RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROY WILLIAM REISERT

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

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

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Kurt Piehler: … This begins an interview with Mr. Roy William Reisert on October 17, 1996, in Somerset, New Jersey, with Kurt Piehler and …

Jan Pattanayak: Jan Pattanayak.

KP: I would like to begin by asking you some questions about your parents; the first thing that intrigued me was that your father went to a military college.

RR: That's right, Penn Military School, yes.

KP: Do you know why he went to a military college?

RR: Well, he was … not too good in his grades and his father was a doctor. … His father had him tutored and finally got him into PMC [Pennsylvania Military College], which is a very well-to-do school here in Philadelphia. In fact, a lot of the cadets had their own polo ponies. One interesting thing about his roommate, though, his roommate was the brother of a Broadway showgirl. … This Broadway showgirl was; let me get it straight now, she was with this famous architect, who was murdered in New York City, in Madison Square Garden. Anyway, … her brother was my dad's roommate in PMC and, when the murder happened; you remember the murder?

KP: I cannot remember the name.

RR: [laughter] … He's a famous architect. He designed Madison Square Garden, [Stanford White]. … Maybe you'd better shut this off until I find the darn thing.

[TAPE PAUSED]

RR: It was Howard Nesbit and his sister, [Evelyn].

KP: Your father …

RR: … Was the roommate of Howard Nesbit, and Nesbit dropped out of college … the day after the murder happened. Later, it was learned that Stanford White had been paying Howard Nesbitt's tuition. He cleaned out his desk and he had the family Bible there, that my dad saw, and that's the only thing he left behind, the family Bible. My father had it. … Later on, [around] 1920 or so, when the Hall-Mills murder happened, the week before the Hall-Mills murder happened, a reporter on the *Home News* ran into my father in a bar somewhere, in New Brunswick. [Editor's Note: The Hall-Mills incident involved the deaths of an Episcopal minister and a member of his choir. The two were killed on September 14, 1922. The suspected murders were the minister's wife and her brothers.] … My father happened to tell him about this fact, that he roomed with Howard Nesbit, who was … the brother of "The Girl On," … what was it? "The Purple Swing?" … "The Velvet Swing?" Remember, there's a movie, *The Velvet Swing* or something, [*The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing* (1955)]. Anyway, she was the principal star [character] in that. … Anyway, he wanted to interview my father about this Bible and my father lent it to him, as a matter-of-fact. … About a week later, the Hall-Mills murder happened and,

when that happened, the Bible was mislaid and lost, and then, my father never did get it back. [laughter] I thought that was interesting. Let me see, I want to get you the name of this person. You don't remember it, apparently.

KP: I cannot remember at this point, although I know I have heard about the case.

RR: Oh, it was Harry Thaw, Harry Thaw and Stanford White.

KP: Yes.

RR: Stanford White was the architect and he was dressed in a tuxedo. … He was a famous architect, designer of Madison Square Garden, and himself a notorious womanizer and playboy. Well, anyway, Thaw confronted White, the jealous rival, and shot him dead with three shots to the head with a .45-caliber automatic. White's mustache, and a thatch of red hair to match, was singed by the powder blast. Well, the next day, Howard Nesbit withdrew from the Keystone; well, I have Keystone here in the book. I changed the name, but it's the Pennsylvania Military College, and was never seen again. His family Bible was the only thing he left behind when he cleaned out his room. Evelyn Nesbit was the girl. She was Thaw's wife, at twenty years old, and had numerous amorous affairs with both men, one on a European trip with Harry Thaw at the tender age of eighteen. White, Stanford White, had already seduced her when she was sixteen and appearing as a chorus girl in *Floradora*, a famous New York musical. [laughter] Anyway, it's in page five of my first book, *An Ace in the Devil's Hole*, self-published, hard cover novel. I made a costly mistake in not applying for an SBN, the results, fifty copies unsold in the cellar. You can read about this business in here. It's all a fact, … except, like I say, I changed … the names, … so [that] it wouldn't hurt anybody. … I thought that was interesting, the fact about my father. It's all true, I mean, what I was telling you.

KP: I believe that I have heard about the case, now that you have reminded me; I just could not remember the names.

RR: Yes, Harry Thaw and Stanford White, that's the ones.

KP: There was recently a documentary on the whole murder. Back to your father, he went to a military college, but he never served in the military.

RR: No, he didn't. He resigned his commission and he went to California as a civil engineer. My mother and dad went out there and they were married out there.

KP: Did he serve in the military at all?

RR: No, he didn't. In those days, you didn't have to. It wasn't mandatory.

KP: He completed military college, but he did not enter the military.

RR: So, he didn't follow the military, no.

KP: It sounds like his curriculum centered on engineering.

RR: He graduated as a civil engineer and he got a job in the Los Angeles Water Department as a civil engineer.

KP: This all occurred before World War I.

RR: Oh, yes. … That was in 1908 and I was born out there, of course, [in] 1915. They stayed out there quite a while and I was born in 1915 in Los Angeles, California.

KP: When did your parents move back East? How old were you?

RR: I was three or four. I think I was three or four, or something like that.

KP: Do you remember anything about California?

RR: No, nothing. I've been back there, but I don't remember anything about my youth.

KP: How did your parents meet?

RR: Well, they met at church, in a church social. Dad played the violin, my mother played the piano. … They used to go to a Lutheran church in Boyertown, a little town outside of Chester, Pennsylvania, and they played … in church and they played in these church socials and whatnot and that's how he got to know my mother. My mother was a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse.

KP: You mentioned that in your survey.

RR: She died … at ninety-five years old, in a nursing home out here on Route 27.

KP: How long did your mother teach before she got married?

RR: Oh, about three, four years, something [like that], not very long, … about three years.

KP: Where was the one-room schoolhouse?

RR: In Boothwyn, a little town called Boothwyn, Pennsylvania.

KP: Which county is that in?

RR: It's right outside of Philadelphia, not too far away.

KP: Your mother went to the Kutztown State Teacher's College.

RR: Kutztown. [Editor's Note: Mr. Reisert corrects the pronunciation.]

KP: Kutztown. [laughter]

RR: That's right.

KP: What led your parents to come back East?

RR: Oh, well, … it's in my first book, really, the reasons. She [his mother] said she was getting tired of the sunshine. … She wanted to see the foliage and the snow. … She got tired of the hot weather and the beautiful sunshine all the time; plus, they just got homesick for snow and ice. They used to ice-skate on the canal in Lenhartsville, up and down the canal for four or five, ten miles, sometimes, when the ice was good. … They'd skate on this canal and, when it got dark, they'd take the trolley back, [laughter] back to where they lived. … Actually, she lived in Shoemakersville at that time.

KP: It sounds like your parents also missed their families. Do you think that was part of the reason why they moved back?

RR: How's that?

KP: That they missed their families, their parents and other relatives?

RR: Yes. Most of them were around that area, Reading, Pennsylvania, Shoemakersville, little towns in Pennsylvania.

KP: What job did your father take after leaving the Los Angeles Water Department?

RR: He came back here and he got a job as an engineer and he worked in Newark for quite a long while. He was the borough engineer for Metuchen for a bit. … Then, he went to Newark and he was with George Merrill as an engineer, a partner in engineering, for quite a while. Then, he left that because things were getting kind of shaky in the '20s and he took a job in Newark in the Fidelity Union Title Company. … He was there about fifteen years or so.

KP: Then, he returned as a civil engineer for Highland Park.

RR: Yes, well, that's right. He was there for a while, yes, as a civil engineer, yes.

KP: Did your father like his work? Did he like being an engineer?

RR: Oh, yes, yes, he was good at it.

KP: It sounds like you went through several different school systems. Did you start school in Highland Park?

RR: Oh, yes, at Lafayette School, I went.

KP: You lived in Highland Park for most of your life.

RR: Most of my adult life, yes.

KP: You initially went to Highland Park High School, but, then, you went to New Brunswick High School.

RR: Well, I went to Highland Park High when it was called Franklin High, in 1927. That's when it opened. … We were in the first seventh grade there, … and then, we graduated in the tenth grade. … That was in 1930 [that] we graduated from Franklin High. Then, two years later, I graduated from New Brunswick High and graduated in the Class of '32. So, I had to walk from here, Highland Park, that is, over across the bridge, all the way out Livingston Avenue, to New Brunswick High. … We had an old car, an old Model T, which we bought, and we used to ride that about three days a week and work on it for the rest of the week, because it would break down all the time, but, most of the time, we walked. We only had that Model T, I think, one year, the last year.

KP: You have lived in this area a long time. What are some of your earliest memories of Highland Park and Metuchen?

RR: Johnson's Pond strikes me as the most impressive thing. … That's where we spent most of our time as kids. … We used to live on Harrison Avenue. We moved from Johnson Street over to Harrison Avenue when I went to Franklin High and that was right two blocks from the edge of town there. Cleveland was the last street, then, there was a lumberyard, and then, the Pennsylvania Railroad. So, every day, we used to change our clothes and go over across the railroad and go to Johnson's Pond and swim or fish or observe bird life and one thing or another, or hunt. Sometimes, in the hunting season, we used to hunt quail and pheasants and rabbits in the field, which is now Lambiance [Court]. You know the Lambiance [Court area]? All the way back in there, … behind that retreat, that Catholic retreat there [Cenacle Retreat House], in back of there was all fields, all the way back, all the way over to where Camp Kilmer is now, or used to be. In fact, Camp Kilmer cut our pond right in two. They put a spur line right through it, to meet the Pennsylvania Railroad to embark the troops. So, that ruined the pond. Of course, I was overseas when that happened, so, it didn't bother me much, but, as a young boy, we spent much of our time in Johnson's Pond. They're two ponds; there's an upper and a lower pond. … There was better swimming in the lower pond, because it was deeper, for one thing, and it was right next to the greenhouse, Johnson's Greenhouse, opposite the pond, and the road leading up was Johnson's Estate. … They had a greenhouse there and the old guy, we used to swim naked in the pond, of course, until he shot at us a few times with a .22-[caliber] and came close to us within the water. So, we had to deal with him, finally. His son … went to high school in Franklin High and we … made a deal with his son, Julius. … We told his father, through Julius, that, "If we wore shorts, could we swim in the pond?" So, he said, "Okay." So, we used to swim in the pond with shorts from then on and he didn't shoot at us any more. [laughter]

KP: He literally shot at you.

RR: Oh, yes, the .22. Those bullets came pretty close sometimes, in the water, to our heads.

KP: It sounds like you spent a lot of time outdoors while growing up in this area.

RR: Yes, all the time, … every afternoon. We'd ice skate, too, on the pond, of course, in the winter. … One year, … I think in 1930, you had no ice. It was warm, but, the next year, we played hockey every year on the pond and I played in high school and I was on the team, but, I think, that year or the next year, they won the state championship, New Brunswick High, in hockey. … I played second goalie on the team. … It was quite interesting, because we all were accomplished hockey players by the time the coach took over, you know. We all used to go over there long before the coach even knew there was ice on the pond. [laughter]

KP: Your parents had met at church. How active were they, and you, in the church?

RR: In church? Well, they attended. They weren't very active, really. … I was confirmed and joined the church. … I just got a questionnaire over there, that I'm supposed to go around and see people about increasing their contributions in our church. They selected me, as one of the oldest members of the congregation. [laughter] I don't know why, because I really have contributed much too less, much too little, I should say, over the years, because of financial reasons, but, now, you know, … your finances ebb and flow and, finally, you get so where you can afford things that you couldn't afford before. So, I plan to be more active in the church. …

KP: Are you active in a church?

RR: Oh, yes, they made me an elder last year, [laughter] for three years, but I attended.

JP: How large was this church that you attended?

RR: It's a very small church. We only have several hundred members, really. We're trying to increase the membership. It's First Reformed, Highland Park First Reformed, on Second Avenue.

KP: Was that the church that you grew up in, the Reformed Church?

RR: Well, yes, that's right. We had several different pastors, of course, and ministers. (Blake?) is our present minister.

KP: Your mother was a schoolteacher. Did she work at all after she got married?

RR: No. Well, she did, yes. She worked at the Roger Smith's [Hotel] for a while, as a housekeeper. She was head of all the ladies around. … That was during the war. It was only a couple of years, during the war.

KP: During World War II?

RR: … That's right, World War II.

KP: Before the war, she did not work.

RR: No, nobody [no women] worked in those days. They all played bridge.

KP: Besides playing bridge, what other things did your mother do outside of the home?

RR: Oh, gardening.

KP: Was she involved with any committees or any organizations?

RR: Yes, gardening and things like that, garden clubs and whatnot. There was a sewing circle that they used to belong to and there was a bridge circle, of course, that they played [in]. They played bridge once a week with different homes around Highland Park. That's all changed now, though. They don't do that anymore, apparently.

KP: You mentioned that your father shifted jobs in part because of the Great Depression. He took a job at the title company. How did the Depression affect your family?

RR: Terribly, awful. We lost our home. It was just terrible. It really was.

KP: Was your father ever out of work?

RR: Not very long, no, no, he wasn't. … He got a job in the Borough Hall right after he was laid off, in Newark. … They started to lay people off in Newark gradually. They cut their work hours, maybe half a day, [then], … two, three days a week. … After all, in 1929, you know, a lot of people jumped out of windows in New York City. … In fact, a lot of my friends' fathers committed suicide. I know one very prominent fellow, who I went around with, his father was a banker in New York and he went down in the cellar and blew his head off with a shotgun. … Then, there were other young boys that I went to school with, my age, whose fathers lost everything. … This one kid hanged himself in his garage on Abbot Street there in Highland Park, a young boy who was depressed because he couldn't go to the seashore that summer. His father lost his business and … his summer cottage down at the shore. He was just distraught and hanged himself. As a matter-of-fact, his burial plot is right about ten feet from my mother and dad's burial plot, out in Millstone, [at the] Cedar Lawn Cemetery. … I often think of him as I visit my mother and dad's grave out there.

KP: You were very conscious of the Depression coming on.

RR: Oh, absolutely, yes. … It was very painful when you're young, you know.

KP: It sounds like, until then, your parents were doing fairly well.

RR: Yes. We went away to vacations every year, to Maine [and] whatnot.

KP: It sounds like those vacations stopped afterward.

RR: They sure did. That's right.

KP: Your parents were Republicans. What did they think of both Hoover and Roosevelt?

RR: Well, Hoover they voted for, because they [were] dyed-in-the-wool Republicans. … Of course, Hoover was an inept fellow. He didn't do too much for the country at all. [However], he was a Republican, so, they voted for him. Of course, when Roosevelt came along, I guess they voted against him the first time, but, after that, they were firmly for Roosevelt. … Everyone realized that he was the man of the century. He was a wonderful person. I mean, he started Social Security, which I'm still a … benefactor of. He did many things. He started the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps], the NYA [National Youth Administration]. The CCC, I know a lot of boys here in this town got their start from the CCC, fighting forest fires in Oregon and Idaho and planting trees and building bridges across streams in the West.

KP: You knew people from Highland Park who joined the CCC.

RR: Oh, yes. One of them is a well-known insurance agent right now. He lives right back here, about three blocks back.

KP: He got his start as part of the CCC.

RR: A young boy, a young fellow in our neighborhood; I won't mention his name, but I could if you want me to.

KP: You can. It is a matter of public record, who was a part of the CCC.

RR: Yes, Johnnie Goetz

KP: He was originally in the CCC.

RR: Yes, … a young boy out of high school, had no job and went right in the CCC. A lot of them did. Of course, a lot of the older men joined in the WPA. … Remember all these alphabet soups that they created? Well, the WPA was the Works Progress Administration and it was under the NIRA [National Industrial Recovery Act], the National Recovery …

KP: Administration.

RR: Administration, the NRA or NIR. … I remember the pamphlets, the big posters all over town, "We are in the NIRA," "We support the NIRA." … Roosevelt really did the job. He was a wonderful man.

KP: Even though your parents were Republican, they still supported Roosevelt.

RR: Oh, yes. They started to realize that he was … doing things that had to be done, all these public works projects for one thing. Bridges were built, roads were built.

KP: Was your father involved with any WPA work?

RR: Oh, yes. He got a job with this engineering firm who did this WPA work. They surveyed all the Meadowlands and ran Raritan Arsenal and [did projects] all up and down the river for all these improvements to Raritan Arsenal. He worked on all … those problems. He did a lot of roadwork, too, bridges and things, railroads. He worked on some railroad crossings that they built over in Metuchen there. … It was all, of course, WPA and all the federally-proposed projects that kept the country going. It really did. It was a wonderful thing.

KP: Growing up, did you think that you would be going to college? Did your parents expect you to go to college?

RR: They expected me to, but I was beginning to have my doubts when I was a senior in high school. When I was finally lucky enough to get that scholarship, that started me off. … Then, my uncle helped me for a while. He sent me for a year, … but, then, he didn't want to do it anymore. So, I had to go it on my own. [laughter]

JP: Were you a good student in high school?

RR: … Yes, I was a good student in high school, good in math and science. … I got good grades in college, too, that first year, and then, after that, though, … between working and trying to go back, my grades didn't go very far.

KP: What type of career did you think you would like? Did you want to be a civil engineer like your father?

RR: No. I wanted to be a cartoonist, as a matter-of-fact.

KP: Really?

RR: Yes.

KP: For newspapers? You wanted to have your own cartoon strip?

RR: Yes. You want to see some of my cartoons? They're down in the cellar. [laughter]

KP: Maybe after the interview. You would have liked to have been a cartoonist.

RR: Yes. In fact, I studied art for a while. [I studied at] Grand Central for, I don't know, three, four, five, six months and I figured, "No money in this." I couldn't make it. … I submitted cartoon ideas to the *New Yorker* from time to time and they wrote me a letter once that said, "Keep at it." I used to send ten or eleven of them at a time. … They asked you to send your pencil sketches on eight-and-a-half-by-eleven paper. … I sent a dozen or so at a time. The editor wrote me a letter once and told me, "Keep at it," but, then, the war came along. … I started to get interested in flying and I said, "To hell with this, I'm going to learn to fly," especially since I learned to fly in the CPTP. One of these things, it stands for Civilian Pilot Training Program, it meant that anybody that had two years of college or more could apply and learn to fly for free under the Federal Aviation Administration. So, I joined that over in Basking

Ridge.

KP: Not at Hadley Field?

RR: No. … The reason I joined over in Basking Ridge [was], I should have joined in Highland Park, because it's right near home, but I was working as a newspaper correspondent in Plainfield. It was the *Plainfield Courier News* at the time. … I went around to the airport once, because there was a crash over there. So, I went over there to investigate it. … That's how I found out about this free flying program. This is in 1940, so, I figured, "Huh, … if I'm interested in flying, I'd better get busy and take this, because the war is coming." … I figured, "Well, the more I learn about flying, the better off I'll be if I'm drafted."

KP: When you enlisted in the Civilian Pilots Training Program, you expected there to be a war.

RR: Oh, sure. We all knew it, we all knew it. Some of the young kids would come around on their bicycles, the young kids from grade school, and they said, "You fellows are going to war, you know." We always said, "Oh, shut up, stupid. We all know that. That's why we're here. [laughter] We want to enlist as pilots, not as infantrymen."

KP: Even though it was the Civilian Pilot Training Program, the notion was that you would be participating in the war.

RR: We all knew, yes, what was coming, because lend-lease just started and ships were being armed with guns. All the merchant ships were being armed and they were being sunk right and left. … You could tell, especially when France fell in June 1940. Paris fell … and the Nazis marched through Paris. We knew right then, right then and there. … It was a very bad situation.

KP: It sounds like you knew a lot of people in Highland Park whose parents were affluent, even though some of them lost their money. Of your friends, how many ended up going to college?

RR: Quite a few of them, quite a few of them, yes. They all went and didn't all make out too well. One or two of them flunked out. … One kid flunked out [from] … NYU, and then, he came back and went to Rutgers and graduated from Rutgers. [laughter] … One fellow … whose father committed suicide went to Rutgers and he dropped out. … Then, he went to Wisconsin afterwards, I think. He went two years to Wisconsin, and I won't mention his name, because, later on, he became one of the vice-presidents of Johnson and Johnson. … Others I knew, I was very friendly with a family called the Newtons, [who] lived on Harrison Avenue. … Professor Newton was their father and he was head of the Music Department at NJC. They had five children. Of course, all of them went to Rutgers for free, because [of] … he being the head of the Music Department. There were five boys and a girl, no, four boys and a girl; they had five children. … They all went to Rutgers for free. … One of the fellows, Jack Newton, … is a professor, was a professor, at Rutgers in electrical engineering, now retired, lives in Millstone. [You] probably know about him. Well, the others all graduated from Rutgers, one [as] a mechanical engineer, another one in journalism and another, I think, in general studies. One's in Canada, one of my friends, Norman, he died, and Anson also died. … Anson was a pilot in the war and I … took him up in his first flight, in a [Piper] Cub, right after I graduated from the CPT

school. I took him up in his first flight. … Later, he became a captain and flew Douglas Bostons in the US Army and [he] was discharged in due course after the war. … Later on, not too long ago, maybe ten years ago, I was active in a soaring club, a gliding club, out in Bedminster, Pluckemin, and I invited him to go with me. I took him up in his first soaring flight. … He used to own a business in Morristown called Anson Newton, Anson Newton Men's Clothes. Of course, he died and he … sold the business to someone else. … They still retain the name, Anson Newton Clothiers, in Morristown. It's on the road … between Bernardsville and Morristown. Maybe you've passed it several times.

KP: I probably have. I can not remember.

RR: It's a very exclusive men's shop. He does a very good business.

KP: When you were growing up, were you intrigued by aviation?

RR: Intrigued?

KP: Do you remember, for example, Lindbergh's flight?

RR: Oh, yes, absolutely, 1927. I remember that. My mother … shouted to me, "He made it. He made it. Lindy made it." I remember, I was sitting at breakfast at my home at Harrison Avenue and it happened at noon, when she told me about it. It came over the radio.

KP: You mentioned that you liked to hunt and fish and swim and that you played hockey. What other activities did you do?

RR: Well, soaring, lately. Just in the last fifteen years, I've been soaring. I haven't been too active physically, but soaring is … a sit-down sport, you know. You sit there in the airplane, trying to figure out how you're going to stay up with the thermals and the wind currents and the rising air currents and what-not.

JP: Where do you do this, usually?

RR: … At Pluckemin, the Somerset Airport in Pluckemin, not too far, about twenty miles from here, right off Route 287. … We often go out and stay up and, in fact, most of the time, we stay up an hour.

KP: Were you ever a Boy Scout?

RR: Oh, yes, I was a Scout, yes. [I] went to Scout camp. [laughter]

KP: You mentioned that you were lucky to get a scholarship. Did you get a State Scholarship to Rutgers?

RR: I think it was a Rotary Club scholarship. I think that was it. …

KP: You did not have to use it at Rutgers.

RR: It was granted to me at Rutgers. It was a four-year scholarship, too, and I gave it up, unfortunately. … I figured, well, at that time, I couldn't see [myself] being able to finish anyway, really, the way things were going financially. I thought I'd have to get out and go to work to save the family home. … It turned out a little better than that. My uncle helped me, and then, … one of my other uncles, my mother's brother, was a Sigma Chi at Penn State and he encouraged me to go to Penn State.

KP: That is how you got to Penn State.

RR: That's right, because he was the founder and the owner of the New York Testing Laboratories, which still exists today in New York [City], on Washington Street. … He sort of intimated to me that maybe I could get a job there after I finished at Penn State. … Of course, I never did get around to finishing, but he died not long after that of tuberculosis. … He was a great influence on me. He was, like I said, a Sigma Chi at Penn State.

KP: You went to two different colleges. Why did you choose Rutgers in 1932? Was it because of the scholarship or for other reasons?

RR: Well, it was my hometown. It was the most economical thing I could do, other than go to Rider or some business school like that.

KP: You entered in September of 1932. I can not think of a more bleak time to begin college.

RR: I recall very … markedly that, in March of 1933, I think I was in my, what would that be, my sophomore year or freshman year? The banks closed [in] March of 1933. Well, no, that was my freshman year, … yes.

KP: Do you remember the banks in New Brunswick closing?

RR: Yes. That's when all the suicides happened, the suicides of my friends and … my father's friends. … It was just a mess. They were very bleak times.

KP: What about the college? Did you have classmates who had a hard time making ends meet?

RR: In college?

KP: Yes.

RR: Well, my uncle sent me.

KP: Yes, but did you see other people drop out as the semester progressed?

RR: Not too many, no. The ones that went stayed there, by hook or by crook.

KP: You lived at home when you went to Rutgers.

RR: Yes, I did, yes.

KP: When you first went to Rutgers, how long were you there for, a full year?

RR: For a year, a full year, yes.

KP: Do any professors stick out from your first year? Did any leave an impression?

RR: Yes, I had [Henry L.] Van Mater, who was my chemistry professor. Van Mater, he was a friend of the family, too, … and the bandmaster. I've forgotten his name, Cook, I believe

KP: You played in the band.

RR: Yes, I did, yes.

KP: Did you take part in ROTC in your first year at Rutgers?

RR: Yes, I did, but I didn't have any military duties. I didn't have to march. We marched in the band, so, we were exempt from marching. Well, we marched in the band. See, we had to learn to march in the band. We were exempt from other military things. We went to class and wore our uniform and everything, but we didn't have to march.

JP: You chose chemistry as your major.

RR: … Yes, I studied chemistry to start, yes.

JP: Why did you choose chemistry?

RR: Well, I guess my uncle influenced me. He was a metallurgical engineer at Penn State and a chemist and a metallurgist. He studied metallurgy after he graduated as a [chemical] engineer at Penn State.

KP: Is there anything you remember of your first year at Rutgers? For example, would you have liked to have joined a fraternity if you had stayed at Rutgers?

RR: Yes, I would have, yes.

KP: Did you think of joining one?

RR: I thought of it, yes, but I thought of it more readily at Penn State, because you're away from home. … I always owe a great debt to the fellows of my fraternity. I did join a fraternity at Penn State and I always owe a great debt to them for the way they treated me my first year. I didn't enjoy my first year out there, because of financial reasons, of course, but I got in with this bunch at Sigma Phi Epsilon, of which I'm a member now. … They really went out of their way

to befriend me and they invited me to dinner two or three times a week and invited me to play with their intramural games. … I was just a non-member member. [laughter]

KP: You had almost all the benefits of the fraternity, except the membership.

RR: That's right, yes, a wonderful bunch, though. I still contact them. I still write to them and still have a lot of wonderful friends amongst them. Most of them are all down in Florida, about five or six of them are all in Florida, retired. In fact, we used to go back to reunions, ten-year reunions at Penn State, up until about ten years ago. Then, one fellow got so old [that] he couldn't run it anymore. … We used to go back to what we called mini-reunions. … All the people in the '30s, about ten classes, would go back every other year. They had it every two years and we went back, my wife and I, … about five or six times to State College and I had wonderful times there.

KP: How did you like Penn State, versus Rutgers? What were the differences that you remembered between the two schools?

RR: All the difference in the world, I thought; friendships, mostly. The fellows there seemed to be more friendly.

KP: At Penn State?

RR: … Remember, when I went there, there were only five thousand students there and it was a small college. … After a year or two, you got to know everybody, almost everybody. [You knew] most everybody by their first name. You didn't know their last name, but you knew them. … There was a "hello" custom, too, that they had. Of course, you wore the dink. … There was a "hello" custom. Everybody, you had to say "hello" to everybody. Even the seniors had to say "hello" to everybody, too.

KP: Did you find Penn State to be a friendlier place than Rutgers?

RR: Yes, I did.

KP: You did not have a "hello" tradition at Rutgers in 1932.

RR: No, we didn't, no. It was all pretty much [divided] all in small groups, you know. Well, naturally, it was a small school in the city and it was dominated by the town, really. … It was different in State College. It was just a dinky, little town and everybody was knit together. There was nothing to do, I mean, except go to the movies every Saturday night or, Saturday night, you'd go down to the Rathskeller and drink a pitcher of beer. We'd sit around a big round table. I think a pitcher of beer was a dollar, … maybe it was fifty cents, I don't know. I guess it was fifty cents, that's more like it, in those days. We sat around this big table every Saturday night and, if you sat in the right place, all you had to buy was one pitcher of beer, as you'd take turns going around. [laughter] … They served peanuts for free and crackers and everything, cheese, rat cheese. The Rathskeller is still there. … My wife and I used to [go]. I used to take her in there once in a while, when we went back. I'd tell her where we used to stay and spend

our time [on] Saturday night. … Then, there was a movie. There were two movies, the Cathaum and I forget the other one's name, Capitol, I guess. We used to go to the movies and I think it was forty cents for movies. In the winter months, you know, there was a lot of snow out there, too. … Most of the time, we used to sit around the Corner Room, … right on the corner there, where they only sold sandwiches and hot chocolate. Now, they got a liquor license. I was in there with my wife a couple of years ago and I said, "Look at this, whisky." I never heard of such a thing in the Corner Room, because it was only a soda shop, you know. … Now, they sell booze and beer right in the middle of town. That never happened when we were there, because nobody boozed it up, really, except … [for] weekends with the beer. … During the week, and afternoon classes, if you didn't have any, especially on a snowy day, everybody would go in the Corner Room. You flocked, packed in this Corner Room. The windows are right on the … College Avenue street and you'd sit there in these booths that held about eight people and you'd spend your afternoons drinking hot chocolate. … I think you'd spend about forty cents the whole afternoon drinking hot chocolate and talking with the co-eds. That was another thing that was very unique, too. They had co-eds there.

KP: Whereas Rutgers was all-male.

RR: That's right, and the co-eds were, you know, kind of an oddity. Not an oddity, but it was an interesting phenomenon, because you met these girls from rural towns and the cities of Pennsylvania and all over. … It was really interesting to talk to them, because they all had different ideas about things. Yes, I think it was really an oddity.

KP: When you said they had different ideas, what are you referring to?

RR: Well, about social customs, about what they did in their farm communities or city communities, where they husked corn or whatever they did, [laughter] what they did with themselves, you know. There were a lot of interesting people I met.

KP: At Rutgers, the classes were all-male. What was it like to have women in your classes?

RR: It was interesting.

KP: Did it change the way the classes ran at all?

RR: Well, it did. Of course, most of my classes … were men only, in the classes I was in, except for algebra, a lot of girls in that one, and trigonometry and calculus and whatnot. Physics, there were men. Most of my classes only had men in them.

KP: Even at Penn State?

RR: Yes, at Penn State, yes. Of course, I had to take a few liberal arts courses and they got girls in the liberal arts courses.

KP: You mentioned drinking beer out at Penn State. What are your memories of Prohibition? Technically, your freshman year was still under Prohibition.

RR: Well, beer was legal then, you know. … Beer was legal then, remember, in '33 and '34.

KP: Yes, but, back in 1932, when you entered college, beer was illegal. Do you remember Prohibition at all?

RR: Not really. I was in Rutgers then. When I went to Penn State, I think beer was legal. … I tell you, you couldn't buy liquor in State College, though. You had to go to Bellefonte, about fourteen miles away. … They used to drive over every week and buy a bottle of whisky or so for different purposes, but, most of the time, most of the drinking was done on weekends.

JP: Did women also drink, or was it mostly the guys?

RR: … Mostly the guys, yes. There were very few co-eds in the Rathskeller. That's one thing I noticed. I liked that, too, but, now, ho-ho-ho; my wife and I went back … last year and, boy, it's changed. It's really changed. … There's just too much drinking, I think. It's changed; I'm telling you it has. More co-eds [were] drinking than there seemed to be men. Some of the … outdoor Rathskellers, they had chairs out on the sidewalk, you know, … I mean, a lot of chairs, a lot of tables, and they're all full of co-eds and fellows just drinking away their beer. Even Joe Paterno says he doesn't like what's going on. He doesn't like what's going on out there, the coach. [Editor's Note: Joe Paterno has been the head coach of the Pennsylvania State University football team since 1966.]

KP: Yes, I know.

RR: … I met Joe quite a few times and I've written to him, too, and he's a great guy.

KP: Both Rutgers and Penn State played football in this era. Do you remember any of the games at either place in the 1930s?

RR: Yes. I used to play in the band, of course. I used to travel around with the band to, again, NYU and Colgate, Lafayette, Lehigh. We'd go to those games.

KP: Did you play in the band in both places?

RR: No, not at Penn State. No, I didn't. I figured I'd better stick to my studies. It was pretty rough the first time away, but I made out very well the first time at Penn State.

KP: It sounds like you liked Penn State and that, if you had enough money, you would have just graduated from Penn State.

RR: Oh, yes, I would have, but, I'll tell you, it was really amazing, though, when I found out what it really cost to go there. … The fraternity house bill involved eight hundred dollars a year and that was room and board for seven months, the whole time. Eight hundred dollars, that's what the fellows were getting by on. … Of course, there was a little bit of, probably, spending money you had to have in there, but eight hundred dollars would get you by, room and board,

and tuition, too, books and everything. That's what the fellows told me, eight hundred dollars, imagine that. I couldn't even borrow eight hundred bucks in those days. I did borrow it from my uncle and, subsequently, paid him back, but, … actually, he refused the payment. He did send me that one year, but he refused to send me the next year.

KP: Was he unable to afford the tuition?

RR: Yes. Well, no, he could afford to; he … had the money. … You know how families are; they get tight with their money once in a while. … It always exasperated me that I couldn't come up with eight hundred dollars to go on and finish one way or the other.

KP: Did you still have the scholarship to pay for tuition?

RR: At Rutgers, yes, but not Penn State, no.

KP: Okay, not at Penn State. You needed your uncle's money.

RR: That's right, yes, to go on. I remember, my first year room was $2.50 a week, imagine that, on the third floor, $2.50 [a week]. It was a nice room, too, [with] double beds up in there.

KP: Were you majoring in chemistry at both Rutgers and Penn State?

RR: No. I studied metallurgy at Penn State.

KP: Metallurgy, so that you could work in the steel industry?

RR: Yes, and with my uncle's laboratory. [laughter]

KP: How would you judge your education, both at Rutgers and at Penn State? Were Penn State professors better than Rutgers professors?

RR: Well, I thought they were wonderful [professors]. They were tough. … I think most of my experiences at Penn State came into mind. … I used to be pretty cynical before I went to Penn State, but I suddenly realized that, in other words, it was a mind-changing thing, going to Penn State, just the way the people treated me, the way I saw things happen and unfold. It was a great experience to me. … What would you call it, broadening or something? It was just an eternal gratitude feeling I had for everything about Penn State.

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

KP: You were saying that you really enjoyed Penn State and this one professor.

RR: Well, … I had a course in field technology and I had an exam and I had a conflict. Well, a conflict means you have two exams on the same date. … I went to the [professor] and I told him, "I can't go this day, so, I'll have to go another day." So, he said, "Okay." … By the way,

the exam had already been given in fuel tech and he said, "By the way, have you seen the paper, seen the exam?" … I said, "No, I haven't," and I said, "I'm not a member of a fraternity, yet." … The fraternities all took the exams and passed them around for their own members to study, you know, for the next time, next year, maybe. Well, anyway, I said, "No, I haven't seen the exam." He said, "Okay, okay, he says he hasn't seen the exam. We'll give you the same exam." So, I took the exam and I got a real high mark on it. … I'll always remember this professor, because he took my word for saying that I hadn't seen the exam. … In other words, he trusted me, I suppose you could say. … Little things like that kind of changed my attitude about things at Penn State, and professors in general and, also, the students. I mean, the students were just a wonderful bunch, in my estimation.

KP: It sounds like you liked Penn State better than Rutgers.

RR: I did, yes. I had a lot of wonderful experiences there. … In those days, Joe Paterno doesn't allow this anymore, you know, but, in those days, all the athletes joined the fraternities. … We had about, oh, at least five or six athletes on major teams, football teams and baseball teams and the basketball teams, all-stars, were in our fraternity, but, now, Joe Paterno doesn't allow that. … [They] can be members of the fraternity, but they can't live there. They live somewhere else. I guess that's for his discipline; that's why he has so many good teams. Well, anyway, we had some good teams, too, when I was there. We used to have the Intercollegiates there every year, in wrestling, in boxing, and, I guess, in basketball, [but] mostly in wrestling and boxing. … It was very interesting, because there was a custom at Penn State, [that] during the rounds of the boxing matches, in Intercollegiates, there would be no cheering, no cheering between the rounds. When the round was over, bedlam broke loose. Everybody clapped and applauded and yelled and hollered, but it was *verboten* and it was not the thing to do, to cheer between the rounds in boxing, and also in wrestling. We had some intercollegiate wrestling champs. I remember, King Cole was one of them. He was a Phi Delta something, up on campus. He was a huge, big man. We called him "King Cole." … We had Norris McFarland. He was an ATO [Alpha Tau Omega]. He was a member of the basketball team. He was a star. … In our own fraternity, we had Keith Parks and Earl Park and Bill Rhoda and (Lou Barth?), [who] were all on the football team, varsity. They played freshman football, and then, later, they were on the varsity, first team. So, we had quite a collection of athletes and it was good spirit in the house. … Everyone was *gung-ho* on all the teams. We had study hour, too. I mean, they were pretty strict on the study hour, I remember that. I got a lot more studying done, very often, in that house than I did when I moved out of the house. So, I had some pretty wonderful experiences, really.

KP: You mentioned that you were interested in becoming a cartoonist. You were a member of a magazine at Penn State.

RR: A college humor magazine called *The Froth*, yes. [laughter] We had a lot of members who … later became well-known. … Actually, one of them was, you ever hear of Julius Epstein? Well, he wrote *Casablanca*, you know. Well, he was a member of our college magazine about three years before I went there. … I wrote to Julius in Hollywood. He still writes scripts. You still see his name on TV scripts from time-to-time, and, also, his brother, I think, [Philip] Epstein. … Anyway, I sent him a copy of my first book and he called me up later. … Unfortunately, we were in Maine on vacation. My son answered the phone and, when I came

home, my son said, "Hey, Julius Epstein called you." I said, "What?" He said, "Yes. He wanted to talk to you about your book. He said it was a good read. He said he thought it was very interesting." … I wrote to him a few times and he wrote back to me and said, "Keep on writing," … which I haven't done, really. I'm getting discouraged about it, but, anyway, that's the book I wrote. [laughter] … I started to write for the college humor magazine, *The Penn State Froth*, while I was in college and that's how I sort of, kind of drifted away from engineering and got into what, really, I should have followed in the first place, journalism or the arts. In fact, finally, my engineering professor finally came to me and said, "Look, why don't you stick to the arts?" [laughter] So, that did it, [just] about. Well, anyway, I wrote for this college humor magazine and I also drew a few cartoons for them. … We had a lot of fellows who went on, I guess, and became well-known in the cartoon field. One of them was Jimmy Dugan. He later worked for … this Frenchman who did this undersea diving. I forget his name; anyway, he worked for him for a while.

KP: Jacques Cousteau?

RR: Who?

KP: Was it Jacques Cousteau that he worked for?

RR: Who?

KP: Jacques Cousteau.

RR: Yes, that's the one. That's right, yes. He worked for him and he went on and did quite well working for him.

KP: It sounds like you had a very active social life. You were involved in a lot of things at Penn State. Was there anything else you were involved in at Penn State?

RR: Penn State?

KP: Yes.

RR: A little writing, mostly. I … drifted into writing while I was there.

KP: Did you ever work for the school newspaper at Penn State?

RR: Newspaper?

KP: Yes.

RR: Well, I typed for the *Courier News* briefly, yes.

KP: At Penn State?

RR: No, not at Penn State, no. Most of the fellows that got into work like my own were … inclined toward literary work and they joined the Penn State *Collegian*, the daily newspaper out there, but I never got into daily reporting on the *Collegian*. … A lot of *Collegian* reporters went on to fame, too. They made themselves well-known by writing books on one thing or another.

KP: Did you ever hold a job during the school year at either Rutgers or Penn State?

RR: … Well, at Penn State, I got a job in the NYA [National Youth Administration], but I was typing stuff for my last year there, trying to earn some money. That happened under Roosevelt, too, you know.

KP: For your NYA job, did you type for a professor or was it in an office?

RR: Yes, [I] typed for a professor, yes, just typed reports and I forgot what it was, … forty cents an hour, some darn thing. [laughter]

KP: It sounds like you were very disappointed after being forced to leave Penn State. It sounds like you would have liked to have received a degree.

RR: At Penn State?

KP: Yes.

RR: I was, really. I really, really was. I often had dreams about it, in the past, [laughter] not nightmares, just dreams.

KP: It sounds like you have stayed in touch with a lot of the people there.

RR: I have, yes, more so, of course, with Penn Staters than Rutgers people, because the Rutgers people I went with in high school and in college, they all drifted away. … They got a job in Chicago and California and they left town, in other words. I only knew them by them returning to town periodically, and that not very often.

KP: You left Penn State and you came back to New Jersey after dropping out. Where did you live? Did you move back in with your parents?

RR: Well, we lived in the barracks building over here in Highland Park, the GI barracks that they built. … Right after the war, they built these GI barracks buildings.

KP: After coming back from Penn State?

RR: Yes, yes, and then, I got a job locally and I went to Rutgers nights to finish my work.

KP: No, but this is in the 1930s.

RR: The ‘30s?

KP: Yes. After leaving Penn State, where did you come back to?

RR: Oh, I came back home, of course. [laughter] I came back home. I got various jobs here and there.

KP: What were some of the jobs that you held? You mentioned that you wrote for a newspaper.

RR: Well, I worked for Cyanamid for a while.

KP: Doing what?

RR: I worked in the laboratory, [as a] lab assistant in the research lab.

KP: It sounds like you were looking for a newspaper job. You found that more interesting.

RR: Yes, that's right.

KP: How long did you stay with the newspaper, the *Courier*?

RR: Well, not too long, only about six months or so, maybe less than that.

KP: What type of writing did you do?

RR: Corresponding. I was a sports correspondent, chiefly, and a general correspondent, weddings and stuff, weddings, baseball games and church news and whatnot.

KP: Were there any other jobs that you held before the war?

RR: No, I can't think of any.

KP: Before the war, did you have any notion that you would be able to go back to college? Was that a hope? Were you trying to save money?

RR: Yes, it was a hope. [laughter]

KP: It sounds like you had the sense that it might not happen.

RR: Yes, that's right. It was kind of a grim prospect all the way through.

KP: It sounds like your parents were unable to send you, even though your father did, eventually, get a job.

RR: Yes, yes. Well, it was tough economically, that's the thing. Not all college graduates make a fortune, you know. [laughter]

KP: You mentioned that you were in the Civilian Pilot Training Program. Do you remember your first flight?

RR: Oh, maybe, wasn't much, just up and down with the instructor, you know.

KP: I have been told by people in that program that, for graduation, you had to do a solo flight. Do you remember your graduation flight?

RR: Well, I remember my solo flight, yes, I do. I remember, the wind was blowing about thirty-miles-per-hour. [laughter] … The instructor let me go … into a, I guess a north wind, yes, a strong north wind. … The only trouble is, the long runway, it was east and west. The north-south runway was the short one. So, that's why he really let me go in a thirty-mile wind. … I remember, I came in, I started going like this, all the way down into the wind. [laughter] You're going into the wind, see, and I couldn't go in too steeply. … Actually, if you weren't careful, the wind would carry you backwards in those Cubs we flew. … They only went along at sixty-five miles-an-hour, you know. With a thirty-[mile-per-hour] wind, you had to watch out how you approached the field. You might miss it or fall short of it, I should say.

KP: What types of planes did you fly in the Civilian Pilot Training Program?

RR: Cubs.

KP: Cubs.

RR: Piper Cub, yes, sixty-five horsepower motors in them. Some had forty horsepower, too.

KP: Before entering the Civilian Pilot Training Program, had you ever flown in a plane before?

RR: Yes. I went up a couple of times out at Newark. I used to go out to Newark, once in a while, and just hang around the airport.

KP: You were interested in aviation for a long time.

RR: Yes, I was, for quite a while.

KP: When did you have the sense that America would go to war? You mentioned that, in 1941, one of the reasons you joined the Civilian Pilot Training Program was the notion that we would be going to war, but did you expect it earlier?

RR: Oh, I had a feeling all along, "Sure, we're going to go into [the] war."

KP: Why?

RR: Well, reading the newspapers. [laughter]

KP: For many of the people I have interviewed, Pearl Harbor literally came out of nowhere.

Most did not expect it.

RR: Well, maybe we didn't expect Pearl Harbor so quickly. … After all, [with] what the Nazis were doing, … we thought we're going to be drawn into it through the Germans. We're going to eventually have so many … merchant ships sunk that we'd just have to go into it.

KP: How did you feel about Roosevelt's policy of actively intervening on behalf of Britain?

RR: I thought it was the right thing to do all along. We should have done it sooner, I thought.

JP: Do you remember the first time you heard of Hitler and what your initial opinion of him was?

RR: … My impression of Hitler?

JP: Yes.

RR: Well, he … was a tyrant, all right, the way he walked through Poland. …

JP: I meant your initial opinion of him when he first came to power, in 1933. What was your initial impression of him?

RR: Well, I thought he was … really improving the country, but Lindbergh went over there, you know, and he found out what was going on. He realized that they were preparing for war. … Even though he accepted a medal from Hitler, which I guess he regretted later, Lindbergh had the right idea. [Editor's Note: In 1938, during a visit to Germany, Charles Lindbergh accepted a decoration from Adolf Hitler and praised the *Luftwaffe* as superior to any other air force in Europe.] I mean, he warned us. He came back and warned us. He tried to tell us what was going on and people turned against him and hated him, booed him and everything in all his meetings.

KP: There was quite a bit of anti-interventionist sentiment in New Jersey. There was also a very active German-American *Bund*.

RR: The *Bund*, yes.

KP: Do you remember any activity around here?

RR: Yes, I remember the *Bund* up in North Jersey. In fact, I used to go hunting up there in the fall, you know. … Every once in a while, I'd run into a group of real German-Americans, women, too, with shotguns, you know, and dressed in their little Bavarian outfits. I just bumped into them accidentally, you know. … I often came home and used to tell my mother and dad, "Gosh, I ran into a funny bunch up there in Andover, in Warren County." Yes, they were a real active bunch of German-Americans there. … Well, the Germans are outdoor-loving people anyway, you know. They like to live outdoors and that's where they congregate, up there in Andover, in North Jersey. … I was really amazed, when … you'd see these women with

shotguns. You never saw a woman with a shotgun hunting [like that], in hunting clothes, in their little hat, you know, maybe a feather in it or something. Yes, I was surprised to see it. … It opened my eyes, too, to realize that there was a certain activity in this state, not only in this country. You know, one other thing happened to me. I was working in New York one time, right before the war, right before the outbreak, and I walked across the street. I remember, it was at the corner of Park and Nostrand Avenue and I looked down at something on the sidewalk and I picked it up, and what do you think it was? an Iron Cross, right in the street. I picked it up and I had it up until last year. I just sold it at a flea market for fifteen bucks. Yes, I mounted it on a frame, … on blue and red velvet. I thought, "Well, it didn't have the ribbon on it; it just had the ring." Do you know what the Iron Cross looks like?

KP: Yes.

RR: Well, the authentic one has a black and white ribbon and I tried to buy a ribbon. I went down to the Englishtown Auction, trying to buy a ribbon, [but] I couldn't get one. So, I sold it anyway, without the ribbon, for fifteen bucks at a flea market. … I had it all these years, down in the cellar. I had it stuck away in a drawer, here and there. I never … carried it with me. I never took it overseas, but I always had it in my drawer here at home.

KP: Where were you working in New York?

RR: I was working for an instrument company at the time, Tagliabue. That was right before I went overseas. In fact, that's how I got to see the article in the *Herald Tribune* about this Clayton Knight Committee that was sponsoring a Royal Air Force flying school in Bermuda. This is right after I graduated from the CPTP [Civilian Pilot Training Program] Corps.

KP: How long was your CPTP course?

RR: It was about, oh, I don't know, about four months or so. It took me into the winter. Anyway, I was working in New York right after I left this flying school and graduated. … Actually, they sent me a telegram. They wanted me to join their advanced course right after that. … I wrote back to them and I said, "What happens after the advanced course?" In other words, I turned them down, you know, foolishly. I should have accepted it. The advanced course was going to be at Hadley Airport, too, but, anyway, I turned them down. … I was working in New York, briefly, and I saw this ad in the *New York Herald Tribune*, sponsored by the Clayton Knight Committee, for a … Royal Air Force flying school in Bermuda. … I said, "Boy, this is for me." So, I joined … that one right away. I took a medical [exam]. I remember, I took a medical in Park Avenue somewhere. … They passed me right away, which I had flunked before. My eyes weren't quite perfect. … I figured, … "Okay, for the RAF, I'll get in it." So, I got my passport. They sent me a passport within five days. I got a passport and I left for Bermuda … a couple of days before my birthday, in January.

KP: This was January of 1942.

RR: '42, yes.

KP: This was after Pearl Harbor.

RR: Yes, right before Pearl Harbor, yes, '41, December. Yes, it was January '42, yes, when I left on the S.S. Yarmouth, and berthed at Hamilton, Bermuda four days later.

KP: Then, you got a passport.

RR: December '41, the war broke out, wasn't it?

KP: Yes.

RR: This is January '42, when I left. I joined up right before Pearl Harbor, I remember. … I sailed out of New York in January '42 and I got there, down … in Bermuda, on my birthday, I remember that, in '42. … We learned to fly on seaplanes, Luscombe seaplanes, Luscombe 8A, in Bermuda, eighty-five horsepower, on floats. I finished a course down there, and then, they seconded me to the RAF Air Command out on [the] Catalinas.

KP: How long was your flight school in Bermuda? Were you a part of the RAF in this flight school?

RR: Well, I was not quite a part of the RAF. I was expected to join … the RAF. I was committed to join the Royal Air Force when I finished.

KP: However, while you were in the course, you were still a civilian.

RR: Well, not exactly. When I went down to Bermuda, they immediately swore me into the military down there, which was the Bermuda Voluntary Rifle Corps. I have a military discharge from the Rifle Corps of ninety-seven days of bodied service. … Incidentally, that … discharge is what entitled me to the GI Bill of Rights.

KP: That discharge.

RR: That discharge, ninety-seven days of embodied service in the Bermuda Voluntary Rifle Corps. Well, anyway, [laughter] I finished the Rifle Corps some time in April. … I finished and I passed out as a competent pilot on seaplanes, and then, the Royal Air Force took a hold of me and put me in the Royal Air Force Ferry Command and assigned me to a crew of a PBY, a Catalina. … We stayed on a Catalina for a couple of weeks, doing oil tests and consumption tests and fuel tests and full stall landings, bang, in the water. [laughter] … Finally, I went across in April, flew across, and delivered this big PBY as a second pilot and we landed in Greenock, Scotland, in twenty-two hours. It took us twenty-two hours to get across, cruising at ninety-four knots, "Gzzzzz." I sat, most of the time, in a gun blister, on one side or another, looking out, watching the clouds and flying. I had some flight time in my logbook, too. … Finally, we landed in Greenock, Scotland, and then, from there, I went down to London, at Adastral House, and reported to the Royal Air Force. … They again checked me medically and they turned me down again, on medical grounds.

KP: Even though you had been through their training.

RR: They said that … I couldn't hear too well. … They said that we did a very bad thing by not wearing helmets while we were flying down in Bermuda, because it must have affected … one of my ears. … They told me, at that time, that either they could send me home or I could join the Ferry Command there, the ATA [Air Transport Auxiliary] Ferry Command. They said they had the flying duties there, but you couldn't use RT, no radio telegram. … I said, "Well, that's fine. I want to fly." So, they said, "Well, this is a good flying job and it's a uniformed job and we'll put you in that." So, they stuck me in ATA as a ferry pilot under the Royal Air Force command.

KP: Going back to your decision to join the Royal Air Force flying school, you joined before Pearl Harbor.

RR: That's right, yes, just about a month.

KP: Were you joining simply because it was a chance to fly or were there other reasons?

RR: [It was] a chance to fly and I wanted to be a pilot. I was in 1-A at the time, too. … When I was working in New York, … I registered. I registered for the draft while I was living in New York and my draft board put me in 1-A. … I knew right … then that it was just a question of time. I'm either going to be a foot soldier or else. So, I figured, well, I had a chance to fly and this is what I want to do, so, I thought I'd do it.

KP: You ended up going to the RAF school in Bermuda.

RR: Yes.

KP: Had you ever been outside of the United States before that?

RR: No, never.

KP: What was Bermuda like?

RR: Beautiful, beautiful, very nice. All the houses were yellow, blue and orange, all different colors painted, you know. … They sat on these little hillsides. … Of course, we were regimented. We didn't have any money. We only had about a pound a week to spend, which wasn't much, plus, you had the money you brought down there. None of us had any money. So, I honestly think I only had about fifty dollars to go down there on, but passage was paid. Oh, incidentally, … one of the terms … of passage was [that the passage] had to be paid, down and back, in case we flunked out of the flying course. So, they gave me a refund of my fifty dollars. That's how [I had] money left to continue on in England, which helped. [laughter] … I had to wait a while to get into ATA. They had to clear me [for] one thing or another.

KP: I think that, during the time you were in Bermuda, the Duke of Windsor was the governor. Do you remember that at all?

RR: Governor?

KP: Yes, Governor of Bermuda.

RR: No, the Governor was [Edward George William Tyrwhitt] Knollys, a fellow by the name of Knollys. … I remember that because we were all invited to his home after we completed our course down there. We had lunch and tea with he and his wife and, incidentally, he had the DFC, [Distinguished Flying Cross]. … He was saying to us at the time, "Well, which one of you guys is going to get the DFC?" [laughter] One of us did. … He died, unfortunately, very tragic death, this one kid. He was from Newark, the copy boy on the *Newark Star Ledger,* and he went to the course for training. … He got over from Bermuda to England after I did and, when he got over there, he got into the RAF. They made him a fighter pilot on Spitfires and they sent him to Malta. … While he was in Malta, he was shot up. … He went to bail out, but he pulled the ripcord while he was getting out of the cockpit. … The shrouds caught on the tail and down he went, twenty thousand feet into the ground. That's the way he ended up.

JP: Your hearing kept you out of combat.

RR: I never was in combat, no.

JP: Was it your hearing that kept you out?

RR: That's right, yes. I was fit for flying, but not for aircrew duties. I couldn't be a bombardier or navigator or any flight crew [member], because of my hearing impairment. It's still not too good. I've got, … what do you call them?

JP: Hearing aids?

RR: Hearing aids, yes. I've got hearing aids, but I never use the darn things, because they're a pain in the neck. … I don't think they do me any good, anyway. So, I am slightly hard of hearing.

JP: Were you disappointed when you found out that you could not fly in combat?

RR: That's right, yes. So, I figured, "Well, I want to fly." I didn't want to come home. So, I figured I'd do the [next] best thing and … fly Spitfires. I liked to fly those. [laughter] … Not only that, when I came home, I got a job as a test pilot.

KP: I am curious about your draft status. Could you have stayed in England? Obviously, you could not afford to, financially, but did the draft board know what you were doing?

RR: Oh, I had to send them a telegram. I had to send them a telegram to get into ATA and I had to wait for that. …

KP: In other words, the draft board in Newark, New Jersey, had to approve?

RR: In Brooklyn.

KP: In Brooklyn.

RR: Yes. I sent them a telegram and, right away, … they send it back and said, "Okay, six months, deferred." … That's what allowed me to get in England as a ferry pilot.

KP: Basically, you were on deferments while you were a ferry pilot.

RR: That's right. I was deferred all the time. In fact, when I got home, I was back in 1-A. When I came back home, I told my draft board. I figured, "I'd better tell them. They'll find out." I told them that I was home and I was looking for a job as a test pilot. … I'd appreciate it if they could give me a couple of weeks or maybe a month to see what I could find out. Boom, they put me in 1-A right away. [laughter] … Of course, the next week, I went over to Linden and I got a job right away. They needed pilots and I just happened to be there. … They needed pilots and they got me another deferment and I stayed there until the end of the war.

KP: How regimented was your training in Bermuda? For example, did you wear a uniform?

RR: No, we wore shorts, old raggedy shorts, with no shirts. … There was only one time we wore a uniform. That's when Winston Churchill visited us. One time, there was an alert on the field; it wasn't a field, it was an island that we were on, Darrell's Island. … He called us together, our boss. We were all in shorts, you know, in sandals and bare feet most of the time, pushing the airplanes around. We were very informal flyers. That's all we did was fly. Well, anyway, we heard that … a "big man on campus" was going to be here, Churchill. Finally, he said, "Churchill is going to be here. I want all you guys to come out with your uniforms on. That is, polish your shoes." We had socks up to here, shorts, neat shorts, and a shirt and a tie and a side cap. We had that, which we never wore. … We all wore that that morning. We went out there. Sure enough, we all lined up on the tarmac. We stood there not very long and there comes Churchill and Charles Portal. Remember Portal? He had a big nose, Sir Charles Portal. He's an Air Chief Marshall. … Old Churchill walks out there with a cigar and he had his little cap on his naval uniform, (naval person?), they called them. … He walked out, not really further from here to where you are. We all stood up in the line, like so, and he walked right across in front of us, Portal behind him about three feet or four feet. … He had his arms behind him and he walked down to about there. He turned around and walked back again. Then, he stopped and he walked back again. He looked at us. He had his … cigar. … They stood in front of us maybe about two minutes, and then, they walked back in the hangar. That was all we saw of him, but we did see Churchill. It was quite a thrill.

JP: He did not say anything.

RR: Not to us he didn't. [laughter] … One of the fellows next to me, I remember this, he said, "If he drops that cigar, I'm going to get it." I said, "The hell you are. I'm going to get it," but he didn't drop it. [laughter] He kept smoking the thing … and walked back in smoking it.

KP: Did you ever do any close order drills?

RR: No, we had no military training at all in England. …

KP: In Bermuda?

RR: In Bermuda, no, we didn't have any drills there, either, no, just flying. … We had a billet in town, up Broadway. I had a billet at Crow Lane, up the end, by Hamilton Harbor. I had a billet there. We all had separate billets and private homes. … My chief building was a bottling works. They had a Coca-Cola bottling works there and one of the families owned it. One of the "forty thieves," we used to call them. Everybody else called them that, too. … Forty families owned Bermuda, you know. They called them the "forty thieves." [laughter] Well, anyway, we had no military training down there. In fact, the only military training that I was subject to in England, really, as a ferry pilot, was when we had to salute. Yes, we all had to salute our senior officers and we had to line up from time-to-time. … We were all dealing with the Royal Air Force. We were in and out of Royal Air Force aerodromes every day. We'd eat in the mess with them and we'd have to salute all the senior officers. … I remember this, too. I was walking on leave in some small, little English town and the Eighth Air Force had just arrived. I was walking along the sidewalk and I looked ahead of me and there was a column of khaki coming at me, you know, two abreast and a sergeant over here on the grass. … I walked along, though. … All of a sudden, the sergeant looks at me and he whips up in a salute, you know. … I looked up and I returned the salute, real quick. Lucky I did, because I wasn't expecting it, you know. … Every one of the GIs that came along saluted me. [laughter] I thought to myself, "I'll be damned. These guys, they turned me down, now, they're saluting me."

KP: Was your rank in the Ferry Command higher than theirs?

RR: Oh, yes, it was lieutenant.

KP: They should have saluted you.

RR: Oh, absolutely. We were … rated as first lieutenants in the Army. … We had our own rank, too. We had … first, second and third officer. When you started out, you were a third officer, as a cadet, and then, … you learned to fly cross-country and flew the Tiger Moth. You flew little airplanes, in the Fairchild 24. … Then, as you progressed, you became second officer. As a second officer, you could fly Spitfires, Hurricanes and Mustangs, all single-engine fighters, Swordfish and all single engines. … Then, you went back to school, [and then, you were] based in the pool for a while. Then, you flew there [with] your class. Then, you went back to school at White Waltham. … You went to school on twins, and then, you flew twins and you were first officer, flew Wellingtons and Mosquitoes, and then, … if you stayed long enough, some of the fellows were Americans under contract, they stayed, some of them, a second year, and then, they put them on four-engine aircraft, B-24s, Fortresses and Halifaxes, Lancasters, and sometimes on flying boats, some of the fellows. So, the longer you stayed there, the more experience you got and the more different types of aircraft you flew. It was quite interesting and, of course, fatal, too, sometimes. [laughter]

KP: In Bermuda, how big was your class? Where did they come from? Did they all come from

the United States?

RR: Five of us.

KP: Five of you were from the United States.

RR: United States, yes.

KP: Where did the rest of the class come from?

RR: Bermuda. Well, there were two from Bermuda. See, it was called the Bermuda Flying School and they … started out taking a few volunteers from Bermuda, but, then, they ran out of men. They had maybe five or six, and then, they'd have another class. I think they had two classes before us. Then, they ran out of Bermudians, so, they started recruiting Americans. That's how we got in it, see. … Two of the top families down there had men in there, the Triminghams and the Goslings. The Triminghams owned the department stores down there and the Goslings owned the rest of the town. Well, anyway, Malcolm Gosling was one of the fellows I flew with down there, a nice guy, and the other one, Trimingham, I didn't know him, because he had gone ahead of me. He was over in England when I got there. So, after they ran out of Bermudians, they started taking us Americans. … There were fellows from New York, Newark, Long Island, and one guy was from Montclair, … scattered around here. Strangely enough, my son, Karl, went to school at Leicester College in Massachusetts with the classmate son of a former B.F.S. pilot, Trimingham, in 1966.

KP: Were there people from other islands, say, Jamaica?

RR: Where, in ATA?

KP: No, in Bermuda, in flight school.

RR: No.

KP: It was just Americans and Bermudians.

RR: Yes. We still on?

KP: Yes.

RR: Good.

JP: At the Bermuda Flying School, you said there were only seven people in your class.

RR: About that, yes, five, more like it.

JP: What kind of things did you do when you were not on duty, when you were not flying?

RR: Well, we had every Thursday off, you know. In Bermuda, everything closes down on Thursdays, so, we'd go swimming, usually. That was a chief diversion. … Oh, we played tennis, too. We had free access to the Coral Beach Tennis Club. It's on the south shore, beautiful place. They had a green stone court and we played tennis there every Thursday, usually. … Weekends, of course, we had off, too. We'd go swimming. I went fishing one time, didn't catch much, but we had a lot of fun down there swimming. We'd go to the movies. … I remember, I saw *A Yank in the RAF* down there for the first time. [laughter] I think it was playing in England, too, when I got over there. I saw it again over there. [laughter] … We used to do a lot of drinking, too. … In fact, we used to do too much drinking down there, really. I got mixed up with these young guys, younger than me. Actually, some of them were in their twenties. I think I was about twenty-five at the time, twenty-six. … I had been all through this business of drinking … [in] college and everywhere else and I know what it's like and what it can do to you. … I tried to stay away from it, but we did quite a bit of drinking down there. … Rum was cheap, only about $2.50 a bottle, but we only got four dollars a week, a pound a week allowance, so, we couldn't spend too much. We had a few dates with the girls down there. There were some nice girls [that] we met. So, we really enjoyed ourselves down there, but the coral reef was something to stay away from. Did I tell you this before?

KP: No.

RR: One of the fellows swam out to this coral reef. It sticks up, you know. The water splashes over it. So, he swam out to it. He sat on it and he sort of sat there. Then, he came back, swam back in and, when he came back in, his buttocks were just bright red with blood. See, this coral is like a bunch of razor blades and, when you sit on it and slide off it, boy, it really cut him up. He had some real gouges on his buttocks. We never swam out to coral reefs after that, or he did not, I'd say that. [laughter] One time, we had a storm down there, though. There was a hurricane while we were down there. … One morning, we came out and there were five Catalinas up on the rocks, on the reef. … One of them had his wing sticking right side up. We knew that was a wreck. We couldn't figure out what these others were doing, sitting there. … I asked my instructor, I said, "What's the matter with those?" He said, "Go over and take a look. … Their bottom is ripped out of them. They're just sitting on coral." So, one of those jobs we had down there [was], we had to dismantle these things. We took some of the instruments out and some of the clocks. … I still have a little piece I took off the dashboard, "Cruise ninety-four knots." I took that and put it into my pocket. … We wanted one of the clocks, but they wouldn't let us have one of the clocks. They were Jaeger eight-hour [eight-day?] clocks, you know, beautiful clocks. So, we took all that stuff out. … We helped them dismantle the things, that is, the cockpits. … We spent a couple of days doing that, but the RAF commander did not request help from the Americans. There were Americans down there, too, you know, an American base. … They were building a Navy base. The RAF commander did not ask for help and the Americans offered to help, to get the Catalinas running, so [that] they'd get out to sea, maybe, a little bit, to save them from the storm. … The RAF commander refused help and he was replaced forthwith the next day. They sent him out of there, because it was his responsibility. He lost us five Catalinas.

KP: Which is a lot.

RR: Oh, boy, yes, five of them, you know. … Later on, a squadron of PBMs came down, Patrol Bomber Mariner, big, high gull-wing, twin-engine seaplanes. They came down to replace these for a while. Then, they got a new set of Catalinas, but we had quite a few experiences down there, different things we saw and experienced.

JP: How long were you in Bermuda all together?

RR: Bermuda? Oh, about five months, from January until April, something like that. April, we took off.

KP: How was the food in Bermuda?

RR: Food? Good, I enjoyed it. There was a lot of fish, of course. … I enjoyed a lot of their so-called lobsters. You know, their lobsters are nothing more than giant shrimp, you know. I mean, if you look at their lobsters, it looks like a shrimp. … They have no claws, but it's got a big, long antenna, just like a shrimp, but they're so big, but they taste like lobster. I mean, they are lobster, really, but they just don't look like one. [laughter] We enjoyed seafood down there.

JP: At that time, was Bermuda a popular vacation spot for Americans?

RR: Yes.

JP: Were there a lot of wealthy Americans vacationing there?

RR: Well, yes and no. I mean, … of course, it was clamped down on, of course, by the war and all you had was base workers. They had a lot of what they called base workers, fellows that worked on the airplanes, I mean, on the airports. They were building two airports down there, aerodromes, they called them. [laughter] … We used to cycle over to St. George's to see the new field there. At St. George's, there was a new field being built. … Our field, of course, … was non-existent. It was just on an island. We had a little island. It was not much bigger than this block, less than that, only about three hundred yards, maybe a hundred yards in circumference, with a hangar on it … where you based the airplanes. That was our base, this little island. … The airbase workers were in the preponderance of the population. [There was] nobody but these American base workers, really, no tourists, no. It was *verboten*, I guess, to go there at that time.

KP: You went to England, which is very different from Bermuda. What were your impressions of England when you arrived?

RR: It was interesting. I walked around the ruins of all the bombings, you know, in London. I spent a lot of time walking around and looking at things. … It was quite an experience.

KP: Did you ever experience an air raid yourself while you were in England?

RR: Yes, just once.

KP: Where were you, in London?

RR: Well, let's see, where was I? I was outside of London, actually. … We had an air raid and the railroad station was hit and I had just gotten out of there.

KP: You were fairly close to London.

RR: Yes, to London, about thirty miles.

JP: You said you walked around London. Did you talk to any of the civilians?

RR: Oh, yes, quite a lot, yes. … I got a lot of benefits from the American Red Cross Club there. They used to give us free tickets to all the shows and plays, you know, around the area, [in the] theater district, and I saw more darn Shakespearean plays than I can count. I had never seen a real Shakespearean play, you know, and it was quite an experience. I saw *Romeo and Juliet*, … all of them, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, oh, five or six or seven of them, at least, all for free.

KP: This was the American Red Cross.

RR: Through the American Red Cross, yes, the Eagle Club. … In fact, … we all used to stay at the Eagle Club. They used to put you up for bed and breakfast for something like fifty cents. You got a towel in the morning and breakfast … at your room. It was quite nice.

KP: Fifty cents, even in those days, was a good deal. It sounds like you liked London a great deal, that it was a very interesting city to visit.

RR: Yes, it was. I saw as many things as I could. … I walked around, saw Big Ben, Westminster and up and down the Thames, along the embankment there.

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

KP: This continues an interview with Mr. Roy William Reisert on October 17, 1996, at Somerset, New Jersey, with Kurt Piehler and …

JP: Jan Pattanayak.

KP: It sounds like you enjoyed England.

RR: I did.

KP: You still do.

RR: … [I] met a lot of girls over there. I never thought of getting married over there, because I just didn't think it was quite right. [laughter] I wanted to come home to my parents and really finish the war here.

KP: I have read that being a pilot was an easy way to get girls.

RR: Sure was.

KP: Yes, there was a certain attraction.

RR: Those uniforms, I tell you, they worked wonders with people. They really did.

KP: Also, you had a unique pilot's uniform.

RR: Yes. It was a great way to get somebody to engage in conversation, all right. I met a lot of nice people, too, you know, really a lot of nice girls [that] I still write to, some that I've visited their homes since, with another pilot, Ed Heering, who was our chief pilot over there, an American. He lives in California. He was formerly the chief pilot for World Airways and, in fact, I was just writing to him this morning, a letter. … He and I usually go over every other year together and visit different people in different pools that he was in and I was in. It makes it quite interesting. One time, he and I marched in the Cenotaph. The Cenotaph is their … Remembrance Day celebration, or remembrance of the war dead. We call it Armistice Day, I guess, over here. Well, I marched with about … thirty thousand British troops over there of every description. We marched down, Pall Mall, all around to all these bands. … It was quite an experience. It was quite interesting, all the troops and all the men with medals. Some of them had medals that went across their chest about eight, ten inches. They had a bar to support their medals. [laughter] It was quite thrilling to take part in it.

KP: What year was it that you marched?

RR: Oh, about three years ago.

KP: Was that before the fiftieth celebration?

RR: I think it was part of the fiftieth, yes. Yes, it was part of the fiftieth, quite interesting. We all convened at the Rising Sun Pub afterwards and had a few beers and did the war talking, quite the thing.

JP: You said that you talked to lot of the civilians there. Were people upbeat? London must have been in ruins at this time because of the bombings. What was the feeling amongst the people? Were they keeping a stiff upper lip?

RR: Well, they certainly were. They really had the spirit. I mean, you talked to them and they just went about their business as if it was part of their job, you know. They just had to grin and bear it. You know what the old man said, old Churchill said, "There will always be an England. We will fight in the streets. We will fight in our homes. We will fight in the fields." … He meant it, too; they meant it. Quite a nice bunch of people, they really are. Of course, my wife doesn't think so, you know. My wife is Catholic. [laughter] Maybe I shouldn't even mention this, but she's always running down the English [for] how they are. [laughter]

KP: It sounds like you liked the English character a lot.

RR: Yes, I did, I did. I still do, yes. Like I said, I still have so many friends, people who write to me and I visit them. … We had one trip, a reunion in California. We went to … Yosemite and went to Lake Tahoe. We all gathered there; about forty of them gathered in San Francisco, went to Fisherman's Wharf together and went up on the huge, big hotel, St. Francis Hotel, up on the top floor, the twenty-third floor. … They've got the replica of the King and Queen's crown jewels up there, you know. It's quite interesting. … I took some of the English people up there. They hadn't been there before. I'd been there once before on another reunion, but this reunion took us up to Lake Tahoe, which we didn't make the last time. We went up to another one in Los Angeles, but, this time, we went up to Lake Tahoe and to Reno and saw all the sights there and took a lot of pictures. We … went back to Yosemite and saw a coyote running along the road in front of us on the bus. That was really a thrill, to see that coyote. I wanted the driver to stop, but he didn't stop. The coyote just loped along the side of the road right in front of us and kept on his way, and then, went down into the woods. We saw the giant redwoods out there, too. They were really interesting.

KP: Going back to England, you were given the choice to either go home or join the Transport Command. How long did it take before you joined the Transport Command? How long did you have to wait?

RR: … Oh, just a couple of months or so. It wasn't too bad.

KP: Where did you wait?

RR: In the Eagle Club. [laughter]

KP: You lived in there.

RR: I lived there, yes. [laughter]

KP: You, in a sense, had a lot of free time.

RR: Yes, I did. That's why I saw all these plays.

KP: I get the sense that your day would be laid back. You could sleep late.

RR: Like a tourist.

KP: A tourist.

RR: Well, I got up early, I tell you. I wanted to see what was going on. … After all, there could be a bombing at any minute, too. I wanted to be ready, with my shoes on. [laughter]

KP: What was it like to be sleeping in a war zone?

RR: Well, I'll tell you, it was sort of the what they call the "Phony War" when I was over there, you know. There wasn't … much activity until later, when they started with the buzz bombs and the "Flying Telephone Poles" [V-2 rockets] and whatnot. … I was lucky. I didn't … really get into too much violence.

KP: You were more expecting bombing raids, but you did not see them very much.

RR: No, that's right. I just saw the results of it, terrible results. St. Paul's was pretty badly damaged. I couldn't go in there. I've been there since then. We go in there every time we have a reunion, you know. We have our services down in a crypt where they have a monument erected to us, with all the names of the people who were killed on this tablet. … We have a service there every year, in November, after the Cenotaph celebration. We go down in the crypt in St. Paul's. Three or four of our leading … English pilots usually take over and they have their own ceremony down there. It's quite a thing.

KP: When did you finally leave London to join the Transport Command?

RR: I joined right there in London.

KP: You joined in London

RR: Yes, yes.

KP: Where did they send you?

RR: Well, they sent me to a little … flying school called White Waltham, near Maidenhead about thirty miles north of London, in Reading, and we had our training field there at White Waltham. … I was sent to other little fields, here and there, for other training, transport, navigation and cross-country, spent about five or six months on cross-country, just learning the different towns and different areas in … England. Actually, they wouldn't let us fly into southern England, because it was too close to the enemy action. In other words, they were afraid we'd get lost and stray into France. [laughter]

KP: Being part of the Transport Command, you were a part of the military.

RR: That's right, yes.

KP: You had full military status.

RR: That's right, yes.

KP: How much discipline did you have? You mentioned that you learned how to salute.

RR: Oh, yes. Well, we had discipline in our pools. … We had fourteen different pools of about thirty men in each pool and they had a commander and he was a boss. … They had other

officers who did the operations that assigned the airplanes that you were to fly each day. … We had a kitchen, of course, a cook, a mess and the girls who waited on us and a parachute storage room and a ready room, where we all stayed and waited for our chances to fly. … Of course, then, we were billeted downtown, though. We didn't have our quarters on the field, but it was quite well-organized. We had discipline. …

KP: Did you march?

RR: No, we didn't do any marching, but we had discipline amongst ourselves. In other words, … we had the officer rank and the officers had full command. In other words, if they told you to fly somewhere, you were supposed to go somewhere. They gave you chits each morning, which was your daily flight order of your airplane which you were to deliver. … You were supposed to go get that and board the taxi plane. That was one of the onerous tasks we had to do sometimes, be a taxi pilot, because you couldn't fly any airplane. … You had to be a taxi pilot, fly this Fairchild 24 all around and follow everybody around and pick them up and take them to their next job. You had that job … maybe once a week. That was a pain-in-the-neck.

KP: Why was that such a pain-in-the-neck?

RR: Well, because you didn't get anything to fly. You couldn't fly a Spitfire. You had to fly a Fairchild. They used that as a taxi plane. It was a Fairchild four-place, high-wing monoplane that you had to fly here and there, all over England, to pick up these birds, [pilots]. It would just deliver their fighter planes. You had to pick them up and take them to the next place, then, to the next one, to the next one, and then, finally, back home to your base again, but that wasn't too bad, because you got to see a lot of England that way. More fun was just flying your own ferry job from here to there. Then, you get into a strange place and it was quite interesting to be in a strange aerodrome or maybe be stuck overnight in a strange town. So, that was fun, too.

KP: In your initial training class in Transport Command, about how many Americans were there?

RR: About a hundred-and-fifty.

KP: Approximately how many were from other countries?

RR: Oh, there were about three hundred from other countries, not other countries, from England, … and some [were from] other countries. We had some Spaniards, had some French, Free French, had some Polish, had some Australians and a … few Canadians. It was a mixture. …

KP: Right, but there was a pretty substantial American presence.

RR: Well, there were a hundred-and-fifty American volunteers. Actually, they were … volunteers, but they were commercial volunteers. They were paid. They were paid more than the British, I should say.

KP: You were not a commercial pilot. You basically got paid like the British.

RR: A British salary, yes, I [got paid] the British salary.

KP: This was substantially different …

RR: … From the American contracts. … You were under contract, you see, that was the thing, but it was a nice job. … It was a paramilitary job. That's what it was.

KP: Were there women at the first training base you were at?

RR: Yes.

KP: How many women were there? What roles did they have?

RR: Well, they were the same as us, cadets. We were all learning together, maybe five or six British girls and, while we were with the American girls, there were about seven of them with us.

KP: They were pilots.

RR: Yes, training pilots, training to fly the Tiger Moth and the Magister, small biplanes. Then, we got on the AT-6.

JP: When you were in the Ferry Command, you said that you did not march. Was there any other physical conditioning, such as jogging or other exercises?

RR: No, none at all. You disciplined yourself. If you got drunk too much, you got thrown out or, if you didn't show up when you were supposed to, you got thrown out.

KP: It sounds like, even though you would fall in occasionally, wear a uniform and salute, it was fairly casual, compared to other branches in the military.

RR: Well, you always had to have a full uniform on. You couldn't walk around with boots on, that is. If you were in the mess, you had to wear your … dress shoes. So, it was a pretty well-disciplined military outfit.

KP: How long did you stay at this base?

RR: I was there two years.

KP: After the training period, did you fly all your missions out of this base?

RR: Yes.

KP: You showed us earlier, on the map, your various flights in Scotland.

RR: Yes. I was stationed in Scotland, actually, on the border of Scotland, Carlisle. Carlisle is

right on the border.

KP: Your initial training had not taken place there, right?

RR: No. I was down in Luton and in White Waltham, Maidenhead, which is thirty miles north of London. That was our training field.

KP: How long did you stay at that training field?

RR: Well, it varied. You stayed there a couple of months, and then, you'd go off to a pool. You'd get some more experience in a pool, and then, they'd send you back to school.

KP: In other words, you were going back and forth to this initial school.

RR: You'd be seconded to different pools, too. You didn't have your primary basic pool station until … you passed out on … flight training. … Flight training meant you were a full-fledged ferry pilot and could fly Spitfires, at least. When you flew Spitfires, then, they'd put you in a pool. … Then, you stayed there and your pool commander would let you fly all kinds of aircraft that you could fly. Then, he'd send you back to school. … If your pool commander didn't like you or you didn't like the pool, you'd request a transfer to another pool, which was nicer or bigger or smaller or whatever. I liked the northern pools, because I liked to hunt and fish. So, I liked to be up in the north, by Scotland, where the fishing was good and the hunting was good, too. [laughter]

KP: It sounds like you were determined to have a lot of fun in this war.

RR: Oh, yes.

KP: You were going to take advantage of this war.

RR: That's right, before you got killed. [laughter] … It was a sad thing, too. … Sometimes, you'd be in the mess and there'd be a bad day and the fellows would go out; only two or three of them would come back. Maybe three of them would be killed. They'd fly into a mountain or something. I remember, one time, it was a very sad thing. I was stationed at Carlisle. … I was standing on a corner and a fellow came over to me and he was a Siamese Prince. Chirasakti was his name, a hell of a nice fellow. He looked like a Jap, you know, black hair and slanted eyes. Siamese, he was a Siamese Prince. His name was Chirasakti and he asked me, "What are you doing, Bill?" and I said, "I don't know, just looking around." I had just gotten there, in the town. There was bad weather. We went into the town of Carlisle and they were going to the movies and I somehow missed them. … I was standing there alone. … He came across the street and said, "Come on, we're going to the movies." I said, "Okay." So, he befriended me and we went over to the movies together. … I had a lot of talks with him, later. Well, one day, anyway, he showed me this airplane, the Defiant, the one which I later jumped out of. … He was showing me the whole thing, … how the controls were. … He showed me the pitot tube. The pitot tube was … an airspeed indicator, really. It sticks out in the wing. He said, "Whenever you want to fly in one of these aircraft, or any aircraft, look in this pitot tube. … One day, … I found this

bumblebee in mine and the damn airspeed indicator didn't work." So, I always remembered that. … Anyway, later on, he was killed. I never forgot that. I was in my bunk and they came in and told me that "Cherry" got killed. He went out in a Hurricane and got in one of these mountain passes. We used to fly through these passes, you know, low down. … He got into one of those and he couldn't turn around and he flew right into a mountain. He was killed in a Hurricane. So, I'll always remember that, what a good friend he was for a couple of months, and then, bang, he's dead. You know, you don't see him anymore, especially when you have to clean out his locker.

KP: How many pilots did you know that did not make it? It sounds like a significant amount.

RR: Oh, yes, quite a few.

KP: If you had to estimate, what were the casualty rates of pilots who were either killed or severely wounded?

RR: Well, there were 175 of them that lost their lives when I was there.

KP: Out of how many?

RR: Out of five hundred.

KP: The odds were really not in your favor.

RR: No, that's right. A lot of people were killed. … A lot of good pilots were killed. Let me tell you, … sometimes, you sit around the mess, drinking a beer or coffee, whatever it was, and one fellow would say, "You know, Joe," or somebody who was killed, "you know, he was a good pilot." … They used to say, "I'm not such a hot pilot. I'm not as good a pilot as he. Yet, he was killed." You know, the wrong people, not the wrong people, I should say, but some of the best pilots, were killed.

KP: In other words, sometimes, you literally had no control.

RR: That's right. You never knew. Amy Johnson was killed, too, you know. I don't know whether you remember who she was, but she flew in the '30s. I think she flew to Australia with Jim Mollison; remember Mollison? He was in our outfit, too. He was a famous, world-known pilot. Amy Johnson was killed in an Oxford. She flew from down towards London somewhere. She ran out of petrol, ran out of gas, and instead of trying to land in the Channel or somewhere in London, right in the Thames there, she bailed out. … As she went down, the plane went down in the Thames, right in, … almost, the heart of London. … She went down next to a ship, but they couldn't save her. She parachuted down, but she was drowned before they could get her.

KP: What were your closest calls? It sounds like you had several close ones.

RR: Oh, yes. [laughter]

KP: What were some of your closest calls?

RR: Well, I remember, one time, … in Linden, when I was home as a test pilot, we had a test area, you know, that went from Linden west to Trenton, all along the Delaware River, up about ten miles and back, a swatch about ten miles wide. … That was supposed to be our test area, Test Area #7. Well, anyway, I was in this test area. I was climbing. … I used to climb to fifteen thousand feet before we did our dive tests, you know, roll over and dive. Well, I climbed to fifteen thousand feet, but, foolishly, I stayed in the climb position too long. I broke off every three thousand feet … and looked, and then, I climbed three thousand more. Well, I was climbing myself without breaking off and I got to fifteen thousand. … I broke off and, just as I broke off, a Liberator went right over my head. [laughter] … It was so close. I passed under the number three engine, which was the engine on the right-hand side, next to the co-pilot. I went under the number three engine and I could see the co-pilot's mouth drop open. That's how close I was, under the number three engine of this B-24 Liberator. It was an Army Liberator. That kind of shook me.

JP: If you had kept climbing for just a few more seconds, you would have hit the wing.

RR: … That's right. Another second, I would have hit them. See, … I realized I had done the wrong thing. Ever since then, when I climbed, I'd break out and look and climb, remember you're at a thousand feet and climb. I never climb straight. See, you lay yourself wide open, see, when there's a lot of aircraft around and climbing like that. Of course, I was in my test area, going to fifteen thousand, which we did every day, and that Army Liberator was definitely not supposed to be there, but he was. See, we got to fifteen thousand and, you know, I think we did the test at seven thousand, by way of the supercharger. … Then, we'd go on to fifteen thousand, roll over and do the dive test. You did a dive test at 340 knots and, when you did it, you usually did it like so, pull out, and then, you … had plenty of time to read your instruments. You had to read your instruments and write on your pad the pressure and the temperature of the oil. … Sometimes, the canopy would shift over a little. That … was very disconcerting, too. The gun panels would lift up sometimes. They weren't supposed to lift up, either. So, there were a lot of things that happened, that might have happened, too. Another time, my controls jammed in a low-level roll, but luckily broke free while flying a Wildcat.

KP: What about in England? Are there any close calls that you remember?

RR: Well, nothing, except I had to bail out once. [laughter]

KP: You had never jumped before, had you?

RR: No.

KP: What were the circumstances that led you to bail out?

RR: Well, see, all the pilots that were there, including the Americans that came over, the experienced pilots, most of us never had any instrument flying training. So, when you got caught in a cloud, you were on your own and it was very disconcerting to be caught in a cloud

with no instrument training. So, I was one of those that got caught in a cloud and it was [a] really dense cloud, just like you were in a smoke-filled room. … I tried … to make a turn and I made the turn, but, in most aircraft, the gyro will stay put … if you don't … turn too acutely, but, if you turn just a little bit too much, your gyro will drop to the bottom of the cage, useless. You wouldn't be able to tell anything except by your primary instruments, but your primary instruments aren't very sensitive. They weren't in those days. So, you couldn't really tell which end was up. So, I lost control and I figured, "Well, I'll just put the stick down and see what happens. Maybe I could see the ground and get out of this." So, I put the stick forward and, luckily, I was in a normal position and I wasn't like this, going down. I got it level and I went down. … All of a sudden, I saw green grass right in front of my face. [laughter] So, I pull back the stick … and, immediately, I'm back up in this stuff again. … So, I figured, "Boy, I can't stand this too much." So, I tried to see if my gyro was working. Sometimes, they'll come back after a minute or two. They don't come back that quick. Well, anyway, I figure, "This is it." So, I tried to open the cockpit and I couldn't open the cockpit. This was in an old Defiant. Well, the reason I couldn't have opened the cockpit was because it doesn't open the way that normal cockpits open. There's a latch on it. You can flip the latch and you could slide the cockpit … window back about this far, just to see out. … I thought that was it, that I could just hit the latch and the whole cockpit will come back. Well, it didn't. Well, I kept yanking on it and yanking on it and, finally, I realized, "If I don't get this thing open, I'm going to be dead in another second." So, luckily, I happened to remember what I had read in my pilot's notes. You see, you had pilot's handling notes, which give the handling characteristics of every aircraft which we flew, hundreds of them, literally, all the Allied aircraft, from the Spit, Defiant, Mustang, twins, four-engine, everything. Well, anyhow, I remembered what I'd seen in these notes, that the release catch in this particular aircraft, the Defiant, is a little rubber ball. It's up here in the extreme left-hand side of the canopy, up in here, and you pull that. It's on a steel wire and that'll release the canopy. Well, I quickly pulled it, because the canopy came back, and, "Wshhh," it went. [laughter] … Before I went and as I went, I stepped on the edge of the canopy and I looked at my altimeter and I see the altimeter going down. It was at about nine hundred. … It went nine hundred, eight hundred, seven hundred, and I figured, … "Better move." … So, at about seven hundred, I started to move, and they lag, too, you know. They lag. Well, anyway, … I was actually moving out when I saw it at seven hundred and I just jumped out and I did it.

KP: Do you know what ever happened to the plane?

RR: It exploded when it hit the ground, within a few seconds. After I immediately felt the yank of the ripcord, the next thing I saw, before the flash, was my boot. When you go down, it's cloudy. You can't see anything, just nothing. … You can hardly see your hand in front of you. Well, I lost my boot as I went out. When I got the yank of the ripcord, I slowed up, naturally, but my boot went off and kept on falling below me. So, I looked down. All I could see was the boot going over and over and over and again, and getting smaller and smaller and smaller. Finally, it disappeared. That's all I could see, was this brown … suede boot, and then, the next second, a big orange flash. "Bang," the explosion was an orange flame. Then, the next thing I see is high-tension wires going across underneath me, big, brown, ugly-looking brown insulators, you know. … I remembered reading somewhere about how you could steer a parachute by pulling on the shrouds, you know. I read that somewhere. So, I started reaching up and, as I reached up, I went by the high-tension wires. I didn't have to do any pulling or

steering. If I had tried to do some steering, I might have gone down into them. … I was drifting and I drifted right over the wires, all these high-tension wires. … I could see the brown insulators and the wires just as I went over them, and then, I hit the ground. … There was only a fourteen-foot parachute, as I recall, and hitting the ground, or landing, is like you're running full speed on a grass field and somebody trips you. That's what it's like. … So, I hit the ground. I got mud all over my overalls. I've still got the mud on, downstairs, … these overalls. … I bounced a few times and rolled over and I pulled the shrouds. You have to pull the shrouds or else the parachute would drag you right along the ground. … Even with no wind, it will pull you along. So, I pulled the shrouds that dumped the air and gathered it up and walked to a stone wall. I climbed the stone wall and into the grounds of a hospital, luckily. … I wound up in a doctor's office drinking scotch. [laughter] He gave me a glass of scotch. He said, "You feel all right?" I said, "Yes, I guess so." … He pulled this bottle out of a drawer, a doctor, you know, in the doctor's office, on the grounds here. … He said, "Here." I never drank whiskey straight. I don't like it yet straight.

KP: In this case, it was okay.

RR: Yes, in this case. So, he gave it to me and I said, "All right." I drank it and I almost choked on it, but I drank it. … Then, he gave me another one, so, I drank another one. [laughter] That was enough. I sat there. … Finally, one of the nurses climbed the wall and I told her I lost my boot. [She] said, "Look, where's your boot?" I said, "It's out there somewhere, in the grass." So, I said, "Look, you know where the crash is. … You walk from … the flames to … about where I landed, over that way someplace, that way." So, she walked in a straight line and she comes back and [says], "Here's your boot." She found it in the fog. It was so foggy, you couldn't see from here to there on the ground, of course, right down. So, that was it. … After that, I used to go over, on rainy days, … to a nearby field, Silloth, and I got in a Link trainer. … I completed what they called a BAT course, Blind Approach Training, which is in the Link. I got ten hours in the Link. Those ten hours I should have had before I got in that damn Defiant, not after, because it might have saved the aircraft and my life. … See, we had … no instrument training. All of us had to fly blind and learn it as you went along. If you didn't learn it, you were dead.

KP: You learned instrument training as you went along.

RR: As I went along, yes. I'd fly in and out of clouds. Later on, I'd fly in and out of clouds … with a Spit. … I knew there was a top. In other words, I knew there was a top to the clouds. Sometimes, there is a top and a bottom. In this case, it was solid, probably up to twenty thousand feet. So, I used to go in the cloud and climb up through it and break out into sunshine. … I'd go down through it again and make a turn in the cloud, practicing, practicing and hoping I didn't get killed doing it. [laughter]

KP: You flew a number of different planes. What were your favorite planes to fly?

RR: I flew forty-five different ones.

KP: Which were the planes that you liked to fly and which did you prefer not to fly, but you

knew you had to?

RR: Well, I preferred not to fly the Defiant. [laughter]

KP: Yes.

RR: The one I liked to fly the most of all was the Spitfire, beautiful. It buzzed along. You could even write a letter while you were in the cockpit. I mean, [as] you're sitting there … in some airplanes, you'd fly along like this; you were shaken out of your seat. [laughter] … A Hurricane was nice to fly, too, but a Spitfire was even quieter, just, "Buzz," goes along like a butterfly, like a dream.

JP: What was the largest plane you flew?

RR: Largest? Well, I've flown in a Halifax and a Stirling. A Stirling was the largest one I flew in. I flew that as co-pilot. … An American got a hold of me, one time, in the mess. He said, "Hey, what are you doing?" I said, "Not much." He said, "You're going to fly with me." I said, "What?" He said, "We're taking a Stirling." You see, the Stirling is a big thing, … four engines. The Stirling, the cockpit is twenty-two feet above the ground, damn, twenty-two feet, four-engine, single-tail. … He said, "I'm taking a Stirling over here, from here to there, and I want you to help me fly it." You had to have a person with you, … either a flight engineer or somebody. So, I said, "Okay." So, I'm sitting there in the right side. We're taking off and he says, "Now, when I say pull, you pull. … Some of these hydraulic systems, you know, don't work too well." So, I had to help him take it off. We pulled back to take it off, and then, it roared away. … Then, we come back to level flight again and he says, "Okay, I got it," but I had to help him take it off. It was that heavy. That was the biggest one I flew. I've flown the Mosquito. The Mosquito is a beautiful plane, too, beautiful. I was on the right side of that one. I flew as the navigator. … There were dual controls in this thing, this Mosquito, and it had a table that you'd pull out to figure your map position out, you know. Well, anyway, I flew with this … senior English pilot. He was a nice guy, too. He was killed later, … over Berlin. He flew over the Rhine and flew into some steel cables, never found his body. Well, anyway, we flew in this Mosquito. We were flying along at about 260 [knots] and he said, "You want to see something?" I said, "What?" [laughter] So, he feathers one engine. He presses a button, … turned it off, I guess, turned it off and feathered it. … The thing goes along from 260 back down to 240 without touching the throttle. It slewed a little. He had to trim it a little, you know. … Then, he starts that engine up, feathers it and starts it up again … and we go along at 260. … Then, he hits the other engine, … stops that one and feathers that one, and we go along at 240 on that engine, too. [laughter] I said, "What the hell are you doing? We don't have to test this thing, you know." He was a real wild English pilot, I'm telling you. I never liked to fool around like that. I mean, when I got in the air and the engines were going all right, I didn't try to test them or, you know, fuss around. I just kept going the way I was going and landed.

KP: Testing was not part of your job, right?

RR: No. He was just doing it for the hell of it, you know. … He was something. He was really something.

JP: How long were most flights?

RR: Well, sometimes they were fifteen minutes, a half-an-hour, an hour, two hours. They varied, depended on where you were going.

KP: Is there any particularly long flight that you remember?

RR: Yes, the Tiger Moth, in [the] training field. They had us go from our training field, which is near London, up to Prestwick. It was about three hundred miles and it took us about two days to get there. … They just did it to train us, … to show us … the lay of the land. … Boy, was that a cold flight. We had these damn leather suits on, you know, the (Sitka?) suits, and helmets and full boots. There were about six girls with us, too, that time, I remember. … It was a nice flight, though. Tiger Moths, you know, going along at eighty-five miles an hour, you thought it was a sightseeing trip, really. [laughter] Well, anyway, when we got there, to Prestwick, they put us on the … night train to London, all these girls and about four or five fellows, and I remember, I had an upper bunk and the girl below me had a lower bunk. … We'd go in the washroom to put our pajamas on or something and, in the mornings, we'd go in there to brush our teeth. … We had to spell ourselves. The girls would go in, and then, we'd go in. [laughter] We were wild, I'm telling you. … I remember, I had an upper bunk and one of the girls below me had a lower bunk, but we spent the night in privacy, believe me, more or less, because we were dead tired. We were so dead tired, all of us just conked out right away.

KP: The women pilots were very much part of the unit. They were not off on another side of the base, so that you never saw them.

RR: … Well, we had all men on our base. Most all the bases were all men or all women. They were segregated. Down in Southampton, there was a Spitfire factory and they flew mostly Spitfires down there. All the girls flew the Spits up to [the] north, to where we were, and we took them on north to Scotland. … There were two or three girls sometimes in one pool, but they didn't like that. They liked to be by themselves, because … you know how they get. … You'd kid around with them, [but] the girls liked to be by themselves in the pools.

KP: Still, at times, they would be put in with men.

RR: Yes, they were. Two or three of them were in our pool at one time, yes, but, like I said, they stayed to themselves. Actually, the men, in those days, didn't like to be with the female pilots, you know. They didn't like them. … Actually, some of them were so pretty and so nice and so talkative. They were just … all-around people. They were really nice girls. … They weren't fops.

KP: Was there any dating between male and female members of your unit?

RR: Dating?

KP: Dating, between men and women pilots.

RR: Yes, yes. One of the fellows … married one of the girls. I went to his wedding. In fact, two of them married English girls. … One of them died recently and his daughter still writes to me and we see her at reunions. She lives in California. She's got a ranch with her sister and her mother. They live on this ranch in California. … This English girl married one of our American pilots over there. There were several weddings, yes.

KP: Was that allowed under regulations?

RR: Oh, yes. In fact, one of the girls from California, she's from Idaho, now, she married two of them, [Mary Zerbel Hooper Ford]. She married Wes Hooper. … She married a Canadian pilot, Hooper, and he was on the Coastal Command and he was lost at sea. He came down and they never found him. That's the wedding I went to, that one. This was while we were in training [that] she married him, Hooper. I don't know where she had met him.

KP: Did she keep flying, even though she was married?

RR: Yes, yes. She kept flying. In fact, like I say, she finished with me, and then, we all went out to different pools. Then, she married another guy. I don't know who he was. Well, anyway, I think he died, but she's living in California, now, Mary, Mary Zerbel, her name was.

KP: The women had equal status. In other words, they were officers.

RR: Oh, yes, yes. … All of the girls down in Southampton were first officers. They were qualified to fly Wellingtons, Hudsons, Mosquitoes, all twins. Some flew four-engines, too. This young girl I was telling you about, this young girl was my instructor for a while on navigation and classroom. She flew Stirlings, this girl. She's pictured in the book there, somewhere., Joan Hughes, by name.

JP: Were any of the men in the Transport Command married before they joined up?

RR: Oh, yes. Most of them were. A lot of them were married. Man and wife were in the outfit, a lot of them, man and wife. They were both in the outfit. Being civilian pilots before the war, private pilots, most of them had a lot of money, you know, because it was expensive to fly in England … before the war.

KP: It was expensive overall to fly.

RR: Oh, that's right, that's right, it was. Unless the government came in with a CPTP and [taught] me for free, I wouldn't have been able to fly. I'd probably wind up in the walking army, the infantry, [or] as a mechanic or something on an aircrew. [laughter]

KP: Speaking of mechanics, how good were your mechanics?

RR: They were all right, but there were a lot of things that didn't work right, too. Boy, you'd get in an airplane sometimes and I'd look down and my boot would be all full of oil. … I'd land

and the damn mechanic had forgotten to put the oil cap back on.

KP: The maintenance was not always pristine.

RR: No, it was very ratty.

KP: Really?

RR: … By and large, it was all right, but it was a lot to be desired, too. … After all, they were under pressure, too, you know. Twenty-four hours a day, they were working on those airplanes, trying to save Britain there for a while. They did wonders, really, considering. Even the new airplanes, though, sometimes would go haywire; [maybe] something wasn't connected right. One of the girls flew a Typhoon and the throttle jammed … full open. She couldn't close the throttle. She kept going around the field at four hundred miles an hour. [laughter] … They knew something was wrong, … but they had no radio, though. … She finally realized she had to cut the engine to come in. So, she kept cutting the engine, switching the engine back and forth, on and off, you know, to get in. She landed, not on our field, but on the next field. I think she hit a couple of cows. [laughter] It was really funny. The funny part about it was, she got out of the airplane, it was all banged up, but she got out of it, … she started to walk away and one of the cows started walking towards her. … She got so frightened, she jumped back in the airplane. [laughter] She got back in the airplane and stayed there until the crew came to get her. Oh, boy, she was something, that girl. Her name was Diana Ramsay; she died in Australia after the war.

KP: Did you actually ever witness a crash? How often would you witness crashes?

RR: Yes, saw one, yes. Actually, I came upon it right after my descent. Two Polish pilot officers were in a Beau-fighter and they were letting down in the same stuff I was in. They let down, but they hit the top of this hill and the aircraft just splattered and it was all over. … One of them was rolled up and it was the first time I had ever seen any dead persons in the war. It was the first time ever [that] I had seen a dead pilot or a dead … body. One of them was rolled up in a hedge about, oh, fifty yards up the field. There [were] cannon shells laying all around. I picked up one and put it in my pocket, foolishly. … One body, like I said, was rolled up in this hedge … and these hedges, you know, they've been there for a hundred years. … The branches are thick, … like iron. … They trim them, but, when the body was in there, I couldn't get it out, because he was stuck in there, you know. Like I say, these hedges have been there a hundred years. Can you imagine how thick they are and how heavy the branches are? Well, anyway, the other guy was laying there on the field, not too far from the plane, and he … went through the cockpit. He went through when it hit and all that was left was the tail. … It was just a bunch of junk, all scattered junk. … He was laying there, the pilot. An RAF medical officer bent over him and he reached down. … He had gone through the cockpit, … through the fuselage, and there was a piece of metal, aluminum, right over his face, like so, all over his head, like this. Well, the RAF pilot reached down and got a hold of the metal. It was rounded, you know, rounded right around his skull, his face, his head. So, he reached over and pulled the metal off his head and threw it aside, you know. When I saw that, it kind of made me sick. His face was all right, but, when he pulled it off, he pulled a piece of skin off with the metal, you know. … It kind of makes you sick. That's the first time, I think, I really felt sick. Well, seeing something

like that, you would, you know. It kind of shakes you.

KP: Otherwise, you had never seen a crash; I mean, you obviously knew pilots who did not come back, but actually witnessing the crash, and then, the aftermath.

RR: I've seen the aftermath of quite a few of them. I'd fly over. … Sometimes, you'd fly over. One time, I saw three of them. I saw a four-engine plane. It was a Stirling, too. It … landed flat. It wasn't burned. It was just sitting there in a hayfield and its nose was right up into a haystack.

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

JP: Go ahead.

RR: The aircraft had slid forward and just came to rest right at the base of the haystack. It was really a miracle that they didn't hit the haystack and burn. Another time, I saw a Blenheim, or what was the remains of it, just the two wingtips, and the whole center part was all ash, burned out, and the tail was there. … Alongside the aircraft was the ambulance. I was in the air at the time, [at] about one thousand feet, just circling around, looking. … There was an ambulance there, a RAF ambulance, and a few officers there, standing there, but there were five little oblongs of white sheets where they just removed the crew from the burned out wreckage. It was really a pathetic thing to see, that they didn't get out. … Outside of that, I … really didn't see too much messy stuff.

JP: What were your feelings towards the end, when you left?

RR: Relief. [laughter]

JP: You were not disappointed at all.

RR: Well, I was happy to get home, I'll tell you that.

KP: Were you under a two-year enlistment?

RR: Contract, yes.

KP: You were not in a "for the duration" type of contract.

RR: Well, yes, I was. … I was under contract of BOAC [British Overseas Airways Corporation] and you have to submit a six-month, or maybe it was three months, a three-month resignation period. Well, I submitted that. I came home one summer on leave. I was entitled to three months leave, I mean, three weeks leave. So, I managed to bum a ride home with the US Air Force. I went down to London and talked myself into a P-4, which is a little, yellow tag, which, … if you get one, it entitled you to get on any US Air Ferry Command aircraft and fly anywhere you want to home. So, I flew home on a DC-4, I guess it was, the Skymaster, DC-4.

… On the way home, one of the engines quit. … We took off from Iceland. We went on to Greenland and, on the way to Greenland, one of the engines quit. … It was a Sunday morning, I remember this, in July. It was late in July. … We had a minister, what do you call them, a fellow in the Army? …

KP: A chaplain.

RR: A chaplain, yes. Well, … he stood up in the front and he said, "Fellows, by your leave, I'd like to say a few words to you." He sort of preached a sermon. He had gotten permission from the pilot, rapped on the door, and so, he turned around at the other end of the plane and gave us a short sermon. Well, in this sermon, he said, "In the course of your life, your life is a pattern." He said, "When the pattern is complete, the Lord will take you." … Then, he said a few more words and he sat down. Well, this little Jewish guy sitting alongside from me, he looks at me and yells up the aisle, "Hey, fellows," he says, "maybe the pattern's complete." [laughter] … Not many people laughed. Well, anyway, we were flying along, we got into Greenland on three engines and we sat down there for three days, waiting … for a new engine, had to get a new harness from Pratt and Whitney in Hartford, Connecticut. So, they got the thing down there and, in the meantime, I was eating popcorn and chocolate and ice cream, stuff in this PX, which I had never had for two years, and it was a real ball, to be able to eat this … US Army food, … the eggs we had, which I hadn't had too many of. Anyway, I got home and this is when I went out to Linden to apply for this job as a test pilot on Wildcats, because my dad had told me they had built a new airfield in Linden, on US [Route] 1. So, I went out there and met the fellows and I was in uniform. … They said, "Yeah, we're going to need pilots. You'd better get back here quick." So, I said, "I can't. I'm under contract to BOAC." They said, "Well, all right, when you come back, look us up." So, I spent my leave, three weeks, here. I went down the shore and went swimming and I tried to get back. I went up to Montreal to get back and they couldn't take me, because the Quebec Conference was on. Churchill was up there and Roosevelt and all these other birds. Well, anyway, I came back home on the train. I met my wife on the way home, by the way, on the way up.

KP: That was how you met your wife.

RR: On the train, yes. Well, anyway, I came back home and I went swimming again, down the beach. A friend of mine had built a house down there. So, I was down there overnight and, all of a sudden, I get a phone call. The little waitress from the diner on the highway walked over to the house and said, "Hey, you're wanted on the phone." So, I went over to the phone; my mother was on the phone. … She said, "Hey, they called up from Canada. They want you back there right away, quick." So, I said, "Okay, okay." So, I said, "Okay," I went swimming once more. Then, I got dressed, went back home and back to Canada again. But, in the belly of a liberator on a mattress. … [I went] back to White Waltham headquarters and gave them my resignation. I told them I was resigning as of three months. So, they put me on … leave. … I flew for three more months, and then, I came home again, but, this time, I had to come home by ship. So, they arranged for me to go by the *Queen Elizabeth II*. I came back on the *Queen Elizabeth II*, by ship. I got home [on] Christmas Eve.

KP: What year was this?

RR: Oh, golly, I forget now, '43. I guess it was '44, [maybe] '43, Christmas of '43, yes, that was it. I came home and spent Christmas with Mother and Dad. … Then, where was it? … Oh, yes, I went out to the field and got the job at Eastern Aircraft, testing Wildcats.

KP: You mentioned the food. What was the food like in England during the war?

RR: … Kind of sparse. [laughter] Actually, what they specialized on was tomatoes and cheese and toast. I had tomatoes, cheese and toast, tomatoes, cheese and toast, almost every day for lunch for months. [laughter] … See, they grew tomatoes, that wasn't rationed, and cheese wasn't rationed, either, I don't think. … Anyway, we had tomatoes and cheese on toast, most of the time, for lunch, day in and day out. One time, though, I did break away and I went salmon fishing up north and I caught a salmon and I had it sent down to the mess and they had fresh salmon that day. [By the time] I got home, … there was one little piece left. [laughter] The cook says, "Here's what's left." I said, "What are you talking about? Why didn't you save me a bigger piece than that?" All the rest of them ate up my salmon, but I enjoyed it.

KP: It sounds like, when you reached Greenland, you had come to the promised land, in terms of food, like chocolate and fresh eggs, which you had not been able to get in England.

RR: Well, I'll tell you, luckily, I got billeted several times in a place where a woman had chickens. I was billeted in private homes and, in Carlisle, I was billeted [with] a family who had chickens in the backyard. So, I had eggs, luckily.

KP: Otherwise, it was pretty meager, in terms of food.

RR: Pretty grim, yes.

KP: What did you have for dinner?

RR: Spam. [laughter]

KP: What did you have for breakfast?

RR: I've forgotten what we had for breakfast, toast, toast and coffee, most of the time, I guess, and buns.

KP: It sounds like you did not eat a lot of meat, except for Spam.

RR: I'll tell you, the pilots were treated pretty well, though. We got around to places where you could get things, you know. Different pubs would serve food after hours and we'd pick up some pretty nice meals sometimes, especially around headquarters, around White Waltham. We were billeted down near the river there. … There is a River Thames [that] runs through there, you know. … There's quite a nice little community at White Waltham. They have little hotels that are built right on the edge of the river and some were built on an island in the middle of the river. They were quaint little places. So, we did all right. I mean, we didn't suffer too much, except

when we flew into a mountain.

JP: When you came home for the first time on leave, can you describe what it was like to come home?

RR: Well, I remember having my first ice cream cone when I got home, after a while. That was one treat I had.

JP: Was there a party waiting for you?

RR: No, no parties. There was just, "Hello." … [laughter]

KP: You had left when there were a lot of single men in their twenties around.

RR: That's right. There was nobody back home when I got home. There were just a few girls I knew from high school. In fact, I went to the movies with one, I remember, nobody around, no men, no.

KP: Did you wear your uniform?

RR: Oh, yes, sure. You've got to wear that uniform.

KP: You must have gotten a lot of attention.

RR: Yes, you do, that's right. It was an odd uniform, so, you'd look like … nothing they'd seen. It wasn't Navy and it wasn't Army. … I remember, the biggest shock I got was when I found out they'd covered over Johnson's Pond. They'd ruined my ponds over there with that damn spur line from Camp Kilmer.

KP: What about Camp Kilmer? All of a sudden, you have this big facility nearby.

RR: All of a sudden, that was there. That's right.

KP: Are there any other changes to the New Brunswick area that you noticed during the war?

RR: … Well, the town was kind of dull, except when the war ended, of course. Then, it was kind of lively.

KP: You mentioned that you met your wife on one of these trips back and forth to Canada. What were the circumstances of your meeting? It sounds like you were a pretty confirmed bachelor up until that point.

RR: I was. Oh, I was on the way to Canada, yes.

KP: Yes. What were the circumstances?

RR: Well, I wrote to her. I got her name, of course. We sat together. I remember, it was in the winter and we went by Lake Champlain and I looked out. It was moonlight. It was in January. It was cold as a son-of-a-gun. … I think it was in January. We saw all these ice houses out on the … lake. … I thought that was peculiar, automobiles out on the lake. … So, we wrote to each other quite a bit, and then, I guess that summer, finally, I went up to visit her and we went to the races at Saratoga. That's where she's from. … We went to the races and corresponded. We had a lot of fun at the track, not knowing much about it. I remember, I came home with some winning tickets in my pocket. I didn't … have enough of a sense to know that I'd won. [laughter] I bet on a horse to win; he came in second and I didn't claim the second place win.

JP: You met your wife because of the Quebec Conference. You were not able to get a flight, so, you had to take a train.

RR: That's right. They were all balled up. They wouldn't take me right away, because Roosevelt was up there and Churchill, I think, was up there at that meeting.

KP: You came back to New Jersey to be a test pilot. Where did you live, with your parents?

RR: Yes.

KP: What was a typical day like at the Eastern plant?

RR: Well, it was a lot of fun. … We used to fly five or six, sometimes seven, airplanes in a day, but we only flew them maybe fifteen minutes to half-an-hour to an hour, at the most. You see, the maximum time was two hours on all those planes and the test flight should have been an hour. In other words, if you had a good plane, it was an hour. … Sometimes, there wouldn't be anything wrong with them. So, you'd fly the whole hour, and then, you'd come back and let the next pilot fly the second hour. … Other times, there would be little things wrong. … It would roll in a dive and you'd have to bend the tabs or some minor thing. Actually, ninety percent of them were top order. I was surprised, really.

KP: I interviewed another test pilot who described how badly made some of the planes were.

RR: That's it. … The first time I flew one of these things, I said to the fellow with me, I said, "You mean to tell me this thing hasn't been flown yet, ever?" He said, "No, you're taking the first flight with them." I said, "Oh, my god." So, I got used to it. There wasn't anything wrong with them. They'd fly perfectly, most of them. Well, anyway, one of these times, I had got in a plane with … no (crabs?) on it, nothing wrong with it. So, I decided to fly up to Saratoga. So, I got up there all right. I was flying along and I had to test it first. I mean, I had to test to see the wind and watch to see whether it was windy or too windy to go. It was easy to fly up. … You just fly up the Hudson River until you come to two little ponds, which is Round Lake, and then, Saratoga is right beyond that, in Albany. So, I got up there and I dove down on the town and away and back home. … My wife said that I came kind of low, that is, Mary, … after I … called her up. She called me up, I guess. She asked me what I was doing. I said, "I was flying kind of low up there." So, another time, I think it was the same week, I flew up to State College. … This was a little longer flight, though, and I had to figure it out, because it was to the west. So, I

… climbed to fifteen thousand [feet] right away, like so, and then, I got to fifteen thousand and I flew due west, 280, 290 degrees. … I got to State College all right. I dove down on the town, buzzed the old fraternity house, did a couple of rolls and came home in an hour-and-fifty-five minutes. I took the full two hours on that one, though, to get home.

KP: You did not land in Saratoga.

RR: No. You're not supposed to land anywhere.

KP: I have been told by one pilot, an Air Force pilot, that he took his crew home. He actually took his plane to his hometown and landed, totally unauthorized.

RR: Yes, they've done that.

KP: You never did that.

RR: No, you can't. I'll tell you why. You see, the Wildcat is started up by an explosive charge, you know, two shotgun shells the mechanic has in his hand. … He puts one shotgun shell up in there, and then, he [says], "All clear," and he gets away. … Then, you fire it and, if it goes off, the engine turns, fine. If it doesn't go off, then, you have to get under there and put another shotgun shell in there and fire it again. You fire it with the ignition switch. So, you can't go landing anywhere unless somebody is on the ground to help you with two shotgun shells. … I'll tell you one thing that did happen. This nut kid that I know, used to know, he lives down in East Brunswick, too, he was a test pilot, Bell Air Cobras [P-39s], in Niagara Falls. … Anyway, he quit there [and] he came down to us and flew with us for the rest of the war, until they drafted him. They finally drafted him. He was a young kid. … One day, he decided to go back to Bell with a Wildcat. Well, he flew up there and he circled around and I guess he did what I did, buzzed the field. … Then, he came … back home, but he didn't make it. He ran out of gas. Well, where he ran out of gas was right over Morristown Airport, luckily. The thing quit. … They go down like a stone, you know. If you're not over an airport, boy, you're in trouble. So, luckily, he landed in Morristown Airport. He phoned up our field and the guys drove over in a station wagon, a couple of mechanics with a couple of shotgun shells, to start him up. They had to start him up with shells and a can of gas to get him home. It's a wonder they didn't fire him, but they didn't. They just reprimanded him.

KP: It sounds like you guys were hard to replace.

RR: Oh, yes, they needed us bad. [laughter]

KP: If you do not mind me asking, how well were you paid?

RR: Pretty well. We got a hundred-and-fifty [dollars] a week, plus overtime. We made two or three hundred [dollars] a week. This was back in 1945, now. That was a lot of money.

KP: Yes. That was really good money.

RR: I saved a lot of money, too, that way. I saved almost enough money to buy the house here, for one thing. … We did lose one fellow. One guy got killed, you know. He flew into the ground at about five hundred miles-an-hour. … He was an experienced pilot, too. He was an ex-Flying Tiger. … He did a dive test, but, see, around the New York area, there is what they call a haze level. It's at four thousand feet, usually. It's all haze. You can't see anything underneath it. Above it is clear skies, but there is four thousand feet of just solid haze. We call it the industrial haze. Well, he dove down and got into the haze at four thousand feet and he tried to pull out. … I guess he realized he was too close to the ground; he should have pulled out sooner. He pulled out and he blacked out. When he pulled up, he blacked out right here, and then, he rolled over, right straight into the ground. He landed in Oldwick, in an apple orchard. There wasn't anything left of him. They showed us pictures of him later. … They had a picture of his parachute harness and his rib bones were sticking out of his parachute harness. Just this chunk, … up to here, was all that was left of him. He was strapped in a harness. You could see his rib bones. That's all. They said one of his feet … was up in an apple tree, just a foot. I wasn't there at the time. … He was killed … while I was back in England working on my resignation. … I had met him. His name was Gunvordahl, a nice guy, a Swede. He was a former Flying Tiger.

KP: One of the pilots at Eastern had flown in the military, or for Transport Command.

RR: Oh, yes. Most of them had been ex-Army pilots. Several were Flying Tigers … in China, but most of them were ex-Army and ex-Navy. Most of them were ex-Navy pilots.

KP: You did not have any women as test pilots.

RR: Oh, no, hell no. I'll tell you, one woman pilot did come in our field one time. … She came in from the north and landed into the south. You know how the field is; US 1 is east-west and there is a north-south runway, like so, you know, and there are tanks down here at the south end of the field. … This girl was a WASP [Women Airforce Service Pilot]. She had a Mustang and she came in over the field. She thought she was in Newark, you see. … She had a radio, too, and she came in over … US 1, over the edge of the field, … and tried to land on the north-south runway. That's a hell of a short runway. We didn't even like to use it when the weather was right. Anyway, she went down over the embankment, through a fence. There's a fence there. She went over an embankment, across the narrow railroad track. … She bounced over the track and just missed one of the tanks. … She ended up about this far from one of the tanks. … You can imagine what would have happened if you'd hit that tank. … One of the mechanics went racing down there with a station wagon. He saw what was happening. I wasn't there at the time. I was flying, I guess. Anyway, he came down to see her. She was crawling out of the thing. … This mechanic said the first thing she says was, "Give me a goddamn cigarette," typical WASP. [laughter] She was rough, tough and a nasty one, this one was.

KP: Going back to England, how much contact did you have with the WASPs and the air forces, both the RAF and the American Air Force?

RR: None with the American Air Force.

KP: You would simply drop these planes off.

RR: Except for once. [laughter] This was a bad occasion, too, [with] the American Air Force, the Eighth Air Force. … Of course, we were in contact with the Royal Air Force every day. We went into their fields and factories, too. Well, anyway, this one time, I'll never forget this, because I was soloing the Hurricane, I had just gone over the AT-6 trainer and my instructor said, "How would you like to fly the Hurricane?" I said, "Okay, fine, let's go." So, this was in the morning. He said, "We'll have it right after lunch," because it was almost lunchtime. So, I said, "Okay, right after lunch." So, at lunch, an American pilot came in with a Dakota, a twin-engine plane, and he landed in our field. He was from some Eighth Air Force base right nearby. He knew one of the girls and he got to talking to her and he said, "Hey, … how about a ride? [Do you] want to take a ride with me after lunch?" So, she said, "Sure, okay." So, she got a couple of other girls to go with her and she asked me, she says, "Do you want to take a ride in this Dakota after lunch?" I said, "No thanks, I'm soloing the Hurricane." So, before I could get in the damn Hurricane, they all climb in this Dakota and they take off the grass field … at White Waltham, right near London. He takes off, he gets about, I don't know, … a foot off the ground and he slicks up. Of course, the thing goes back down on the ground again. He never did get off. So, all you could see, down the field from looking at him when he landed [was], … you know when you go skiing, two herringbone cuts in the green grass, where the props had churned up the grass. That's all you could see and this Dakota is down about the middle of the field, right where I'm supposed to take off in this Hurricane. So, anyway, my instructor says, "Well, do you still want to fly this thing?" I said, "Sure, I could get around him." He was in the middle of the field, but I figured I could land just to his left, you know. So, I did. That's how I soloed my Hurricane, with a damn Dakota in the middle of the field, US Army lieutenant, his work.

KP: You had a lot of contact with the RAF. What did you think of the RAF?

RR: Wonderful guys. They were really dedicated. … Boy, I'm telling you, they had hell. They just flew through hell. … You just wonder how they ever did what they did.

KP: Did you ever get a chance to talk with some of the pilots, back in the 1940s, when you were actually a part of Transport Command?

RR: The RAF pilots, you mean?

KP: Yes. Did they ever talk to you about their missions?

RR: No.

KP: It sounds like you just dropped your planes off.

RR: That's right. I talked to them afterwards, after the war, when I went back on these reunions. I talked to some of the fellows who had been RAF pilots before they got in ATA, our outfit, and they used to tell me about things that … happened. There's a lot written up in this book by this girl, too, about it. She was very friendly with dozens and dozens of RAF men, wealthy men, who got in the RAF after their college training and went off to the worst part of the

war, the very worst part, the fighter pilot stuff and the bombing of the reservoir, the bombing of the … dams … up in Norway, … somewhere. She writes a great number of interesting stories about the men that she knew. She was one of the high-ups in society and all these fellows that she knew immediately went into the RAF. See, they didn't go into the Army, they went into the Royal Air Force, most of them as pilots, because they had been private pilots before the war. [They had] the money to indulge in it. … It's very interesting and amazing, unbelievable, some of the stories that she's written in that book, that really happened, really fascinating. Every once in a while, I pick up the darn book. I … still [have not] read it through. I keep reading it chapter-by-chapter, you know, a little bit here and a little bit there. Then, I reread it. [laughter] The Book is *Spreading My Wings*, by Diana Barnato-Walker, M.B.E.

KP: What kind of contact, if any, did you have with the factory itself? Did you get to know any of the managers, any of the foremen, any of the workers, men or women, in the factory?

RR: No.

KP: They just gave you a plane and you went off.

RR: Yes. … We just saw them. We'd walk through sometimes and they'd look at us and smile. … We never talked to them, no. Actually, we weren't supposed to.

KP: Really?

RR: Yes. … We weren't supposed to.

KP: Why?

RR: Well, [with all the] secrecy acts, they were very strict on the talk business. We weren't supposed to talk. … Another thing, cameras, too, were *verboten*. I had a camera over there and I shot up the film and that's all I had. I mean, I couldn't get any more film. They wouldn't sell it to me. … They barely processed it. I took pictures of London, different places. … Cameras were strictly out and, yet, a lot of the fellows I flew with carried cameras, the Englishmen. They carried cameras with them and they took a lot of good pictures. … Of course, we took a lot of official pictures on the ground, like those pictures you saw downstairs … of all of us together. … They weren't supposed to take any pictures of aircraft, but we did anyway, when we could and when we had the film and when we had the cameras.

KP: Did you keep a diary at all?

RR: Yes, I did.

KP: I hope you still have it.

RR: Yes, I have it. I don't let anybody see it, except … for one follow I let see it. He wrote to me, an Englishman who was writing a book. He wanted to see my diary about certain crashes and certain dates and places that I mentioned. … I sent him the diary and he incorporated some

of it in the book that he wrote. [laughter]

KP: How long is your diary?

RR: Well, there were two of them, actually, about this thick. It's a pocket diary, you know.

KP: Okay.

RR: There are two of them. I ran out of [pages in] one.

JP: Did you write a lot of letters back home?

RR: Oh, yes, I wrote a lot of letters. They didn't all get there, either. I know, I sent a photograph of myself to my mother and dad and it never arrived. It was sunk by enemy action. The reason they found that out was that, well, I got a notice, several months later, that my package had been lost at sea. … Another friend of my mother and dad's got the picture and they wondered why my mother and dad didn't get theirs. So, they put it together, that it was lost at sea.

KP: If the war had not come to an end, would you have stayed as a test pilot at Eastern?

RR: No. There weren't any test pilot jobs, then, but you mean as a pilot?

KP: Yes.

RR: … I tried to get a job as a pilot in the airlines, but they didn't go for pilots who were, let's see, I was about twenty-nine when the war ended, I guess. They wanted young fellows with four-engine experience and there were a million pilots.

KP: You would have liked to have stayed in flying, if you could.

RR: I would have liked to, yes. I tried to get an airline pilot job, but they were few and far between. I was offered one job as a helicopter pilot, but I turned it down. I told them that I didn't think it was safe. I liked the wind under me. [laughter]

KP: In terms of your draft status, could you have kept the Eastern job as a test pilot for the duration or did you have to go before the draft board?

RR: Well, I … was in 1-A up until the time the war ended. Then, of course, I was in 2-A and they just forgot the draft entirely, really.

KP: Did you ever have to report back to them to renew your exemption?

RR: Oh, yes. … I was supposed to report every six months. In fact, that's … what I did in England. I sent them a telegram to request another six-month deferment, which they did, which lasted, of course, … two years, really, beyond that. … They knew I was in England, so, they

couldn't touch me, anyway.

KP: When you were at Eastern, there was no talk that you maybe should go into the war.

RR: When I was in London, I was out of their jurisdiction. I was in the throes of the Royal Air Force. I mean, I knew that. I told them that in my telegram. …

KP: What about when you came back to fly as a test pilot?

RR: Oh, yes. Then, … I reported to them right away when I got back. … I called them up and said I was back and that I wanted a couple of weeks to get a job as a test pilot. …

KP: Was that a problem for them?

RR: Well, they put me in … 1-A right away. [laughter] … Of course, [I] was deferred immediately when I got the job. First thing my boss asked me [was], out there at Linden, when I was being interviewed, he said, "Are you on good terms with your draft board?" I said, "Yes, I am. I [kept] in touch with them … when I was in London." Luckily, they went along great, because if I had been trying to dodge anything, … trying to be diffident with them or evasive, they probably would have gone after me and slapped me right into the Army. I was honest with them, right up to the board. I figured, "Well, what the hell? … If it happens, it happens." … Luckily, they went right along with me on every request I made. Like I said, the telegram from England was the big one. If they had said, "No," if I had been nasty with them about any previous deferment, they would have said, "No," and I would have had to come back to the USA in … 1-A. [laughter] So, I guess it pays to be honest, even though, … sometimes, [it is] not too good, but, most of the time, it is, I guess.

KP: Where were you when V-J Day occurred? Do you remember?

RR: V-J?

KP: Yes.

RR: I was here. Let's see, oh, I was at Linden. That was the end of the war, August 8th.

KP: How long did it take before you stopped flying planes after V-J Day?

RR: I never flew a plane after that.

KP: Really? After V-J Day, they immediately stopped.

RR: I took my son up once, … out of North Brunswick Airport. That was it, too expensive, I mean, you know, … and what is it? up and down, up and down. Who wants to go up and down? … When you fly a plane, it's nice to go a couple of hundred miles, like I was used to doing in the Wildcat, you know, just taking off in some direction. We used to go out to Montauk Point … once in a while, when the weather was bad. We had another test area [up] north. We'd go out to

Montauk Point and go around the lighthouse, real low, … way out to the tip of the island there, a hundred-[and]-fifty miles out and back. …

JP: What was life like when you were here as a test pilot? You said that there were no other men your age around. Did you think it was boring?

RR: No, it was interesting, a bowl of cherries.

KP: You had met your future fiancée. In fact, you got married before the war ended, in April.

RR: In April, right.

KP: Did you and your wife get an apartment?

RR: Yes, we got an apartment, a GI apartment. [laughter]

KP: Which was where?

RR: Out in Highland Park, the north side of Highland Park. Yes, it was nice, enabled me to finish my college training at Rutgers, yes, but life was kind of dull after that, though, comparatively speaking. [laughter]

KP: What about gas rationing and other rationing in the States? How would you compare it to, say, England?

RR: Well, they had rationing over there all right, severe.

KP: How severe was the rationing in the United States?

RR: Well, it was more severe [in England]. They had coupon books, you know, for shoes and sugar and tea, oh, a lot of things. Actually, I didn't really even use my ration book. I used to give it to my landlady, because I had my meals in the mess. I didn't need any clothes. I had a uniform issued to me. … I had the privilege of buying a uniform shirt, blue. We wore navy blue shirts, black ties, of course. … [With] the uniforms, I didn't need any clothes. I didn't need any food and didn't need clothes. … I used to give my ration books right to my landlady. She'd use them for food and everything else she wanted to do, clothes. … It was a boon to them for me to give them my ration book, because they were really strapped for sugar and meat, everything. I didn't have to worry about that. … I didn't eat in my billet anyway, except … I had breakfast. She gave me breakfast, but I had all my other meals at the mess at the aerodrome, Yorkshire pudding. [laughter] Another nice thing, too, in the RAF [was], they used to serve beer in the mess, you know, at noon. You had beer in the mess hall, but you had to watch out not to drink too much of that after all, if any. In fact, … I remember only once [that] I had beer in the mess, drank it, that is, but, any time you wanted to have beer, you could have it. I thought that was rather odd, you know, flying airplanes and letting the pilots have beer, die happy, huh. [laughter]

JP: When did you start taking classes at Rutgers again?

RR: Oh, right away, in September. Maybe I let a year go by; I think I did. I let a semester go by. I had an interview with some [professor] and we were talking about it. … I said to him, … "I don't think I can afford to get my degree." He said, "You can't afford not to." So, I listened to him saying that and it sort of changed my mind. … I had so many years already tucked into getting my degree, I figured, "It's silly not to go on and get it, to finish to my advantage."

KP: While you were going to school, did you work?

RR: Yes, I had a job. I was holding a job at … Cyanamid.

KP: You had worked for them before the war.

RR: Yes, that's right.

KP: What job did you do?

RR: I had a research assistant job.

KP: How many courses would you take a semester?

RR: I took as many as I could hold. In fact, [I took] too many once. I had to drop one. … I took … just as many as I could get by with. I wanted to get through, you know. So, I took a lot of them. I took accounting, statistics. I liked statistics. Statistics was interesting. I didn't have to take too many, though, to finish, you know, just accounting and a few liberal arts courses and statistics and a few other liberal arts courses.

JP: Was this while you were working full-time?

RR: Yes, working full-time, yes. I wound up with low blood pressure, too. I remember that. I was really beat by the time I finished, but I figured the only way to do it was to do it.

KP: How had Rutgers been changed by the war? Did you notice any changes?

RR: Oh, boy, I did. I was down on, what? Busch Campus the other day. I was really amazed. The Ceramics Building has changed from a dinky, little, one-horse brick building there on George Street to a tremendous, big complex, beautiful.

KP: What about the Rutgers of 1932 versus the Rutgers of the late 1940s? What were the differences that you noticed?

RR: '40s?

KP: Yes.

RR: Not much.

KP: It was still similar.

RR: Not much. It was still a one-horse town there. I think they still drove cars through the middle of the mall. What is it?

KP: Voorhees Campus.

RR: Voorhees Campus there, yes. They used to drive cars through the middle of it, until they closed it up, remember?

KP: Yes. It has been closed since I have been here.

RR: Down to William the Silent. William the Silent is down the other end, isn't he?

KP: Yes. Would you have liked to have gone full-time?

RR: Yes, I would have. I was thinking about it at the time, but I thought, "Boy, being married and [having] a child, I don't know." … I think maybe I made a mistake. I should have gone full-time with subsistence. They would have given you subsistence then, too. In fact, I could have gone back to Penn State on subsistence, probably, at that time. I often thought of that, because I talked to other people, graduates from Penn State, and they said, "Why don't you come back to State?" I said, "Well, it's my own hometown." I … wanted to hold on to a job as well as study. I figured that was the best way. You know, I held on to a job and that was the decision I made, but I think I would have finished a little faster [going] full-time, probably in two years.

KP: It sounds like the GI Bill was crucial.

RR: Yes, it was.

KP: When did you learn that you would be eligible for the GI Bill, because you were not in the US military?

RR: I read it in the paper somewhere. [laughter]

KP: It really came down to the fact that you had been in this Bermudian unit.

RR: Yes. I remember, there was an embodied service. I read it somewhere. I have it yet, downstairs in my files, where I have it underlined. … To qualify for the GI Bill, you had to be [fighting for] a friendly foreign government, Allied. The words … just fit. Everything fit. You had to be [in for] ninety days. … I remember seeing that.

KP: You were in for ninety days?

RR: Ninety-seven embodied service days. Oh, boy, I just made it.

JP: What were the benefits like under the GI Bill?

RR: Well, you could buy a house, you could … invest in a business, you could go to college under the GI Bill, for free, more or less. … You had to buy your books, I guess it was. No, I got my books free, too. That's right. I remember getting a whole bunch of books. … You can't join the American Legion. That was about the only thing I couldn't do.

KP: Did you want to join the Legion?

RR: Well, I got approached three or four times by people. I got … three or four letters in the mail and, each time, I wrote back and said, "I'm sorry, but … I'm really not qualified." When I think of all the things the GIs went through and I didn't go through, I said, "I couldn't be a member of the American Legion. I'd feel funny." Though I qualified for the GI Bill, I don't think I'd feel right with some GI who had tanks run over him in training and went through the training that they do, which I found out that they did go through in different camps, here and there. You know, a friend of mine told me that they had a … M1 tank run over him. You had to dig a hole in the ground, and then, get in it, and then, the tank would run over them. I said, "That's enough for me. Airplanes [are] enough [for me]."

JP: In that respect, you were probably pretty happy that you decided to go to Bermuda in 1942 and avoid infantry duty.

RR: Yes, that's right. What are we doing, running out of reels here?

KP: No. The tape is almost ready to run out. You mentioned earlier, before we started the interview, that this house was originally owned by someone who bought it under the GI Bill.

RR: That's right.

KP: You assumed the GI Bill mortgage?

RR: I assumed it. That's right. I could have done it outright, I mean, without him being a GI, but it just happened [that] we liked this house and that's the way it was.

KP: Only GIs, in a sense, have lived in this house.

RR: Yes. That's right.

KP: When did you move into the house?

RR: … I think it was '52, something like that.

KP: 1952.

RR: Yes.

KP: Do you know when the house was built?

RR: Yes. It was built, I think, in the '50s, 1950. It was practically a new house. That's right, it was '50. This development, the whole place, was built at that time.

KP: Are you surprised by how the area has developed? You described earlier in your interview how you remember your pond and the woods and hunting very fondly.

RR: Yes, yes. This was a rural area, too, you know, out here. I remember, my wife used to sit in the corner room there, working at the typewriter, and she often used to see deer run down through the back lot, about a hundred yards away. I remember seeing, once, three deer run across in that field back in there, before those houses were built. … That's the way things go. Things are changing. We're going to have a senior center out here, one of these days, too, a senior center, all for our own use, plus, … all the other community things are going to be held there, too, … [like] Boy Scouts, but it's going to be a senior center. It's about time. I mean, every other community has got one, Highland Park and South River and Sayreville and Metuchen. They've all got brand-new ones.

KP: I know.

RR: So, we're all looking forward to it. I belong to the senior center out here. We meet out at Dumont Lane, at the police headquarters, [at the] community center out there.

KP: After graduating from Rutgers, did you continue working for Cyanamid?

RR: No, I left. I went to Newark. I worked in Newark for about fifteen years.

KP: Where did you work?

RR: Federal Pacific.

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

KP: This continues an interview with Mr. Roy William Reisert on October 17, 1996, in Somerset, New Jersey, with Kurt Piehler and …

JP: Jan Pattanayak.

KP: You mentioned that you worked for Federal Express.

RR: Federal Pacific.

KP: Federal Pacific, doing time study engineering. You stayed with that company for fifteen years. Where did you go after that?

RR: Well, I left there and I went to Fedders. Fedders, they make air conditioners and refrigerators. … I did time studies on the line there and industrial engineering work for them, writing operation sheets on all the different models of refrigerators that they made. I was on the refrigerator line, about one hundred men on the line, and we studied each position and determined the cost … and the speed of the line and whatnot. … It was quite an interesting job. I wrote a good many time studies and several hundred operational sheets for all the positions on the line, on all the different models that they made, from the model twelve to the thirteen, the fourteen, the fifteen, the sixteen, and even the side-by-sides, too, they had. … They didn't make the side-by-sides there; they made just the up-and-down door models. It was quite interesting.

KP: Did you stay with Fedders until you retired?

RR: Yes.

KP: For someone who wanted to be a cartoonist, it sounds like a very technical and mathematical job. It seems like you liked both.

RR: Yes. I wrote a lot of operations sheets. I kept it on the creative side and time studies [are] creative, too, you know. You describe the job, the work and the motions and the time involved to do each one. … It's quite creative. You come up with something out of nothing. You come up with a rate. In other words, it's a piecework rate.

KP: When did you retire?

RR: About ten years ago.

KP: When did you first start going to reunions of the RAF and the Transport Command?

RR: Oh, about several years after the war. Well, it was quite a long time, though, after that, because a lot of us didn't have too much money at the time. It was just when I got a little … more affluent that I was able to go back to England to one of these reunions. … Since then, I've been going quite frequently.

KP: When was the first reunion that you attended?

RR: First one?

KP: Yes.

RR: Oh, golly, I don't remember, '75 or '78, something like that. I've forgotten.

KP: How early did the reunions start? Do you know?

RR: They have them every year.

KP: Even in the 1940s and 1950s, they had reunions.

RR: Well, they had their local reunions, yes, what they called the AGM, an annual general meeting, which they had at the airport where it all began, in White Waltham, in Maidenhead, England.

KP: That started right after the war?

RR: That started it, that's right, yes.

KP: You would get invitations to go to these?

RR: That's right. I did, yes, every year. … Now, we're having formal meetings in an RAF base in Lyneham. Only recently, well, in the last fifteen, twenty years, I guess, the Royal Air Force has hosted us at their military base at Lyneham, which is in the Midlands. It's about a hundred miles from London. … They put us up there in the officers' quarters and we wear formal dress and they have a band that plays during the … evening meal, … in a balcony above. It is quite impressive.

KP: It sounds like you stayed in touch, even though you could not go to the reunions, with a lot of people.

RR: Oh, yes, I did. I wrote to quite a few on every occasion, Christmas cards, of course, and other occasions. [On] vacations, I'd send them a postcard.

KP: I get the sense that this was a very tight-knit group. How many members of your unit did you lose touch with, or do most people stay in touch, even if they do not come to the reunions?

RR: Well, I keep in touch with only about four or five of them, my close friends. The rest of them … you sort of see at reunions and I sort of renew acquaintances that way.

KP: It sounds like your reunions are very well-attended.

RR: They are, yes.

KP: I have talked to other military people who say that that is not the case for them.

RR: They had a hundred-[and]-fifty, I think, at the last one, just last month.

KP: With other groups, either military or not, the interviewee says that their group either never had a reunion or they never stayed in touch with anyone.

RR: You don't want to know anybody, sometimes. [laughter]

KP: Yes, whereas with your group, you really know what happened to people.

RR: Yes, that's right. Well, we were a very friendly, close-knit group, because of the danger we went through, see. The things we did had very little to do with killing people, you know, no combat. … We were interested in just airplanes. Some people were called type-hunters. In other words, they wanted to fly a different airplane every day and they went around looking for a different one, which is dangerous, too, because you might get a lemon and get killed. [laughter] So, … we were all interested intensely in aviation. Really, we wanted to fly. That was what kept us together. In fact, this fellow that I write to quite frequently, he still, up until this year, when he got really sick, … attended air shows and took part in air shows. … He owns two of his own airplanes that he does loops and aerobatics with in at all these air shows. He owns a Pitt Special, which is a highly aerobatic aircraft, a biplane, and he owns two of them. … He owns a Stearman biplane, which is used as a trainer by the US Navy. He uses that as an aerobatic aircraft, too. He puts dye in the gas tank or something and it shoots out and makes … a smoke trail out the back, you know. … He does these air shows every week, up until this year, when he got sick. … He must be seventy-two or so and he's still at it. He's really a wild sort of an Englishman, I must say, real wild.

JP: How about you? Do you keep up with airplanes? Do you read a lot about them?

RR: Just reading about them, yes. … I just gave up soaring, like I say. I was soaring up until last year. [It was] getting so [that] I couldn't stand the heat, standing out there in the hot sun, waiting for your turn to fly, just too much for me anymore.

KP: It sounds like, if you could have afforded it, you would have very much liked to have owned your own plane.

RR: Oh, yes, definitely, yes.

KP: Your son never served in the military. It sounds like you did not necessarily want him to serve in the military.

RR: Well, he was in … 1-A, you know, all through college. … Then, right away, he got drafted and they sent him in to Newark and he had bad eyes and sent him back again.

KP: He was drafted.

RR: He was drafted, but they rejected him.

KP: Would you have liked your son to have attended either Rutgers or Penn State?

RR: I would have, yes, I would have. He chose otherwise, though. He chose a … small school in New England.

KP: He was the one who picked out his college.

RR: Yes. New England College he went to, in … New Hampshire. He wanted to go away to school and I thought that was a good idea. So, … we managed to scrape enough together to send

him away. He took a student loan out one year, too, which helped, and he paid it back. [laughter]

JP: Your professor said that you could not afford not to go to college. Looking back, do you think he was right?

RR: Yes, I definitely [do], sure. You wouldn't get the opportunities. … You just wouldn't open the door if you didn't have that college degree. Here and there, you feel it, from time-to-time, that the degree helped. You know that it helped.

KP: Is there anything we forgot to ask you about the war, about Rutgers, about what happened afterwards? At the reunions, do as many women pilots come as male pilots?

RR: Do women come to the reunions?

KP: Yes, the women pilots.

RR: Yes, we get several. Ann Wood-[Kelly], up in Massachusetts, she attends quite regularly. She was one of the American girls that was recruited and another girl, Yvonne MacDonald, she's actually an English girl who left England and married an American and came back and she lives in Massachusetts, somewhere by Cape Cod now. She came back for the last reunion, too. Last month, she was over there. I write to her from time-to-time. She was a very nice girl. She has three children … and she's got a sister, Joy, who lives in England, married, and she attends the reunions in England direct. So, they're scattered all around. A lot of the Americans are in Florida and Georgia and Tennessee, California, all around in this area. One, in New York State, lives in a big place on the Hudson River. He owns a pharmaceutical firm of some kind, I think. Another woman, … Jacqueline Cochran, she's the one that recruited all these American girls, Jackie Cochran, she's the one that married … Floyd Odlum, the oil millionaire, and she has a ranch out in Indio, California. They just commemorated her with a stamp. I don't know whether you saw it or not, but it was out … about a month ago, the Jackie Cochrane stamp. So, some of us even get on a postage stamp. We must be getting close to the end of the conversation.

KP: I think so, unless there is something else we forgot to ask.

RR: Well, we couldn't have forgotten much, [laughter] I don't think.

KP: Thank you very much.

JP: Thank you very much.

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

Reviewed by Marc Friedland 4/12/05
Reviewed by Daniel Achatz 4/03/05
Reviewed by Melissa Falk 3/28/06
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 9/14/06

Reviewed by William Roy Reisert 10/1/06