Marshall was in the G-3

[division operations] section of [the] First Division in World War I. So, he had met my father while he was visiting the division. He wanted to see his old section. ... We got a letter from General Marshall, who was, at that time, [US Army] Chief of Staff, and got a certificate signed by Franklin Roosevelt, that sort of thing.

MS: And it was an original signature by the President. I don't know if that sort of thing is done today.

RP: Well, back then, yes, they did that. Nowadays, the things are more mass produced.

SH: Did you have to go to school then? Did you stay home for a few days or did your mom say, "Out the door you go?"

RP: Well, I stayed home for a couple of days, I think, and then, I went away to school, because she had to go to work, and I went to Rutgers Elementary School, it was part of Rutgers Prep, I don't know, maybe two years. Then, I went to Peddie [School in Hightstown, New Jersey], which is where I finished my schooling. ... Seventh and eighth grade and high school, I went to Peddie and I lived at school, because it was too difficult for her to work and keep track of me.

SH: Where did she work and how soon after your father had been killed did she start working?

RP: Yes, she applied [to] a couple of different places, she [was] offered a couple different jobs. She decided to go to work for Carter Wallace, and she stayed with them until she was seventy-three, when she retired. ...

SH: Where is Carter Wallace?

RP: Well, they're no longer around. I think they were split up and part sold off. Old Harry Hoyt, wasn't so old back then, but Harry Hoyt owned the company, and then, his two sons took over, but, apparently, the grandsons ... weren't that interested.

SH: What town did she work in?

RP: She worked ... originally in Milltown, [New Jersey]. In fact, one of their products, they named Miltown, [the brand name for the tranquilizer meprobamate].

SH: You said she had the more advanced gasoline stamps.

RP: Yes, she worked in Milltown.

SH: You still were living off what is now Library Place.

RP: Yes. We lived there until the; well, not too long after my father died, the house was sold. We rented that and we moved to a two-family on Hillside Avenue. Then, after the war, we bought a house on Lake Avenue, and then, we went to Spring Street, and then, here. We've been here about forty-five, forty-six years, but, yes, she was with Carter Wallace. She started out in

the lab, and then, she became associate director of research, and then, when she got to be sixty-five, they had mandatory retirement. So, she had an offer from another company and she told them she's going with another company, and so, they made an exception and kept her on. They made her director of technical services for their international division, and she used to travel.

MS: And that was because of her expertise about the products. They didn't want someone else [benefiting from her expertise]. ...

RP: Well, she developed several products.

MS: What products did she develop?

RP: She developed Arid, which is an antiperspirant, and she developed Nair, which is a depilatory, and then, they had lots of other products, too, but she liked it. She liked to travel. She traveled all over. She was chairman of the scientific section of the Toilet Goods Association for awhile. She was president of the American Society of Cosmetic Chemists, and the company paid for all this, which was very nice. They treated her very well, and she would get to go, sometimes [for] two or three weeks, to meetings in Europe between the American Society of Cosmetic Chemists and the European equivalent, and the company would pay for that and they'd travel around. Different companies would entertain them over there, and it was very nice.

MS: But, they did make a lot of money off of her.

RP: Presumably, yes. [laughter]

SH: She must have had several patents or something. Did you get to travel with her or were you too young?

RP: No. Well, I was all different ages; ... she did that for a long time.

SH: No, I was just wondering if you ...

RP: No, no, I was away at prep school.

MS: ... After you got the news of your father being killed, ... do you remember how quickly she actually went to work? Was it within a couple of weeks?

RP: A couple of weeks.

MS: A couple of weeks, that quickly.

RP: Well, you've got to eat, every day. [laughter] You can't take a vacation from that.

MS: And so, this was the period when most of the male population who could go to war were at war, so, there were lots of openings. It was easy for her to get a job.

RP: Well, she always maintained, and ... I think it's probably true, that if you have a doctorate in a science, you can always get a job, and I think that's probably true. I was just never smart enough to do science, [laughter] so, a different situation.

SH: When she first went back into the scientific field, were they focusing on war-related products?

RP: Well, they did that, yes. When she first went back with Carter Wallace, they had a lot of contracts for the military and I don't even know what. I was a kid, you know, and science was never my thing. I know they were making some kind of [medicine]. They were making penicillin, for instance, and they had these rooms full of these bottles of stinky stuff that penicillin came out of, and various products, yes, for the military, from '43, when she went to work, until '45, when they went back to their civilian [products].

MS: I remember seeing a documentary called [*The Life and Times of*] *Rosie the Riveter* [(1980)], about ...

RP: Yes, she didn't do any riveting. [laughter]

MS: She didn't do any riveting, but a lot of women who had been recruited to go into the work force, when all of the men went overseas, talked about their experiences in being forced out when the men came home, and she didn't experience any of that.

RP: No. As she said, I think it's absolutely correct, in science, there's never an overabundance, and that's true today. If you get a PhD in chemistry today, you can get a job.

SH: She never experienced someone coming back into their old job and her being let go.

RP: No. There were no problems with that. Usually, the problem is getting people with sufficient technical and scientific training to do the jobs.

SH: She had taught, you said, prior to this.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: When the decision was made that you would go to prep school, you were going to school here in Metuchen, New Jersey.

RP: Yes. I went through third grade, I think I pulled out somewhere in third grade, from Metuchen, couldn't swear to it, but went to Rutgers Elementary School, must've gone there fourth, fifth and sixth, because I started Peddie in seventh.

SH: When you were at Rutgers Elementary, were you in an afterschool type of program or did you go home and was somebody there?

RP: No. I came home and we had a lady that was here who would keep an eye on me.

SH: Would your mother drop you off at school?

RP: I took the train, because it's an easy commute to New Brunswick, obviously, from Metuchen, and the school was right up the hill from the railroad station, across from Winants [Hall, at the intersection of Somerset Street and College Avenue].

SH: Was that where Rutgers Prep was at that time?

RP: Yes, the elementary school part, at least. I'm not sure about the high school part.

SH: You were at Rutgers Elementary through sixth grade.

RP: I think through sixth, yes, fourth, fifth and sixth, I think, there.

SH: Then, you went to ...

RP: Then, I was old enough to go away, so, I went to Peddie.

SH: At Peddie, you started seventh grade.

RP: Seventh, yes, seventh, eighth and high school.

SH: How often did you come home from Peddie?

RP: Oh, from Peddie? Of course, in the summer, and I think we got a weekend a month at home, but my mother used to come down every Saturday to visit me, take me out to eat and, sometimes, take me home, and then, take me back there at night. You had to be in by a certain time. It was closely regulated, but she'd come down, pick me up, or we'd go to, say, a football game at Rutgers, and various things like that.

SH: As the war came to an end, how much of a focus was World War II for a young man? For the next three years, until sixth grade, the war was going on. Were you concerned about the war? Were there updates at school or were you focused on school?

RP: No, everybody, of course, was interested in the war, because ... those were [the] days before TV, but we listened to the radio and read the newspapers. We always got the *New York Herald Tribune* at home and, when I was away at prep school, I used to get the *Herald Tribune* delivered and we'd read the newspaper stories and follow what was going on and where.

SH: Was it a big adjustment to go away to Peddie?

RP: For a couple of weeks, yes. I liked Peddie. ... First couple weeks, I thought this was a terrible thing, to be away from home, but any kid does at that age, but my mother told me I had to, and so, I had to; after a couple of weeks, I liked it. It was interesting. I liked the people who were there.

SH: Why was Peddie chosen as your boarding school? Were there other choices?

RP: Yes. We looked at some others and we wanted something relatively close, obviously, and it seemed like a good place to go, and Peddie had a very good reputation, still does. I'm still involved down there as an alumnus, I still contribute, what-have-you. It was well kept up, well maintained, school was good, you know, and it was close.

SH: Proximity was one of the key factors in choosing Peddie.

RP: Well, it was an important factor.

SH: Was there someone else in the community who had gone to Peddie or made a recommendation?

RP: Not that I know of. I had some distant cousin, who's still alive, who graduated from Peddie in 1929, or something like that, [laughter] but I didn't know him, still don't.

SH: I was just wondering what was ...

RP: Simply had heard, "Oh, yes, that was where so-and-so went."

SH: What were you interested in and what were you involved with in Peddie?

RP: Well, I was interested in reading. I always read. I still do, because I was interested in history. I was always interested in the military.

SH: Was there a military component to Peddie?

RP: No.

SH: There were no junior ROTC programs or anything like that.

RP: No.

SH: By going to Peddie, was it assumed that you would then go to college?

RP: Yes. It was always assumed that I'd go to college. ... I didn't have much choice. I know my mother would have killed me if I didn't go. [laughter]

SH: When you came back home on the weekends, was it easy to connect with friends that you had had here?

RP: Yes. I maintained friends here, of course, and it's just another part of your life, you know. [laughter]

SH: When did you make the decision where to go to college?

RP: Well, because my mother had gone to NJC and she used to take me to Rutgers football games, so, I decided I wanted to go to Rutgers, and that served two purposes. One, I knew about it from my mother and, two, it was close. I commuted. One, it was nice to live home and commute, as opposed to living away, because I had lived away for so long. Two, it was a lot cheaper, and Rutgers had a good reputation.

SH: Were there any scholarships available for you or for children whose fathers had been killed in World War II?

RP: Not that I know of.

SH: I have heard of the War Memorial Scholarships.

RP: I think a lot of that stuff is much more recent. I used to get Social Security for my father. I used to get eighteen dollars and six cents a month, but, unfortunately, that was not enough to do it. [laughter]

SH: Not quite. Did you have any afterschool jobs?

RP: Well, I worked. Not afterschool jobs; that's difficult if you're away at prep school. I used to work in the summers. I used to work, I know, one Christmas, I worked in the post office, and then, they stopped hiring kids for awhile, and whatever I could do, you know. After I got to be seventeen, I joined the National Guard. I used to, obviously, get paid for that.

SH: Was that decision made because of the family tradition, because of your grandfather and father?

RP: Well, my grandfather wasn't in the military. My grandmother's mother's brothers were, in the Civil War, and my grandfather and my grandmother's brothers were in the Spanish-American War. They were in the Ninth New York, and there was also another one that was in the Navy, in the Spanish-American War, and then, there was a cousin, Evie, Everett Wolf, who'd been in First Division, strangely enough. I didn't know him that well; saw him once in a while. Well, he was in First Division, the First Engineers, in World War I. He'd been a sergeant and it was kind of odd, because that was the same division my father was in, in World War II, and so, ... there was a family connection to going in the military when there's a war, and I [was] just sort of raised [that] if there's a war, you're supposed to go fight it, ... but I always had that interest in history anyway, which ties in, and many people connected with the military are interested in history, I think.

SH: When did you graduate from Peddie?

RP: 1950.

SH: That would have been in May of 1950. Then, the Korean War erupts.

RP: Somewhere around that, around '51, I guess. Was it '50 or '51? I'm not even sure anymore.
[Editor's Note: The Korean War began in June 1950.]

SH: You joined the National Guard prior to the Korean War.

RP: I joined the National Guard in October 1950. I was seventeen.

SH: Did your mother try to discourage you from joining?

RP: No. In fact, she had to sign for me to join, because I was underage, so-to-speak. You're under eighteen, your parents had to [sign]. No, because my mother believed the same way I did, it's probably why I believed that, I should reverse that and say, I believe the same way my mother did, that we owe an allegiance to the country to defend the country, and one of the most important things that a government can do is to defend its people. ... So, I had always, as long as I can remember, wanted to go in the military, when I was a real little boy, partly, of course, because of my father, and, you know, I was very proud of him, the fact that he was a soldier. So, that was just part of my psyche, I guess. [laughter]

SH: At that time, ROTC was mandatory at Rutgers, but you were already in the National Guard.

RP: Yes. I was already in the National Guard and I remained in both throughout my college career.

SH: Did you have to do National Guard drills and ROTC, or did the ROTC circumvent that?

RP: Oh, yes. No, nowadays, it's quite different. Nowadays, they have ... joint membership, I think they call it, and you have more benefits, many more benefits, today than you did back then. Back then, I used to get two dollars and fifty cents a drill. They'd pay us every three months, because it wasn't worth writing a check for every month, like they do now. [laughter] I'd go to summer camp with the National Guard. The year I had to go to ROTC summer camp, I was excused from National Guard camp, because I couldn't do both at the same time, but they were parallel experiences, and the one advantage [was], of course, you got an experience in the [National] Guard that you don't get as a cadet.

SH: You had already joined the National Guard; when you became a freshman at Rutgers, were you advanced or did you have to go in just as they did?

RP: Well, it all happened about the same time. I started at Rutgers in September of 1950 and I joined the National Guard in October. So, I was at Rutgers first, and I took ROTC. ROTC was mandatory for any able-bodied student at Rutgers at the time, which is not why I joined. I wanted to do it anyway. That's one of the reasons I went to Rutgers, was they had an ROTC department. I would not have gone there if they didn't, and I was home from prep school, kind of settled in. Then, my mother went down and signed me up. [laughter]

SH: As a commuter student, were you subjected to any kind of initiation as a freshman?

RP: Well, we had to wear dinks, that sort of thing. I don't think they do that anymore. We had to wear freshman dinks, little, funny hat. I guess [I] may still have one upstairs, somewhere, and I'm not sure there's anything else. I know, in prep school, we had to wear a black tie and a dink, and, in college, we wore a dink and I'm not sure if we had to wear a scarlet and black tie or not. I don't think so; I think just the dink.

SH: Were they still wearing a jacket and tie to class or was it more casual, because there were so many returning veterans? What do you remember about them or that?

RP: The only thing I remember is wearing that darn dink. I'm not sure if we wore jacket and tie or not. In prep school, we had to wear jacket and tie.

SH: I am wondering if Rutgers was somewhat or much more casual than Peddie had been.

RP: I think it was more casual.

SH: Did you join a fraternity?

RP: No. In fact, I was president of then what they called the Crown Club, which was the Commuters Club back then, and I put my experience from when my father was in the Army in mixing drinks to assist in that capacity, yes.

SH: That is the first I have heard that the Commuter Club had that component to it.

RP: Yes. They did when I was president of it, anyway. [laughter] We were part of what was known as [the] Scarlet Barbs, which was, barbs was for barbarians, as opposed to Greeks. I think I was vice-president of the Scarlet Barbs. Art Kaminsky, who's now Art Kamin, was president of Scarlet Barbs, as I recall. ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: When you came to Rutgers, did you already know that you wanted to go into law?

RP: I think so, at that point, yes. ... I already had learned that I was not very good at science [laughter] and I had to do something for a living, ultimately, and I very much admired my Uncle Bunk, who'd been a lawyer, and so, I decided, ultimately, I'd go to law school.

SH: As a freshman and as a commuter to Rutgers, did you attend all the football games? How involved were you in the Rutgers community?

RP: Yes. I think I attended every football game while I was in college. I don't think I missed a single game, used to go to the away games and the home games, and a bunch of us used to go together. ...

SH: As a commuter, did you take the train?

RP: No, got a car. The summer between prep school and college, I went to work. I needed a car partly to get to work. I worked for National Lead Company in Perth Amboy. So, [I] bought an old Pontiac. My mother lent me the money for it. I probably still owe her the money for it, actually. [laughter] but, anyway, I had the old Pontiac and I used that to commute, both to work in the summer and to Rutgers, whatnot.

SH: Did you go to National Lead because of your father having worked there?

RP: No. He didn't work in that division of the company. I worked in the lead works, over on State Street. My uncle worked for National Lead, which had nothing to do with my father's working there. It's [just] one of those things, and ... he worked in New York, at 111 Broadway, which was the company headquarters. He was manager of paints and pigments, or something, or pigments and lead chemicals, I guess it was, and they had a big plant out on State Street in Perth Amboy, and I worked there and it paid well, because it was dirty work. You know, it was a lead smelter and a paint plant, and, when I hear all this stuff about lead poisoning, yes, you can get that, but, if you're careful, you don't. ... My first summer, I worked in the medical unit there, again, my mother had to sign, because I was seventeen, and we used to have to treat people with lead poisoning.

SH: Did you really?

RP: Oh, yes. I didn't really treat them. I was just doing the administering.

SH: These were the workers being treated.

RP: Yes, but, generally, because they did not obey the safety rules. The people who worked in the smelter, which I did not do, that's really hot, heavy, dirty work, but it paid well, had masks they could wear, they had greaves to protect their shins and the upper part of their foot, they had steel-toed shoes. I mean, the company really supplied them with what they should have worn to protect themselves, caps to keep the stuff from getting in their hair, but a lot of them wouldn't do it, even though they could get fired for not doing it, and they'd come down with lead poisoning, which is a miserable thing. It never goes away; maybe now, I don't know. Back then, they used to give them these calcium shots, which were terribly painful, which had the effect of making the lead deposit in the bone marrow, out of the blood stream, which is not exactly a good situation, either, but it was generally [due to worker negligence], if you investigate them; they had to investigate every case. The company was very, very sensitive to that.

SH: Was it really?

RP: And we had signs all over, you know, ... but human beings being human beings, "It's not going to happen to me," you know.

SH: Were you involved in other activities at Rutgers, besides ROTC and the Commuter Club?

RP: Yes. I belonged to the Geography Club, various clubs and things. I was not an athlete.

SH: Who was your favorite professor?

RP: I guess, when you get down to it, John Paul Vann.

SH: He was a political science professor.

RP: No, ROTC.

SH: That is right.

RP: Yes. ... Guys from our class, we're still fighting with Rutgers, trying to get them to honor John Paul Vann. He was a brilliant guy. He was very charismatic and he cared about his students, and he was a young captain at that time, and, ultimately, he was the most famous of our professors, but there were a lot of good professors. Dick McCormick [Richard P. McCormick] taught history, was very nice, Norman Stamps, we had in political science, was very good, Professor Wiegand, I forget his first name, taught geography. That's why I belonged to the Geography Club. ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: I will end the interview here, reserving the right to come back and start again next time.

RP: Yes, okay.

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

Reviewed by William Nesson 11/4/09

Reviewed by Nicholas Koval 11/4/09

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