RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ARNOLD SPIELBERG

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

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

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SANDRA STEWART HOLYOAK
and
SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

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TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Mr. Arnold Spielberg on May 12, 2006, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth and …

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: Sandra Stewart Holyoak.

SI: Thank you very much for sitting for this interview today.

Arnold Spielberg: My pleasure.

SI: To begin, could you tell us where and when you were born?

AS: I was born February 6, 1917, in Cincinnati, Ohio.

SH: Could you tell us a little bit about your father and how his family came to settle in Cincinnati, Ohio?

AS: Okay. My father was an orphan, born in the Ukraine, in a little town called Kamenets-Podolski, in the Ukraine. … His parents died, I don't know of what, when he was about two years old and he was raised by his uncle. His uncle's name was Avrahom and his father's name was Meyer Pesach, and so, I became Meyer Pesach Avrahom. So, I was named after both his uncle and his father, okay, and my father came to this country after serving six years in the Russian Army as a conscript. That is usually what happens to people. … Also, when he was raised on his uncle's farm, he rode horses and punched cattle. So, he was sort of a Russian cowboy. [laughter] … When he got out of the service, he became a cattle buyer for the Russian Army, working in Siberia with occasional forays into Manchuria. … When the … Russo-Japanese War started in 1904, he says, "That's enough for me. I'm out of here," and so, he came to the States in 1904. … His older sister had preceded him to Cincinnati, and so, he followed the family and came to Cincinnati to join his sister, who was a wonderful woman, tough as nails, had a Hungarian-style, semi-*kosher* restaurant, in Cincinnati. … Her name [was], we called her Aunt Clara. She had two sons who served in World War I, and I liked them both. … My dad was a real good guy. He had to struggle; to start with, he used to have a pushcart to push around, and then, he even tried a grocery store business, and that didn't work. Then, he went into the dry goods business and that was his field, … up to the time he passed away. That's a quick snapshot of my dad. [laughter]

SH: Could you please tell us about your mother?

AS: My mother was in a little town called Sudilkov, born in Sudilkov, also in the Ukraine, not too far from Kamenets-Podolski. … Apparently, they were betrothed as young people, because, when he came to America in 1904, he had my mother follow him, in somewhere between 1906 and 1907, I'm not sure which. I think I have a transcript from the Mormon Archives [The Church of Latter-Day Saints Family History Library] of the date that she came, but I can't remember right now which [year it was]. It's either … 1906 or 1907. Of course, she came to Cincinnati and, apparently, there were a number of other Jewish families that emigrated and landed in Cincinnati, because my parents started and participated in what they called a *Sudilkovo*

society … [with] people who came from that same little town who also landed in Cincinnati. … My mother was a good cook and a good housewife and my dad was a hard-working man.

SH: Did they bring any other members of their families to this country?

AS: Later on; no. Most of my mother's family immigrated to Israel. Her oldest sister went to Israel and her children and grandchildren are [there, (Rachel, married Nussinoff; Daughter Miriam, (doctor), married Asher Feldman; Daughter Leah Ben Ishai, husband deceased) whom] I've met in one of my trips to Israel. … Then, many years later, my mother's younger brother, who had, by this time, moved to China and was living in Manchuria, at Harbin, came to America, in 1927. So, little by little, the family gathered and they all came to Cincinnati.

SH: Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood years in Cincinnati? You spoke about the community there.

AS: … I grew up in Cincinnati. … Well, I was born in the Bethesda Hospital in Cincinnati, which is on Reading Road, and my parents lived, for a while, in Walnut Hills, and then, moved to Avondale. … Avondale had a large concentration of Jewish families and I lived on a street called Windham Avenue, which is the best street for a kid to ever grow up on. It was steep, so that during the winter, we could ride a sled down the street. At the bottom of the street, it opened up into a park. We had a baseball field there. There were tennis courts at the bottom. There was woods that you'd go hiking in. So, I couldn't think of a better place for a young boy to grow up than a street where eighty-five percent of … the kids there were Jewish and those who weren't were also … friends. … We used to have our own baseball team. We hiked. We played games. It was just a nice street to grow up [on] and I went to Avondale Public School, which was two blocks from where I lived; so, [it was a] nice situation.

SH: Did you also go to a Hebrew school?

AS: Yes, I went to a Hebrew school. It was in an old stone building right next to the public library. That building, subsequently, was torn down and they built a synagogue there, many years later, and then, they built a Hebrew school right across the street from the public school that I went to, Avondale Public School. … I used to step out of the public school [and] into Hebrew school and, of course, I resented it. [laughter]

SI: Were you involved in any youth groups, like any of the Jewish youth groups or the Boy Scouts?

AS: … Yes, I was a Boy Scout and I joined the Jewish Boy Scout troop, which I shouldn't have. I should have joined the general-purpose Scout troop, because it succeeded. The Jewish troop … broke up. So, I worked my way up to a Second Class Scout and had a number of the credits for First Class Scout when the troop broke up, due to lack of response of the kids. They just would rather play out in the street than go to the Scout meetings, but I … really liked Scouting and, many years later, Steven [Mr. Spielberg's son] became a Boy Scout and worked his way all the way up to Eagle Scout, yes. … Is that what you are, an Eagle Scout?

SI: Yes.

AS: Yes. When I was working down in Kentucky, and this [is] jumping ahead, I took training for Scoutmaster … and I was all set to get active in a troop when my draft number came up, and so, I went and enlisted. [laughter]

SI: Reading over your autobiography, it is clear that your interest in radio and in being a ham radio operator was very important in your life. Did that interest begin when you were very young?

AS: Yes. I first became interested in electricity when I was about seven or eight years old. … I remember, I persuaded my parents to buy me an Erector Set and the way I did that was, on my way to school, there was a hardware store and the hardware store had it in a window, the big Erector Set. So, I said, "I've got to play with that." So, I went into the hardware store and talked the boss into letting me build a steam shovel that he could put in the window and, thus, advertise his Erector Set better. So, he fell for it. [laughter] I used to come after school. I would drop by the store, sit in the back and assemble that Erector Set laboriously into one that worked and they put it in the window. I brought my parents up. I said, "Look what I built." They bought me an Erector Set for … Hanukkah, and that was when I was about eight or nine years old, something like that. … The Erector Set had an electric motor and, in the instruction book, it said [that] if you take the motor apart and use a battery, you can make a magnet out of it. So, I used to use a magnet and pick things up and play with needles floating in water, make a compass, and things like that, and so, I got really fascinated with electricity, that and chemistry. I got a chemistry set a couple of years later. So, in manual training [wood shop] in elementary school, I built a chemical workbench, you know, like, with places to put the test tubes and little racks to put all the chemical bottles. So, I transferred everything out of the box [and] into my chemistry lab. I used to make firecrackers and stink bombs and everything that a kid would normally make, and funny … story about that: the kids had decided they'd like to dig a tunnel into the ground and make a cave. I said, "Fellows, let's not dig a tunnel. We'll build an explosive and blow out the ground," [laughter] and so, they say, "Okay." So, I went, chipped in my own money; … in those days, you could buy the makings of gunpowder in the drugstore. So, I bought some potassium nitrate, some sulfur and some powdered charcoal, went to the library, found a book about the ingredients, mixed the ingredients up. In those days, they used to sell Hershey's Chocolates in a tube, little, round chocolate wafers. I took one of those, filled it to the top with gunpowder, sealed it off, put a fuse in it, dug a hole into the ground, stuck it in there. Instead of blowing up, it just fizzed and a huge flame shot out the open [end] and the thing flared out. … I was the laughing stock for a long time, hard to live that one down. [laughter] … My interest in chemistry and science was earned very young. One of my Gentile friend's father was a telegrapher, so, he got me interested in learning the Morse code. … So, early on, I set out to become a ham radio operator. … When I was, … I guess, fourteen or fifteen, I took my first exam, you know, for ham, but the inspector came to town about a weekend before I was anywhere near ready. I figured, … "I applied, so, I guess I'd better take the exam." Well, I flunked terribly. I couldn't get the code right and I was never so embarrassed in my life as when, after taking the test, knowing I didn't do well, he said to me, "What does (QLF?) mean?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "That means, 'Send with your left foot.'" I said, "Did I pass?" He said, "No." So, I went out there and I said, "I'm going to beat this." Well, me and another fellow studied like mad. The

next time we came back to take the test, six months later, we aced it. [laughter] … So, I became a ham radio operator at the age of fifteen-and-a-half, sixteen, yes. So, I built my own transmitter, built my own receiver and was on the air, from there all the way up after the war and up to the time I moved to Arizona. Then, I got too many other things to do; I just let it drop.

SH: What was the most interesting thing that you were able to listen to on your ham radio set?

AS: Mostly talking to other fellows and trying to see how far away I could communicate. I remember, I was very excited when I was able to talk to somebody in Australia. This is all in code. I hadn't yet got a phone transmitter then, and then, one time, a guy in Spain, quite often, people in Canada or California; from Cincinnati, that was a big deal. … I was friends with a guy who was a year older than me in school. He was a nut also for ham radio and I used to go over to his house. He built a big transmitter. So, I used to work with him on that and he later became the chief of police in Cincinnati, yes. … Rather interestingly, I just got a letter from his son, just a few weeks ago, and I've answered him back. So, I'm waiting for a response, because I sent him a picture of his son, I mean, the young man, as a baby, in a baby buggy.

SI: This question may be far-fetched, but, when you spoke with people in other countries, particularly in the 1930s, did you ever hear stories from them that you were not hearing about in the news, anything about life over there?

AS: … No. Ham radio was so canned. "How's your signal, R5X9?" you know what I mean? "What kind of transmitter do you have? What's your receiver? What kind of antenna do you have?" It was almost ninety percent technical when it was overseas, because your communications sometimes only lasted a few minutes, because, then, interference would come in or you'd lose him or he'd fade out. So, it wasn't a case of having a steady conversation, but I will tell you an interesting ham radio experience. You remember H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* and do you remember when what's his name, the actor that put it on on the radio?

SH: Orson Welles?

AS: Orson Welles. During the time that that was being broadcast, I was, at that time, living in Kentucky and I was on my ham radio and I was talking to a friend in Cleveland and, [at] this time, we had a lot of long conversations. There's a telephone call in our house. My cousin, who I was staying with, picks up the phone, says, "It's for you." So, I answered the phone. The guy says, "Get off the air. You're interfering with my reception. The Martians are coming," you know. I'm not even listening to *The War of the Worlds*. My cousins were listening to it in the living room. I said, "Well, what's the problem?" He said, "Just get off the air." So, [in the] meantime, I went back to my receiver and the guy I was talking to says, "You know, … I just got a call from my aunt in St. Louis. She wants to know if the Martians have got to Cleveland yet," [laughter] and, at that point, another man came on the net and said, "Everybody, please get off the air, because there's some sort of catastrophe in New Jersey," and so, I got off the air. Two weeks later, when I went to get a haircut, the barber says, "I was the one that called you up. I apologize." [laughter] So, that's a ham radio experience for you.

SI: I have heard some stories from people in New Jersey about the hysteria. The Martians landed in the Princeton Junction area [in Orson Welles' radio play].

AS: That's right.

SI: It spread to the Midwest quickly.

AS: Oh, yes. Did you know about that?

SH: We have heard about it through some of these stories.

AS: Yes, yes.

SI: How did the Great Depression affect your neighborhood?

AS: Well, we, of course, were always struggling as far as money was concerned. My father, somehow or other, always managed to bring home enough money and food, you know, to keep us going. The Depression affected us … to the extent that my parents didn't have the money to send me to college. I missed a scholarship by having an eighty-nine average instead of a ninety average. My brother, who came two years … later, he was real tops and he won a scholarship to MIT, which we couldn't afford to send him to. So, he went to the University of Cincinnati and traded the MIT scholarship to the next guy in line, but I went to work … instead of going to college, and I wanted to go to college. … I didn't realize that I could go to a Jewish agency and probably get a scholarship, because my grades were good. I had the highest grades in math in my high school, … and in science, but my English and Spanish were not as good, so, I didn't quite make a ninety average, yes, but the science and math were always good, yes.

SI: Did you find that the level of study in high school was up to your own level in math and the sciences?

AS: Oh, yes. I think it was challenging, yes. … As a matter-of-fact, I thought, in grammar school, that we had a lot better training than the kids get now, because you couldn't get out of seventh grade unless you passed a grammar exam, and it was a nice, stiff grammar exam. … The school I went to was a good school and the teachers were dedicated. So, I have absolutely no argument about the kind of education I received. … It was just broad and good. … I didn't go to the best high school in Cincinnati, because you had to have an A grade and I came out with a B+. So, I wasn't eligible to go to Walnut Hills High. So, I went to Hughes High, which is also a good school.

SH: Were you taught Hebrew and Russian by your family or only English?

AS: My parents spoke Russian to each other as a hidden language, as a secret language, so that I wasn't supposed to learn it. I picked up very little Yiddish from my family, although they talked a little Yiddish. My parents both tried to talk English a lot and my mother went through much more schooling than my father. My father, because of [being] an orphan, he probably went through about the equivalent of fifth or sixth grade. Then, he was working on the farm. My

mother went through high school in Russia and she was quite well-read and my dad was a good-hearted guy, a good guy, and he picked up what you might call "a natural beat of how to get along." … I learned Yiddish and a little Russian in Kentucky, because I lived with my cousins and they were very well-educated. My oldest cousin spoke Hebrew, Yiddish, English and Russian. We used to sit around the kitchen table after supper and have tea. He would read from the Russian classics and translate for me, you know, in … both English and Yiddish. I didn't need the Yiddish, but he was just doing it to educate me, which was nice. … His sister was a med student at the University of Cincinnati and she taught me more of [the] classics and Russian songs. So, I learned a whole bunch of Russian songs. … She finally started suffering from asthma and she … was getting ready to drop out of school. I even wrote one of her papers for her, yes, on the Siberian tribes of the Shamans, you know. … I read up on it and read the paper for her and she got a C in it. So, I wasn't so good. [laughter]

SH: You tried to help.

AS: I tried, yes. I was just out of high school then.

SI: Was your family aware of the Zionist movement?

AS: Oh, yes, yes. My parents used to get letters from their relatives in Russia and they were often couched in innuendoes, like, one letter said, "We're living very comfortably, only sixteen to a room." Yes, the message was there, you know, and many of my relatives were killed by the Germans who invaded Russia, yes. I don't know their names. I've got some pictures in my collection of family pictures that are of the people who died in the Holocaust. … I have no family in Germany, so, whoever was killed was killed when the Germans invaded Russia. … There was some terrible slaughter in the Ukraine, yes, including the town of Sudilkov, … where my mother lived, yes, we were aware.

SH: In Kentucky?

AS: Yes, in my cousin's department store. … I worked my way up to become a manager of one of the stores. I liked it and I didn't like it. I'd rather have been an engineer, but, since I worked in that business, I decided to learn it. So, I learned it pretty well. My cousin was very well aware. In 1936, he took a trip to Russia to meet some relatives and he came back with a solid feeling of the Communist regime at that time in Russia. At that time, it was "enthusiastic Communism," if you know what I mean. Young people were excited about the new changes and things like that. He came back; he said, "It's a mess." He says, "It's a mess there." His cousin, no, it's his uncle, was there and, I remember, he wanted to send a telegram home to say that he had arrived safely in Kiev and everything was okay. So, they're standing in a big, long line to the one telegraph station in Kiev, a town of about a million people at that time. … The man behind the counter is handling one at a time, slowly. So, my cousin's uncle goes to the front and steps behind the counter and assists him in processing the telegrams. "Oh, Comrade, thanks for helping," you know. At the time my cousin came up to send the telegram, he processed it, you know, hands it to the guy and leaves. He said, "Hey, (Tovarich?), stick around." [laughter] … He says, "I did my job." The telegram comes to Kentucky and the telegrapher was a friend of mine, calls me up, says, "Arnold, I got this strange telegram in Russian. It's addressed to the

family." I said, "What does it say?" It says, "(Pasha redila sinna?)," which is, "Pasha gave birth to a son." So, we're thinking, "Why would Max send a telegram saying, 'Pasha redila sinna?'" We finally figured, "Ah, somebody gave birth to a son; he [Max] arrived safely." That's exactly what the telegram was meant to say, only it got confused with somebody else's telegram. [laughter] That was an example of the confusion in Russia in 1936 and I don't think it's changed very much.

SI: How aware were you of what was going on, for example, in Germany during the rise of Hitler to power and Mussolini's activities in Italy?

AS: … You know, I was in India during that time; … well, during the beginning …

SI: In the 1930s.

AS: In the '30s, yes, I knew what was going on, mostly because of [the fact that] my cousins subscribed to a lot of [magazines], *Time*, *Fortune*. We got a lot of input then, but nothing about the Holocaust. That was unknown, really, except [for] the letters we got from relatives, and then, they stopped coming, you know. So, it was almost implied information. When I was in India, I found nothing about it. I knew nothing about the Holocaust, you know. Our communication was the *Yank*, the *CBI Roundup*, and a local thing for our squadron and that was it, and I had a good radio receiver. I used to listen to as much [of the] BBC broadcasts [as I could], but they didn't say very much and I was too busy doing my job to really listen, a lot.

SH: Did you register for the draft or did you enlist?

AS: … You had to register for the draft and I had a low draft number, but I received a deferment because … my brother and I were supporting our parents. My father had taken sick and he was off of work for about a year. So, we were sending what little we earned home. I got a 3-A deferment. As soon as the US got in the war, my 3-A changed to 1-A and, since I had a low number, I knew the draft board would come after me any day. So, I said, "I'd better enlist in the service I want." So, I said good-bye to Lerman Brothers, the company I was working for, and went back to Cincinnati. … I went up to Dayton, to Wright Field, to think about enlisting in the Air Corps, but, since they … said they couldn't guarantee me communications, I came back and enlisted in the Signal Corps, because … I was a ham, a radio operator. That's my area. So, I enlisted in the Signal Corps. When I enlisted in the Signal Corps, I enlisted in January of 1942. So, it was just a month after we got in the war and I was sent to Fort Thomas, Kentucky, and, was processed through there, spent a week in Louisville, and then I was sent down to New Orleans. That was a great place to go, because I was on the lake, Pontchartrain, in the New Orleans Army Air Force Base, in the signal company attached to an A-20 squadron of attack fighter planes. It was so confusing then. They didn't know what to do with us. I already had more code training than they could give you, and so, I ended up drilling recruits. I was a private, so were they, but I was in the Army one month longer than the kids from New York. So, they said, "You are an acting corporal now. Take these guys out and give them some basic training." I'd barely learned it myself. … I'd say, "Fellows, take your gas masks along. Bring your field handbook." We would march down to the lake. I'd post one guy to look for the officer and we'd sit there and goof off, and then, … somebody'd say, "Hey, somebody's coming." "Pick up the

masks," and we would start to have a gas mask drill, yes, but the good things I did there was to teach the recruits Morse code. Well, most of the guys didn't want to copy code. They were just, … you know, a bunch of New York tough guys. … So, I would send dirty stories and that got their attention, and so, they learned code pretty well, yes. [laughter] You have to progress. You train one way or train another way.

SH: The mark of a good teacher.

AS: [laughter] Yes, right.

SI: Before we get too far along in your military career, do you remember where you were when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

AS: Yes. I was in a concert at Music Hall in Cincinnati and I came out and there were people hollering, "Extra," you know, "Japan Bombs Pearl Harbor." I knew that and I knew, "Boy, that's it. We're in."

SH: Living in the Midwest, what were you hearing about the war, the invasion of Poland, the Battle of Britain, lend-lease, etc., before Pearl Harbor? Were you hearing a lot about it or was it pretty distant?

AS: Oh, I'll tell you, most of our conversation within our family was about Hitler and his terror to the Jews. We were well aware. My cousins were quite erudite and very politically-oriented. … Early, before World War II, when the Japanese invaded China, since my cousins had all come from China, actually, Russia to China to America, they were incensed that the US had not gone in and stopped the Japanese when they could have in 1926 and '27, because that's when they could have gone in there and said, "Stop." … They were so mad at the Secretary of State. I can't remember who he was at that time, but I remember my uncle saying, "What's the matter with the United States? Why aren't they in there stopping the Japanese? Don't they realize … it's going to be a big war?" They smelled the war coming from day one, yes. So, yes, we were very conscious of what was coming up, primarily through the fact that their family was well-read, and I got a lot of coaching. [laughter]

SH: It was being discussed in the Midwest.

AS: Oh, yes; well, being discussed among us. [laughter]

SH: Were there any isolationists?

AS: In our community? That was a small town, with five thousand [in] population, down in Kentucky and there was very little mention about war, yes, really. As long as we were not in it, [the big issues were], "What was the price of tobacco? What price are sheep bringing?" Cynthiana, Kentucky, was in Harrison County, a good county for raising sheep, a wonderful county for raising tobacco. That was the two industries down there and that occupied the farmers' attention, yes. …

SI: How large was the Jewish community in that town? Was there much of a Jewish community?

AS: There was our family. Another family had a small department store, and his son was a ham radio operator. So, he and I became friends and we were written up in the paper as … Cynthiana's two ham radio operators. So, we got some publicity. Also, in 1937, the Ohio River flooded higher than it ever had been. It reached a flood level of forty-two feet, which means it flooded all the way up to my father's store. It flooded the basement of his store and that was up three streets, up a steep slope from the Ohio River. Our store in Frankfort, Kentucky, had three feet of water in it. I was sent there to help straighten it out. I was on the air as a ham radio [operator], carrying messages a lot for relief. So, there was a lot of action to try to handle the flood, because not only the Ohio River flooded, but several of the rivers, the Licking River, the Kentucky River, that flowed into the Ohio, also overflowed. In Cynthiana, the river almost reached the level of the covered bridge. We had a beautiful covered bridge there and it didn't wash it away. So, I had a lot of ham radio communication, … conveying messages and help … through relay stations, to try to assist in the flood effort.

SI: Where were these messages being sent?

AS: To families that were in trouble, you know, and something like that. I acted as a relay.

SI: Were you relaying messages for the Red Cross or any other relief organizations?

AS: … I don't think I put anything to the Red Cross, mostly to families, family transmissions, communications, but I did have experience in helping clean up a flooded area, yes.

SH: Shall we go back to Louisiana, to New Orleans, and the intense training?

AS: Oh, yes. Well, you know, the … best time I had in New Orleans was going on leave every weekend. I met a Jewish family at the USO [United Services Organization], a doctor's wife with two children, and they invited me to their home every time I had a pass. They were wealthy people. They had black servants who wore white gloves and I sat down to dinner at a magnificent table. I felt like I had a real lucky break and they were very nice people, Dr. and Mrs. Sternberg, I remember their names. Her birthday was exactly my birthday. She was ten years older than me. She used to play the piano after dinner. So, I really had sort of a second, junior home back there in New Orleans. … Plus, every time I saved up any money, I'd go eat at Arnaud's or Antoine's, yes, have a good meal, yes, because Army chow isn't that great. [laughter]

SH: Did you ever pull KP?

AS: Yes, sure, I had my turn, yes, but it didn't bother me.

SH: Being from Cincinnati, were you shocked by race relations in the Deep South?

AS: In that city? Well, you know, when I went from Cincinnati across the Mason-Dixon Line, … the Ohio River to Kentucky, and started working, I was sixteen years old. I was still a junior in high school. I went to work there for the summer. Then, I came back to finish high school. Then, I came right back down again after high school. The kids down there, did not accept me for about two years, because I was a Yankee. But, then, little by little, I became friends with them. … The way I got to be friends with them is [by] learning how to drink, only since I couldn't drink very well, you know, I mean, I never drank whiskey, we'd go out on a Saturday night, to a roadhouse, out of the city limits. Everybody'd get drunk and I'd sit and hold a bottle to my lip and pretend to drink. … I ended up carrying the drunken kids home, help them home, and, of course, I became more like one of them. So, that's how you get acquainted, yes, and I dated some of the girls down there, yes. That was kind of nice.

SH: Where were you sent from New Orleans?

AS: … While I was in New Orleans, I applied for Officer Candidate School and my papers started to be processed, but nothing happened. … Then, when they needed overseas people, and since I already knew how to send code and I knew something about how the transmitters and receivers worked, they sent me to St. Louis, to Jefferson Barracks, as Air Corps, unassigned, for overseas shipment and to be hardened up for overseas travel. Well, in two weeks' time, I think they wore everybody down to a nub, you know. I'd go out for … bayonet practice and rifle training and [we would be] standing in a line for hours, at three o'clock in the morning, to get issued a Tommy gun with no ammo, and I think I was worn out. … Then, from there, we got on a train, went to Charleston, South Carolina, spent a couple days there and boarded the *Santa Paula* troopship, which was a "banana boat" run by the Grace Lines, and to go we didn't know where. We had no idea where we were going.

SH: Were you alone?

AS: Oh, [there were] about twenty-five hundred men on the *Santa Paula*.

SH: I meant was the *Santa Paula* alone.

AS: No. We were in a convoy of, I don't know how many ships, but there were the [HMS] *Rodney* and the [HMS] *Nelson*, two battleships, six destroyers and … two troopships, the *Santa Paula*, and then, the Matson Line *Mariposa*, which is about twice as big, with about five or six thousand troops. We had about three thousand on[board] and we took sixty days to cross from Charleston, stopped a day in Bermuda, went across to Freetown and Sierra Leone, around the Cape, stopped at Durban, and we got a day off the ship. I came back with a bottle of Johannesburg Riesling hidden in a bag of oranges, so [that] they wouldn't see it. … When we boarded the ship, there's a nice story, … since we had no rank and we weren't even part of a company, we're Air Corps, unassigned, they sent us down into the hold. … Going up the gangplank, we passed through the first class area. There was a number of empty cabins. After we got down to the hold, another fellow and I left our barracks bag on these three-by-six slabs. We went back up … to the first class deck. I went into the cabin, locked the door. … There were twelve bunks in the cabin. They were stacked like that. He went down and got some of our buddies, came back up. We locked the door again and people pounded on the door. We didn't

answer. The ship set sail and, after that, nobody bothered us. [laughter] So, we had a cabin. … You know, for the first six days, we actually had freshwater, until they realized they were going to run out of water. So, we used to take a bath by [having] two people [who] took a bath [together]. We flipped a coin [to see] who gets in first. [laughter] Yes, and then, after that, it was saltwater showers, except we learned how to take a freshwater shower with the water just in your helmet. You learned how to do that.

SH: Were there any training sessions on the ship?

AS: There was no training whatsoever. We were served two meals a day. As we approached Freetown, after about twenty-five, thirty days on the water, the food was, by that time, moldy food. … We had corned beef hash, you know, and stuff like that, oatmeal for breakfast, and only two meals a day. It got kind of rancid, and people were getting sick, especially going around the Cape, or that was later, but, when we approached Freetown, one of the guys took sick and literally died. So, they took him to … a hospital ship, which was in the harbor at Freetown, and I remember copying, along with a couple of other guys, the signal flashes that [signaled that] Private So-and-So died on this … hospital ship. … That same night, there were twelve women on the ship, they were [the] wives of the oil workers in Saudi Arabia and they were going to go back to their husbands, they [the officers and the oil workers' wives] had a dance up in the ballroom. … The fellows [enlisted men] went to the fantail, took garbage and hurled it in and broke up the dance. Everybody says, "Get up on deck. We're going to settle this." So, a whole gang of fellows came up on deck and, of course, none of us had ammunition. We weren't going to shoot anybody anyway. We just wanted to raise a complaint. Well, the commanding officer of the ship was a colonel who was drunk all the time, [which we knew] because his orderly was one of our friends, and he come out there, half weaving. He said, "This is sedition. You men could be shot for this," [Mr. Spielberg imitates the colonel's slurred speech], you know, and then, the chaplain came out and said, "What's the problem, fellows?" "Well, we're only getting two meals a day. The bread is moldy and the food's no good. The officers eat in a small mess. The Filipino mess boys bring the food down to them. They have good food and we're getting junk." They said, "We'll fix it." For two days, we had ice cream, we had three meals a day, and then, it went back to two meals again, but the riot was broken up, yes.

SH: Was this ship commanded by …

AS: It was a Grace Line boat. … He [the colonel] was a military commander of the troops. The actual ship itself was run by Merchant Marines, yes.

SI: That story really demonstrates how enlisted men had one existence in the military and the officers lived in a whole different world.

AS: Yes, except when you're fighting. Once we got into a squadron, rank made very little difference, just occasionally, but a combat crew, pilot, co-pilot, navigator, were all officers; the flight engineer, radioman and gunners were all enlisted men. They were buddies. They had to be. They had to fight together as a crew. … My brother, who was a flight engineer on a B-29, he still has meetings with his former crewmates, you know. Some of them have passed away. I, in turn, go to a 490th Bomb Squadron reunion every year. … This October, I'm going to

Lexington, Kentucky, for a reunion, and Steven's coming with me, yes, and we're going to stop by and see the town where I used to work in. …

SI: However, in the States, there was a clear officer class separate from the enlisted men.

AS: Oh, yes. Well, you know, when you're an enlisted man, you've got to have discipline. You're going to try to take guys that are not necessarily militarily trained and, … you know, your life and their life depend on cooperation and obedience and obeying orders without question. That's the military code.

SH: When you pulled into these different ports, were you allowed any time off the ship?

AS: Only at Durban.

SH: Only at Durban?

AS: Yes. … We didn't even go into port in Freetown. We stood out in the harbor, yes, … I think while we collected some more of our convoy. … During that convoy, [the period when the convoy crossed], that was the worst sinkings of the war, in May and June of '42, the heaviest sinkings. We had six submarine scares during the trip and, during that time, the destroyers would circle the convoy and put down a smokescreen, to make sure that no periscope could spot us. … We all had to come up on deck to our lifeboats, we all were assigned lifeboats, put on your life vest … and stand there until the all-clear was sounded, then, go back to your duties, which were usually nothing, you know. No, duties were guard and KP. … Since there's three thousand people, they guard every three feet of the ship, you know. … I used to sneak up to the top deck and sit on the top deck and just try to get away from everybody and I was caught sun bathing. So, I got put in the brig, because you weren't allowed to sunbathe. [The military] didn't want anybody to get sick, but the officer came and bailed me out after a couple of hours, yes, but that didn't bother me.

SH: Had you volunteered to do anything other than just ride it out?

AS: You mean right now?

SH: No, when you were onboard the ship. Did you try to help with the communications?

AS: No. … I did go up, one time, to see the radio equipment, but … you weren't allowed to go in there, because it was under the command of the Merchant Marine, yes. … What I did do is, I wrote a story of getting onboard, … you know, of standing in line to wait to board the ship, boarding the ship, my impressions of the troops, my impressions of the mess, how I got the cabin. That whole thing, I wrote up in about thirty pages and I've got it typed up at home somewhere.

SH: How long were you in Charleston before you boarded the ship?

AS: … About four days, yes, just collecting a group, and … we knew we were going somewhere.

SH: When did you know that you were not going to North Africa, that you were going to India?

AS: … When we landed in Karachi; no, I know, when we got to Durban. I knew pretty well that we weren't … going to go to any place in North Africa, because we were around the Cape. As we ran around the Cape, the waves were terrible. The ship was just going like that, yes, but, somehow, I never get seasick, never. I just weathered it. …

SI: Were you eager to get into some sort of combat role or towards the front? What was your mindset at that time?

AS: Well, when I landed in Karachi, Air Corps, unassigned, they sent me, along with several other guys, to downtown Karachi, to a place called the Karachi Classification Depot. … We bunked at a Muslim hostel called the Leslie Wilson Muslim Hostel. Our job was to go to the classification depot, open up boxes of parts and equipment, [which] were carefully packed in America with metal foil, to keep moisture out and all that, look at the parts, open up a tech manual, try to figure out what the part was, assign it to a plane, and then, repack it and ship it to China or to the area … [that was currently] the combat zone. … I looked at that stuff; I knew nothing about airplanes. I'm a radioman, and so, … finally, I said, "I can't classify this stuff." So, I volunteered to type up the invoices. Well, I type like this, you know what I mean? [Mr. Spielberg demonstrates his two-finger style of typing.] [laughter] So, the invoices were stacked this high. … I finally got so disgusted, I found out that there was a B-25 squadron forming out in the desert outside of Karachi. So, I asked my CO, commanding officer, if I could volunteer and interview with them, see if they wanted a radioman. [I said], "After all, I'm a radioman." He said, "Well, if you want to give up this cushy job, go ahead." So, I went out there and there were two other radiomen in the squadron. They were just forming. They said, "Sure, we'll be glad to take you." So, they applied for me, but the paperwork got screwed up, as usual, and I got transferred to a fighter squadron. [laughter] I went to the CO, "No, I don't want to go to the fighter squadron. I want to fly combat. I'll fly as a radioman. I'll get my fifty missions in. I'll go home." He said, "Okay. … We'll cancel this thing and you'll go to the bomb squadron," and, sure enough, I did and that was the best thing I ever did. I enjoyed the work; I rose to be the communications chief, you know. So, it was all together up, you know, as far as I was concerned. I wanted to fly combat, until they found out I could fix radios, and then, they said, "You're grounded."

SH: Really?

AS: Yes. So, the whole time I was in India, I only flew two missions and that was when the Japanese had attacked India through Imphal, … [in the] northeast corner of India. The Japanese had surrounded the British and Gurkha troops fighting up there and our squadron was taken off of bombing and pressed into service … flying in there with supplies and ammo and taking out the wounded.

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

SI: This is side two of tape one. Since you were one of the earliest Americans in the CBI, what were your impressions of the American presence in India?

AS: Yes, okay. In Karachi, of course, it was rather quiet, because … that was out of the war zone. It was a staging area to bring in troops; it was a staging area for supplies as well. [That is] why I worked in the classification depot. It wasn't anything like it is now, because it was India [then], not Pakistan. … I had a pair of shoes made to order for me. I had clothes made to order, you know what I mean? It was cheap as dirt then and I used to go to the gardens, bicycle around, … on the times I had off, on weekends. The Leslie Muslim Hostel, where I lived, was kind of a nice place. We stayed … not in tents but in real barracks, you know, things like that. So, it was really an easy job. You couldn't have asked for a nicer [posting]. We used to go to restaurants and have nice meals and things like that. I learned to eat Chinese food there, yes, and I liked Indian food, so, I managed to do that. Every time we'd open a box that had some motion picture film, sixteen-mill [millimeter] film, I'd steal a few and a friend had a sixteen-millimeter movie camera. So, I'd give him a roll and I'd have a roll for the use of the camera. … I took six rolls of film and that'd be … almost a half-hour's worth of film and I would give it to the censor and it would disappear. The last roll, I said, "I'm worried about this. I'm not hearing anything." I met a pilot who was flying back to the States. I handed him the roll of film, "Take this back with you and mail it in the States," and he did and it went through the censors in the States. … Of course, it was passed. It showed up at my mother's house and it shows a nice picture of me bicycling around Karachi, cleaning my Tommy gun, driving a jeep, you know, innocent-type stuff. That's the only film I have of me in India, yes, and Steven has it.

SH: This was a movie, not just stills.

AS: Yes, a movie, yes. Oh, I took lots of still pictures. When I was in Calcutta, I bought a real good … double extension bellows, a German camera, a Voigtlander, with a good shutter, and I took lots of pictures. They were nine-by-twelve centimeters. It was hard to get film, but you could buy it in Calcutta. … Then, I wanted to try to get into the photographer's lab, which was air-conditioned, but they wouldn't let me, because they only did military work there. So, they had a little lab set up [for recreational use] and most of my pictures came out grainy, because I was developing them at temperatures of 100, 105, 110. That makes … the films grainy, but, still, I have some pretty good pictures I took, still pictures, in India.

SH: At that time, it must have been very interesting, because so much has changed.

AS: Yes. As a matter-of-fact, just jumping ahead, … the second time the squadron was relocated, was a town called Kurmitola. At Kurmitola, we had just an airstrip and a village with scrubby pineapple growing in the field nearby. My brother's son is [with] UNESCO, [United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization], in charge of children's problems, in the world, and he was in Bangladesh recently. He went to Dacca [or Dhaka] and he went down to Kurmitola, where I was stationed. He says Kurmitola is a thriving city and it's the international airport for Bangladesh and that was the extension of our runway, yes. [laughter] … What was your question again, my impression of India?

SI: Yes, and the American presence, which was building up at that time, but it does not seem as though it was that large when you first got there.

AS: … No, it wasn't. The British were primarily there. … More and more, as the war progressed, as Gandhi's influence, of passive resistance came into being, there were signs that used to say, "British, Quit India," then, [they] said, "British and Americans, Quit India," you know. In other words, they didn't want us there, and there was a man, Subhash Chandra Bose, who was an Indian, who was in favor of the Japanese taking over, … yes, and there was a big battle and, finally, he was jailed. Yes, so, the Japanese had influence.

SH: Was there a British military presence as well there?

AS: Well, we had Gurkha guards and, nearby our Kermitola base, there was a small British base. As a matter-of-fact, when I needed wire, we'd go and steal it from the British. [laughter] … You scrounge whatever you could, yes.

SI: Did you feel as though you were well-supplied? You were kind of at the end of the American supply chain.

AS: Boy, you're not kidding. [laughter] … We got good rations. Of course, … the Indians revere cattle. You don't kill cattle. An Indian doesn't eat a cow. The Muslims don't eat a pig. So, it was a problem. We had a lot of pork, because there wasn't that many [Muslims in the area], although my bearer was Muslim. I had a young bearer, [who] was a handsome, young kid, and I started teaching him algebra. I said, "You've got to learn. You've got to get along in this world, so, why don't you [learn]?" I used to teach him algebra, [laughter] yes, for the hell of it, you know. … A bearer was cheap. … A good bearer, you paid thirty *rupees* a month. He would take your clothes, press your clothes, … sweep up; he wouldn't sweep. He'd hire a sweeper, who was … the lowest caste. The caste system was still rampant in India; it still is, I think. … So, that was okay. You want to hire a bearer, pay some of the thirty *rupees* out? Okay, you'd give him a couple of *annas*, you know, sixteen *annas* to a *rupee*. … So, [to answer] your, call it the question about America and [the] British both, as the Indians began to resent [us], even though we were protecting India, even though the Battle of Imphal was an attempt to keep the Japanese from invading India, there was still a resentment of, "We don't want you here." You could guarantee that's exactly how the Iraqis feel. [Mr. Spielberg is referring to the occupation of Iraq by a US-led coalition following the 2003 War in Iraq.] "We don't want you here. We'll take care of our own affairs." … Pardon me for putting this in, but we had no business being in Iraq, yes, and you could almost smell it, in India. Here we are, in India, for the purpose of defeating the Japanese and helping the Indians retain their independence; or, actually, they eventually became independent of Britain, so, they were a colony, too, at that time. So, if you think about it, they already felt occupied. Now, you add another occupier called "Americans," it doubles the occupancy. … Of course, during the course of being in Kermitola, about ninety percent of our soldiers got malaria, me too, and I landed in the British hospital in Dacca and was unconscious for about two days and shivering, and then feverish. They had no Atabrine in those days. … I got malaria early enough that they just used quinine, which was effective, yes, and I got over it and never had a reoccurrence. I'm so lucky. Many people [who] get malaria have periodic reoccurrences; I never had anything, nothing, done.

SH: Did you receive good treatment in the hospital?

AS: Oh, yes.

SH: It was well-supplied.

AS: Yes, yes. Well, we had British nurses, you know, sisters. … I had a bed right next to a Welshman who had just been wounded in Burma and brought back. The British took a lot bigger beating than we did and it's because they were on the ground, fighting the Japanese in Burma, and he said to me, "(*Hast had da bra*?)?" In other words, … "Hast had the brass?" or, "Have you been paid?" [laughter] "No," and that was the expression, "*Hast had da bra*? [laughter] You learn all sorts of nice dialects. … Most of us learned a lot of Hindi words, you know, mostly words about orders, "*Jaldi*," "Hurry up," "*Inderow*," "Come here," "*Jaldi carow*," means, "Hurry up," you know, *Pannie Lowe*," "Bring food."

SH: Were you struck by the poverty there?

AS: Oh, yes. … The first time I visited Calcutta from Ondal; that was the first place the 490th was stationed, when our squadron left Karachi and got ready to go into combat. Their first station was a little town, a coalmining town, called Ondal. It was about ten miles from a bigger town called (Assansol?) and, there, they had a British officers' club, but, in Ondal, the people were dark, black, and the women were running around bare-breasted. … The GIs were ogling them so much that, two weeks later, they were back covered up again, [laughter] but there was terrible poverty in Ondal, really bad. … We bombed from there and the squadron would take off from Ondal, do a bombing mission in Burma, but the B-25s didn't have enough gas to get back. So, they would stop in a coastal town called Chittagong, refuel, reload bombs, and, take on another mission, and then, come back to our base. Well, that took three days, so, many of us ground guys, we just took off and went to Calcutta, without permission, you know. … I'll never forget, I was there with an Irish guy named Murphy and he's dancing on the floor … in the Grand Hotel in Calcutta. An officer dances by with another woman. He says, "Murphy, what are you doing here?" He says, "Same thing you are, Lieutenant: fucking off." [laughter] … That's the first time I'd ever been to Calcutta and it was in the middle of a famine. There were dead people in the streets. It was really sad, yes, because, when there was a famine in India, the people from the country came to the city looking for food. It wasn't fun, no.

SH: Was there any sort of humanitarian aid coming in? Was the military trying to help by providing food?

AS: Well, not that I know. For example, at our squadron, we ate out of mess kits, and we used to take our mess kit out; if we didn't like the food, the Indians would stand along the line, holding out their *dothiss*, we'd dump the food in. They'd wrap it up and run back to give it to their family. … The buzzards would swamp down and grab the food out of your mess kit, too, if you weren't careful. They were the scavengers. They scavenged India.

SI: Were you ever instructed by the military in how to act in India, what to do, what not to do?

AS: Yes, yes, we had occasional training of behavior, and [we were told to] keep a presence and don't mess around with the women, because you'll get a disease, and a lot of guys did. … We had lectures by the chaplain, lectures by the medical staff, you know, of how to take care of yourself, yes.

SI: Was there anything about what we would call today …

AS: Etiquette, you mean?

SI: … "Cultural sensitivity," that sort of thing?

AS: Not in that sense, no, but there are some kids [who] just have a nature to integrate. There was a young guy there who refused to dress up in clothes. He wore shorts and … nothing above the waist. … He got so integrated in the little town of Kermitola that they made him a member of the town council. … He was a preacher's son, so, he had that [background]. He was trained to integrate with people and … he felt so bad for the poor people in Kermitola that he used to go in there and help them, … sneak food in, sneak it like that. So, that was a personal thing on his part.

SH: You said that there was no fraternization with the women, but were you also told to be careful of certain things?

AS: Oh, yes, food, you mean?

SH: Or security.

AS: Oh, lots of security.

SH: Was there any sabotage or black market activity?

AS: … We were cautioned about leaving weapons unattended, because there were *dacoits*. *Dacoits* were the criminal group in India that could sneak into a barracks and just steal your stuff. … We had a few *dacoits* attacks, you know. They would sneak in, steal some weapons, but not very much, and we had Gurkha guards and Indian guards, but mostly Gurkhas. The Gurkhas are tough fighters. If you asked them to show you their *khukuri*, that big, curved knife, they always cut themselves a little bit before they hand it to you, because they're not supposed to draw the *khukuri* until they use it; yes, interesting custom.

SH: Did you eat with them? Were you housed with them?

AS: No, no, they always went to their own area, but … we all were allowed to have bearers or servants. They worked in the mess halls, helped with the cooking, helped with some serving. In our squadron, we had a good squadron. It was a well-organized squadron. It was highly productive. We were known as the "Burma Bridge Busters," the 490th Bomb Squadron. General [Howard C.] Davidson called us, "Bridge Busters," because our squadron, first of all,

invented a way to drop our bombs in a combination of skip and dive, a bomb that would hit the bridge instead of jumping over it. … So, we ended up, after accidentally discovering that method, which I will describe in a minute, … destroying close to two hundred bridges in the course of our service and that … really crippled the Japanese movement. … There were only two foreign [non-British?] bomb squadrons in India. Our group had four bomb squadrons, each allotted sixteen aircraft. Two of them immediately went to China. Ours was stationed in Kermitola, and then, later, in Assam. The other was stationed in nearby Chakulia, the 491st Bomb Squadron, we were the 490th, and they were also quite productive, if you call "productive" destroying things. [laughter] … We had a good reputation and my communications group did an excellent job. I had two other ham radio operators with me. Between the three of us, we fixed almost anything. We did more than first-echelon maintenance, which is "remove and replace." We actually repaired things when we couldn't get parts. I was in charge of making sure that the squadron projector worked, because, somehow or other, they thought I could fix it. So, I used to fix it. It used to breakdown a lot and I'd fix the projector, because we had to have movies every week. … Of course, when there was a danger of an air raid, you'd shut down the projector and jump in a slit trench. …

SH: How often did you have air raids?

AS: Never had a red alert; yellow alerts, which means they're close by, but never a red alert. They were always driven off. Now, that's as far as when I was there. Subsequently, when the squadron left Assam and moved into Burma, they had real air raids, but I came so early that my two-and-a-half years were up in November of '44. So, I came home through Bombay, yes. I completed my trip around the world, yes. [laughter]

SI: Can we get into your day-to-day activities at the base, both in Malir and Ondal? What were you doing every day?

AS: Well, in Malir, the squadron had just formed. They only had a couple of planes, and so, for a while, I would man the tower and, assist the planes during take-off when they went on missions and see them to safe landings and stuff like that. It was almost a token [effort], because there were only two or three planes. There isn't much activity, yes, but, at that point in time, I tried to get some training in, … where the planes were always planning low-level flights. So, I got [in] a few flights where I'd sit in the turret to run the .50-caliber machine gun, but not very often, because I was too busy with communications. … I later found out, later on, … my communications officer said, "You're staying on the ground. You know too much about radio to become a flying radioman." At Malir, we had cryptographic work, just training, mostly, because we had very few classified messages to send, but we had a small activity. … There was originally two radiomen, a sergeant and a corporal, and I was the third one. … Then, another shipload came in and we got a number of other privates, that we started training, and put to use, and then, when the squadron was finally ordered to go east, get into the combat area, I stayed behind with four other guys from different activities to make sure the equipment, the ground equipment, was all shipped, packed and shipped properly. We stayed behind about a month … after the squadron had already moved to Ondal and we just saw to it that everything got packed up and, classified documents that were not needed were destroyed. Then, we boarded a troop train to go to [the east]; we had ten days to get from Karachi to Ondal. As soon as we get on the

troop train, we got off and we waited for the Delhi Mail and got on the Delhi Mail, … told the conductor, "The officer in the back has our tickets." Then, we rode from there to New Delhi. We spent a couple of days in New Delhi, touring the old fort area. Oh, before that, we went to Lahore … and went to [the] Shalimar Gardens up there, and then, from Lahore, we continued on the next Delhi Mail to New Delhi, and then, we spent a couple of days in New Delhi, and then, we went to Agra and spent a couple of days seeing the Taj Mahal. … We used up our ten days to get into Assansol on a first-class train. No one ever collected any tickets. It was so confusing, you can't imagine it, yes, but that's the name of the game.

SH: Did you ever inquire about what happened to those orders for OCS?

AS: Yes. … I finally got my orders to go to officer's school, but I'm in India and the officer says, "Too late, you're here." [laughter] That was the end of OCS.

SH: How did the weather affect your ability to do your job in communications?

AS: Terrible. Well, first of all, … during the monsoon season, it was terrible. You got hot, sticky, humid rain during the hot weather, … there was a general squadron rule that nobody worked from lunchtime to about four o'clock in the afternoon. That was hiatus time. You did inside work, and then, you came out to work on the planes in the evening, late afternoon and evening, because, when you crawled into a plane after [it had been] sitting out on the runway, the temperature would be up to 140 to 150 degrees and it's hard to take, and so, … you couldn't work. You touch a piece of equipment, you burn your hand, yes. You get up on the top of a plane to change an antenna and you're burning. So, we had afternoons off. Then, we'd have a roll call in the afternoon and go back out on the flight line and go to work. My group had three functions: run the telephone communications for the squadron, run the radio communication, and the cryptography associated with it, and maintain the equipment. … I broke my group up into three cadres: maintenance guys, both ground and air echelon, communications guys, communications and cryptographers, and telephone linesmen. … We strung about forty miles of telephone lines all over our base. … We had a forty-drop switchboard. Well, not only did we serve our squadron, but, for a while, we were also the base squadron, because there was no one else there, until the AACS [Army Airways Communications System] came. … Then, they took over the base duties and we reverted to just, you know, tactical activities.

SH: During lunch, you mentioned to Professor John W. Chambers that you insisted that the men use code rather than try to use voice. Would you like to put that story on the tape?

AS: Yes. Well, basically, code transmission is clearer and sharper, but slower than voice, but it doesn't suffer as much from breakup due to the static, fading, and a good code operator can cut through noise better than a voice can, although most radiomen didn't want to mess around with code. So, that's why I used to always try to have lessons and keep the guys up to snuff. Some of them were dedicated; some of them said, "I don't care." … I couldn't force them, because, even though, technically, the combat radiomen were supposed to report to me, literally, they worked as teams with the pilot and the co-pilot and the navigator and the group, [flight crew]. So, they really formed [crew bonds]. They even slept differently. They slept in other barracks, because they had to get up early for combat, you know, and so, they often moved to another barracks,

adjacent to the communications guys. … So, to the extent that I could persuade them to study code, they benefited from it.

SH: You said that the monsoons truly affected the voice communications.

AS: Well, yes, because there would be thunderstorms [that] broke up [the messages], transmissions were not as clear and clean, planes would get lost and … try to radio for help. … A B-24, in one instance, was lost over the Bay of Bengal. They had to go down. We picked up a radio message. The sergeant-in-charge immediately contacted another group near the coast. They went out and rescued them. So, we contributed in that respect. We had a tower that put out a low-frequency signal for a radio compass to home in on. So, if a pilot got lost, he could turn [on] his radio compass, a Bendix radio compass, and it would give him [a heading], point to our tower, so [that] he knew where to come in. I once went out on flight to calibrate a compass with a pilot and we went out and flew a fifty-mile radius, semicircle and I measured the intensity of the signal and plotted it on coordinate paper, to see where the signal was best and weakest. Then, I'd say, "Now, go out to one hundred miles," and we'd go out like that, … "Go out to 150 miles." By that time, we're flying over Burma, but, you know, in one instance, after I did all that work, the pilot said, "Now, tighten up your seat belt. … I'm going to practice something." I said, "Okay." He says, "I want you to watch the … airspeed indicator. Let me know when I hit 105 miles an hour." He proceeds to put the plane in a steep climb, and, at about … 106, 107, the plane starts to shake as it got near the instability point. I said, "105 miles," and he dives down. He goes down and pulls up from the dive. I go like that, [Mr. Spielberg imitates being thrown around by the G-forces], you know what I mean? … It turns out, later, what he was practicing was how steep he could dive and how fast he could pull out, because, [in] the next couple of days, he was going on a mission to bomb a bridge that was between two … steep slopes and the squadron was to come in at high altitude and bomb it from about ten thousand feet with the Norden bombsight, but the chances of hitting a twenty-foot wide bridge from … ten to fifteen thousand feet is next to impossible. So, he was going to turn around and come down the length of the bridge, dive [on] it and pull out, only he pulled out and smashed into the side of the cliff and killed everybody, including himself. So, he was practicing with me. [laughter]

SH: You were going to tell us about why you were known as the "Bomb Busters."

AS: Oh, the "Burma Bridge Busters." Well, the squadron invented, accidentally, a way of diving the bomb into the bridge and not skipping over it, and it happened something like this. One of the captains who was flying a test flight, you know, for training purposes of skip bombing; no, it wasn't. No, it wasn't a test flight. It was a real mission, I'm sorry, and he had come in low to hit this bridge and there was a tree in this road, or a *pagoda*, I can't remember which, but he tipped up the wing and raised up. Then, he had to release his bombs, so, he nosed down like that and released his bombs and, "Bam," it blew up the bridge. … He realized that he was pointing down as he released the bomb, so [that] he gave the bomb an impetus to go into the bridge, rather than [if] he'd hit it like that and [had it] bounce off. … He came back and reported that. So, the squadron instituted practice runs. So, I used to bring out the radio truck, park about a hundred yards away from a big bamboo mat that they strung up, and then, the pilots would come down and bomb that mat, with little test bombs, … ten pounds of explosives. … One of

the bombs hit the ground right in front of the radio truck, bounced over the top of it and exploded on the other side. I said, "Wait, cut it out now."

SH: Thank heavens for the bounce effect.

AS: Yes, but, anyway, that's how they accidentally perfected that, and then, once they perfected how to do that, the squadron became extremely adept at destroying bridges. So, most of its missions were focused on bridge-busting and General Davidson, [who] was head of the Tenth Air Force at that time, sent a message to our squadron that says, "You Bridge Busters, have done a wonderful job," and the squadron immediately adopted that name as the "Burma Bridge Busters."

SH: It has a good ring to it.

AS: Yes.

SI: How often did the unit suffer casualties? How did that affect the ground personnel and everyone else in the squadron?

AS: … Oh, well, we lost a reasonable number of people, not too many, but the saddest part was when a guy'd go out on maybe his first or second mission and not come back. I remember, a young, nineteen-year-old radio-gunner came in. I kind of took a liking to him. He was on two missions and he never came back. … If a guy lived ten, twelve, fifteen missions, you know what I mean? and, finally, didn't make it, it was sad, but it wasn't like as if he'd just barely got there and he's dead, you know what I mean? Yes, and depending on their skills, many of them survived, had to bail out in the jungles in Burma. "Pop" Manley was an experienced automobile repairman and, also, was a camper. He came from Maine and Pop was in a mission where he had to bail out and they were close to the ground. I don't think his parachute [made] more than two or three swings and he landed on the ground. He immediately grabbed the chute, the lines, took care of himself, cut some bamboo and made a canteen out of it. If you take a bamboo and cut it below the seam and above the seam, you can make a hollow tube for holding water. … He found some vines that stored water, filled up the canteen, got out his compass, started heading to the British. … He was picked up by some Burmese natives and taken to the village and put in the chief's … *basha*, whatever he had. A couple of women came in to keep him company. He said, "I'm too tired," [laughter] … and, eventually, came back to the squadron, [was] perfectly capable of handling it. Some other guys couldn't handle the stress. Some of them came back scarred and beat up. … I guess we would say, it's kind of hard to guess, I have the statistics at home, [there was] something like about fifteen percent losses, yes, of missions, in that neighborhood.

SH: You also told the story about someone who worked with you being struck by lightning.

AS: Oh, yes. [laughter] Well, that was a situation where a plane got lost and was sending back a message of help during monsoon season, with lightning and thunderstorms, and, literally, lightning struck. We put up masts, which I will describe to you later, pretty high, to get our signal out real good. Lightning struck, came down the line and hit him, knocked him off the

chair. He got back on. The radio still worked. He kept on communicating. Lightning struck again, knocked him off the second time. I said, "That's enough," [laughter] but it ended up [that] he was able to help the guy find his way and I got him a Bronze Star medal for that, because anybody able to climb back and [who] starts to transmit again after being knocked off by lightning [deserves it]. His name was (Fitzgibbons?). …

SH: Where were the men in your unit from, generally?

AS: He was from Canada, he happened to be, yes.

SH: Really a mixed …

AS: A mixed bag, yes. … There was very little anti-Semitism in our squadron. It was [only] a couple of guys who were anti-Semitic, but we had … three Jewish boys in our group … and two of them were radio operators and one was a cryptographer and they were all good, yes. … I had one guy who was a Western Union telegrapher. He was high-speed. He could go thirty, forty words-a-minute like nothing and he would show up the guys in New Delhi, because that's where the top-notch guys worked. He'd start sending to them at high-speed and they had to slow him down, but … they couldn't send fast enough to stop him. I used to see him type five-letter code groups, you know, copy an incoming message in five-letter code groups, which you can't even [imagine]; you have to memorize those. … A page would run out, he'd jerk a page out, throw another page in, catch up, type like mad and catch up, three or four more code groups, from his head, and then, pick up the rest of the message. He was just so fast. His name was Paul Daly. [laughter] I'll never forget that name, yes. I had a wonderful team. I had two Texans. One of them, Arlen Moore, died last year and I don't know whatever happened to Tex Morgan.

SI: That was your team. Were they the people that you hung around with most?

AS: … Well, no, actually, among [my] friends [were] the chief clerk, an Irishman named J. V. Mckell, and a goof-off by the name of Gordon Murphy, who refused to … take any rank. He just never wanted to be in the Army. He was an air mechanic. One time, he and I were in Calcutta and his shirt got messy. So, I said, "Wear one of my shirts," with master sergeant stripes. He refused to wear them. He took the shirt and turned it inside out and put it on, [laughter] and the other fellow was Lee Kruska, who was a newspaper reporter in civilian life, and he edited a little newspaper and would send dispatches into the *CBI Roundup*. Lee was a friend of mine. He always insisted I smoke. I never smoked. I said, "I'll tell you what, Lee. When I get my orders to go home, I'll smoke a cigarette." So, sure enough, when I get my orders, I picked a Lucky [Strike], a Chesterfield and a Camel. I smoked three in a row, not inhaling, and said, "That's it. I've done it. Are you happy?" …

SH: Because of time constraints, we are going to have to bring this interview to a close, with the caveat that we would love to continue at some point in the future.

AS: Okay, that'd be fine.

SH: Thank you so much.

SI: Thank you very much.

AS: Okay. How long have we been talking? I lost track.

SI: Probably about seventy minutes.

AS: … Well, close to ninety. I'm running out of steam. …

SI: Thank you very much.

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

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 6/1/06
Reviewed by Arnold Spielberg 12/12/06