RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH DONALD J. VAN BLAKE

FOR THE

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SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

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TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Mr. Donald J. Van Blake on December 19, 2007, with Shaun Illingworth in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Also in attendance is …

Donald J. Van Blake: Jan.

Jan Warner: Jan Warner.

SI: Mr. Van Blake, thank you very much for being here today.

DV: You're welcome.

SI: [To Jan Warner] Thank you, also, for driving Mr. Van Blake in. To begin, could you tell me, for the record, when and where you were born?

DV: I was born on August the 9th, 1921, in Plainfield.

SI: Can you tell me your parents' names?

DV: My mother's name was Harriet Ellen Van Blake. My father was Henry Van Blake. …

SI: Can you tell me a little bit about your father's background? Where was he from? What did he do for a living?

DV: He was from Plainfield. He was a worker, an African-American worker. He was a waiter and he worked at different clubs around Plainfield. He had a voice, evidently could sing, and he was called upon to sing quite often.

SI: At the clubs or outside?

DV: At the clubs, at church. He died [in] 1924, I was born '21, so, you see, I don't know too much about him.

SI: Right. What about your mother and her background?

DV: She was born in Rahway, gosh, 18--; I can't remember. She married quite young. Her education was, I think, limited to sixth grade, fifth grade. She married quite young. There were five of us kids. We lived at 425 East Third Street in Plainfield. … My father died in 1924 and she continued to support and raise the children. She was a domestic worker. That's all.

SI: Do you know how either side of the family came to settle in New Jersey?

DV: Well, her mother was from Virginia. Her name was, my grandmother, … we called her "Mom," [laughter] … her name was Alice Jackson, and I can't remember the little town in Virginia. She took me down once, to see the farm where … her family lived. So, she came from there to Rahway, and then, to Plainfield. My father's people, we're not sure, but we feel as though, as far as we know, [they] came from up in New England somewhere. I don't know. His

wife, my grandmother, my other grandmother, we never knew whether she was African-American or not. I have pictures of her. She looks white to me. She's got straight, flowing hair, … but, at that time, that must have been very strange, because my grandfather was very black and interracial marriages, at that time, was a "no-no," but he must have been quite a guy. He built a--what do you call it? He used to keep people's horses. …

SI: A stable?

DV: Yes, and he'd keep people's horses, and then, … he must have done physical work, like road work and things like that. I'm not sure, but he built a house and, here, again, this is something unusual for a black man, that he built the house on East Third Street. It was 619, yes, East Third Street. The house is gone now. So, he must have been a very energetic, serious person. He raised--he and his wife raised--let's see, there were three brothers. … There were no girls, there were three brothers, my father, Uncle Seymour and Uncle Harris; … Uncle Archie. No, that wasn't Archie. [laughter] I can't remember. This is a long time ago.

SI: That is okay.

DV: Uncle Horace, yes, that's right, Uncle Seymour, Uncle Horace and my daddy. … Of the three of them, like I said, my father died in '24, I'm not sure when Uncle Horace died, but the one who lived the longest, and he lived quite a long time, he was quite a guy, [was] Uncle Seymour. He must have been screwed up in the head or what[not], a little bit, but, … because he had worked with horses, he became a trainer for Princeton athletic teams [laughter] and he was the trainer for the 1932 [1936] Olympics in Germany, when Jesse Owens and what-you-call-it did all this stuff. He was the athletic trainer there, and he always used to laugh and say [that] because he knew how to rub horses and handle a horse, he transferred that right over to human beings, to humans. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Seymour Van Blake worked as a trainer at Princeton University from 1928 to 1962. He passed away on February 26, 1976.]

SI: That was your uncle who was the trainer.

DV: Yes, my uncle there, and they called him, at Princeton, they called him Sy, his name was. Why did they call him Sy? His name was Seymour, but they called him Sy, I remember, because I went over to Princeton, … when I got older, and a couple [of them said], "Oh, you're Sy's nephew."

SI: Sy is usually a common nickname for Seymour.

DV: Okay, all right, that's a nickname for Seymour? Sy, okay--I didn't know it. …

SI: Did he ever tell you any stories about being in Germany for the Olympics?

DV: No. Uncle Seymour was a kind of--that's why I said he had a bad hitch somewhere. He thought that his wife … had been unfaithful to him and he left his wife and family, … my aunt and my cousins, and he just occasionally came back to Plainfield for a visit. … I can remember him coming in the house, heavy of step, positive of voice, a very strong voice, and he let you

know he was there, [laughter] but, like I said, there must have been something, that he accused his wife of being unfaithful, yes.

SI: To go back to your family, you mentioned that you had four brothers and sisters.

DV: I had two brothers and two sisters. All right, what happened to them, where are they?

SI: Before we get into that, where did you fall in the birth order?

DV: I was--let's see, Mary, Edgar, Horace, myself and my sister--I was fourth out of five, and Horace died of … pneumonia. In those days, pneumonia was a very threatening disease, died of pneumonia. He was a baby. He was still a baby. … Well, there, Mary and Edgar, they were the two older ones, and then, that left my sister, Loretta, and myself, and we were like two groups. There was the older group and the younger group, [laughter] and we went to school in Plainfield schools. However, because things were tight, my brother, Edgar, was sent down to Suffolk, Virginia, to live with my mother's sister, Aunt Gertrude, who was the wife of a doctor. Aunt Gertrude had gone to nursing school at Freedmen's Hospital in Washington and that formed a lot of jealousies between my mother and my aunt, because my mother hadn't finished, I don't think, sixth grade and, here, my aunt was able to go to nursing school. She was the baby of the family. [laughter] Mary went to--as I said, we [all] went to--public school in Plainfield. My brother went up to eighth grade. When he got to high school age, he was sent down to Virginia to be with Aunt Gertrude. … Myself, I went … on through, my sister, Loretta, went on through Plainfield schools.

SI: Can you tell me a little bit about some of your earliest memories of growing up in Plainfield? What was your neighborhood like?

DV: Yes. … It's funny; we were in a very mixed neighborhood. It was the corner of East Third and Richmond Street. There were blacks, Polish, Italian and Irish. [laughter] We were all in there together, and I was going to say, yes, we got along pretty well. We'd had our fights, … but, then, I remember, … they would come into my house and I would go into their house, quite often. [The] Depression, you know, was a big part, because, although I was a big boy, I can remember picking coals up along the railroad tracks, so that, you know, [I] could take it home and burn them in the furnace, gathering wood to have it. Our mother was away from home most of the time, because she was working, and that left us kids, … it was mainly Mary, myself and Loretta, to get ourselves together and get to school, every day. … [laughter] I was always late and people around the neighborhood knew, if they saw me going to school, it was late and they were late. [laughter] …

SI: How much older were your older siblings, the older set of siblings?

DV: All right, the older ones were, let's see, Mary was nine years older than I, … but the next one was Edgar, my brother, he was seven years, and then, there was the space where Horace came and died, and then, I and my younger sister, Loretta. I was two years older than she. So, we kind of fit in like that.

SI: Your older siblings probably played a role in raising you, to an extent.

DV: Oh, yes, well, yes. In fact, I always thought of my brother, Edgar, almost like my father, and Mary, yes, Mary was … almost like a mother. She had to [be], [laughter] and I can remember the time she went to spank me, or beat me, and I had grown a little larger there now. [laughter] … I picked her up and put her inside the door and ran. "Come back here." "I'll see you later on." [laughter] Yes, she had … assumed part of the role of mother. Like I said, my brother had gone down to Virginia and I always fantasized about him.

SI: About going down there?

DV: No, just fantasizing about him. I'd get in fights, sometimes, or I'd lose, I'd say, "I'll get my brother after you." [laughter] We all had big brothers. …

SI: What was your educational experience like in Plainfield? What were the schools like? Did you enjoy school?

DV: Yes, we were in the minority, the black students were, very much. It's different today. The Plainfield school population is about ninety-eight percent black now, right? black and Hispanic, but, then, we were in a very small minority. I went to Bryant School, up until the fifth grade; no, up to the seventh grade. Then, I went to the seventh and eighth at Evergreen, went over to Evergreen, and then, … we went from eighth grade to the high school in Plainfield. What always rings, I always think of the times when segregation was the "note" of the day.

SI: Even up in Northern New Jersey?

DV: Excuse me?

SI: Even up in New Jersey, there was segregation.

DV: Oh, yes, definitely up in New Jersey. [laughter] All right, for instance, coming home from high school, … I'd go by the Y sometime, the YMCA, and I could hear the boys in the swimming pool, swimming in the YMCA. … I could recognize the voices of some of the boys I was in school with, and I could not go into the YMCA, because it was white, for whites only. I wasn't too aware of it then, but I realized that much of the programming for the types of education that they sent the black kids into, they directed the black kids into the business courses for the girls, and … the cooking and sewing courses, and we took, the boys took, the industrial arts courses. I was very fortunate that my sister, who was nine years older and who had made very good school impressions on her teacher--she was a very good student--was able to see to it that I got some college preparatory courses, along with my, you know, … industrial arts courses.

SI: When you were going to these college prep courses, were you the only African-American student?

DV: Oh, no, there were one or two others there, yes. There were one or two others there, yes.

SI: However, most were sent into the industrial arts.

DV: Yes, industrial arts for the boys and, like I said, the cooking and the what-you-call-it for the girls, business, for the girls. Athletic teams, I wasn't much of an athlete. I ran on the track team, if you call it running. [laughter] I tried to do the mile. I never won a race, but they used to laugh at me--I always finished and they would hold a broken tape up for me to break, even though the race was over and they had gone another four laps around, you know. [laughter] … I played football, junior and senior year. Well, … I wasn't a good student. … They graduated me to high school on, I was supposed to be [on] probation, you know, because, back in the eighth grade, I spent so much of my time looking out the window and dreaming, and I didn't do well.

SI: Do you think you personally were not interested in the studies or do you think the teachers did not give you the help you needed?

DV: No, really, I think I wasn't interested in the studies. So, when I went to high school, the freshman year, yes, I buckled under and I passed, but the sophomore year, I failed every subject except gym and glee club. [laughter] So, I had to repeat the sophomore year. I must have been playing football then, too, because I repeated the sophomore year and, because it was repetition, I became an honor student, … even in the math courses. Math was hard, but, … oh, I excelled in them, and I remember Winkler, Mr. Winkler, he was [the] math teacher, and then, we had geometry and I was one of his favorite students there. [laughter] Oh, I was repeating the course. I remember him saying, after the class got stuck on a problem or something, "All right, Donald, come on up and show us how it's done," something like that. … So, I became an honor student and, once I had passed, I liked the feeling of …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: We were just talking about high school. In your junior year or your third year …

DV: No, in sophomore year, I had failed everything and I had to repeat it. … As I said, I became an honor student, you know, got "Bs," [laughter] and, from then on, I made the attempt to study more. It was a good feeling, being an honor student.

SI: Was there one subject or area where you were particularly interested?

DV: No, I don't remember any. You know, … like I tell you, I was doing industrial arts, too. I was doing shop courses, too, and I liked them. Math courses, I had a problem with, but I could do them. I could do it. We did, like, I think I had math up to trigonometry, I think, but I always felt as though I was out of the mainstream there. The cliques and the what-you-call-its that ran the high school … never had any black kids on them. You had the cheerleaders, … they had social clubs, and so forth, and there were never any black kids on those. Now, we black kids were on the track team, baseball team, football teams. We even had black kids on the tennis team. [laughter] I remember because Bill Willis, his father owns Shady Rest [Golf and Country Club in Scotch Plains, New Jersey], which was the [only] black country club, really, east of the Mississippi, and the black athletes, the tennis players and the golf players, … who were playing came there to play. … Bill, he was raised there, so, he played tennis like crazy, since he was a

[child]. … When he got to high school, he and his brothers, when they came, too, they were each captains of the tennis team. So, there were black kids on the tennis team, a few of us, but the rest of us never played tennis. …

SI: Did the African-American students form their own social groups or clubs?

DV: Yes. I can remember, we complained about it, there were no black kids in the drama club, and do you know one thing? They formed a black drama; well, it wasn't a black drama club, but we gave, in our senior year, … a separate performance of black kids, yes. … Mr. (Carey?), who was the head of the Moorland Y, which was the, in Plainfield, … African-American Y, where we went to play pool--there was no swimming--but he put pressure on the administration, "Why were there no black kids in the drama club?" So, … that's the answer they came up with, "We will have a black performance, separate performance." [Editor's Note: The Moorland Branch of the YMCA was created in 1923 to service the African-American community of Plainfield and found a home in the former Hope Chapel in 1926. After its building burned down in 1955, the African-American community, supported by the local chapter of the NAACP, moved to integrate the former Moorland staff and membership into the main YMCA in Plainfield rather than reestablish a segregated facility.]

SI: Do you remember what you did, what performance it was? Was it a play?

DV: You mean what the name of the play was?

SI: Yes.

DV: [laughter] Wait a second, I haven't thought about this in a long time. I've got a picture of it, though, somewhere at the house.

SI: Really?

DV: Yes--*Pirate's Revenge*, and I was the father and they gave me gray hair. [laughter] They put powder and stuff in my hair and, yes, it was *Pirate's Revenge*, yes, and there were around about--it wasn't a big cast--there were about five or six, that's all, in the cast.

SI: Did other members of the school come to see the performances?

DV: Well, one thing, we gave … the performance for the whole school. You know, they came to the assembly. … I'm trying to remember how; oh, there were a bunch of other black people, other black kids, who scolded us for being a part of a separate unit, you know.

SI: Really?

DV: Oh, yes, sure, and then, rightfully so, but we felt that we wanted to do it. We wanted to perform, we wanted to, and so, we did it. So, there was a right and a wrong of it, … as there is of everything, and that's right. I hadn't thought about that in a long time.

SI: Was that your only involvement with drama or performing?

DV: Yes, because that happened in my senior year, and, after that …

SI: Were you involved in anything extracurricular, any clubs, or did you have to work after school? What took up most of your time outside of school?

DV: Working, I think, was most of it. You said working, although my mother, she was quite a person, she allowed me to play football and to run track. Yes, I mean, although I can remember, after graduation, I would work, and it was quite normal for all of us, the boys, when you worked, you brought the money home to your parents. … I got a job with a house wrecking company.

SI: After high school or during high school?

DV: After high school. … That's too much, to be wrecking houses and going to school. [laughter]

SI: What kind of jobs did you have when you were in high school?

DV: Well, one time, I was the delivery boy for the Professional Pharmacy, you know, the pharmacy on the corner of Seventh and Park, right there. I was the delivery boy there. What other jobs were there? Oh, I remember, we used to wait for the snow to come in the wintertime, so [that] we could get on the city. We would knock off school, too, and go to work for the city, removing the snow from the streets, [laughter] and, oh, we'd work sometimes two days, three days, without stopping, so that our paychecks would be big. They don't do that now, I don't think, but we would cut school in the wintertime. Oh, what else? Oh, Mother was a bit of an entrepreneur, too. In our house, she took the downstairs--there were two rooms downstairs--and she … organized it as a restaurant, the kitchen being there, and the items that were sold were a quarter of a chicken and a half a waffle, and I think it was thirty-five cents. [laughter] … I very often [worked there], and we brought the chickens in, you know, in the back. They had a what-you-call-it there, a house and a pen, a run?

SI: A chicken coop?

DV: Yes, a chicken coop, yes, and I can remember, sometimes, groups would come in and I would be in bed, upstairs in bed, and Mother would shake me, "Come on, we've got a party." … I'd have to go outside and get the chickens and kill them, pluck them, cut them up and fry them in the [pot]. [laughter] That was one.

SI: How long did that go on for?

DV: You know, must have been about a year, year-and-a-half, but, evidently, it didn't make enough money. [laughter] … It never ballooned, but the very fact that she thought of trying it, now, as I think about it, must have been quite a feat for her. Oh, Prohibition days; [laughter] I lived in an area where one, two, two right … in my block, these were bootleggers, right in my block. Around the corner, on Cottage Place, there were two more. I didn't mess too much with

them, because they were too far away. … What we boys would do, … we would gather bottles around town and we'd sell them the bottles. The pint bottles were two or three cents and the quart bottles were, I believe they were ten cents, five or ten cents, something. They were bigger, and we would gather bottles and go in and get our [payment]. [laughter] … One time, we were up in Mazio's--that was up the street from us--and Les Hopson, and I just found out Les died.

[TAPE PAUSED]

DV: Turn it on now. Les and I were [there]. We'd gathered our bottles and we'd taken them into Mazio and Mazio had them out on the counter and [was] counting out the pint bottles from the [collection]. … We looked out the window and the cops were coming out of a Model A Ford. [laughter] I never will forget it, and I never saw so many cops coming out of one little Model A Ford in all my life. I thought there must have been sixteen or twenty of them in it. [laughter] … They were coming in and Mazio grabbed the bottles and threw them, I don't know where he threw them, down the cellar somewhere. … We ran out the door and next to us was a vacant house. The (Vaughns?) had lived there before and they had moved and nobody took the house. We went down in the cellar, … so [that] we could peep up from the cellar window, and they took Mazio down to the--I guess they took him down to police headquarters. I don't know what they did with him, but we were so afraid to come out. Now, it was daylight when we were there and we stayed down there until it got dark. [laughter] We were so afraid to come out, but we still gathered bottles and sold them to the bootleggers.

SI: Did Mazio eventually come back?

DV: Oh, sure. [laughter] That didn't stop him. He probably paid the guys; no, oh, no. [laughter] … You know, during Prohibition days, you saw men who were drunk on the streets. You don't see men drunk on the streets now, but they'd go in, and those [men] would go in, and they'd drink and you'd see [drunk men]. … One very good friend of ours, Jesse, (Jesse Smith?), Jesse would always get drunk and come down the street singing. He'd always sing, staggering drunk. … He'd come down the street singing, "Don't know why there's no sun up in the…" and he'd be staggering, *Stormy Weather*. [laughter]

SI: Was that when you were younger, when you were a kid?

DV: Yes. We were kids. Let's see, now, what was the time when; … Prohibition was running from back in the '20s, because it … was lifted in '34.

SI: 1933 or 1934.

DV: … All right, yes, '33.

SI: After FDR came into office. [Editor's Note: President Franklin D. Roosevelt was sworn into office in March 1933 and served as President of the United States until his death in April 1945.]

DV: Yes, yes, so, and I was born in '21, so, I was a kid, running around.

SI: You were about a teenager when it ended.

DV: Yes, about the time it ended, yes. So, Jesse was drunk on the streets all the time while I was [young]. [laughter] … He lived right across the street from us, his family. We paid--we were some of the families who paid--into the Metropolitan Insurance Company, little twenty-five-cents-a-week insurance policies. I used to take my mother's twenty-five cents, or, sometimes, if I had money, I would go down and pay it. … We later learned that the Metropolitan Company denied the rights of the people who had been paying into these little, stinking policies for years. These are some of the things I thought of when we were fighting. No, you just think of those things, that's all.

SI: It struck you that it was unjust.

DV: … Yes, "What the hell am I doing here, when I know what happened before to the [African-American community]?"

SI: You mentioned that, during the Great Depression, you would do things like picking up coal and searching for wood to get along. Were there other things that you remember doing because it was the Depression?

DV: Yes, there, the Depression era, at that time, you know, they had the WPA [Works Project Administration, a New Deal agency]. They had the food rations that they would give out to us poor people and we stood in line for bread, up at the--what was the name of that place? It was an old church, Salvation Army. … We'd go down there and they'd pass out, once a week--oh, no, it was more than once a week--bread and cans of, we called it bully beef, it was meat, cooked up, you know, bread and meat. … It was part of the--what did they call it? Jesus, I've forgot now--the relief program. It's part of the relief, yes, and we were all on relief. We used to laugh at each other [laughter] about, you know, … what we did get or what we didn't get. I can remember not being able to get your shoes repaired and, … oh, you were lucky if you could get a piece of old carpeting and cut [it] and put in your shoe, and, a lot of times, we had paper in our shoes.

SI: Was your mother able to stay employed throughout that period?

DV: Well, she was a domestic worker and they were all--no, she wasn't employed all the time, because there were times when things were tight. … We ate beans a lot. That ain't nothing; I eat beans now. [laughter] I loved them. I like them now, but, then, it was [necessary]. … She would go on, in [the] summertime, she would go away with white families and they would go to the Shore and she would cook and keep the children while they what-you-call-it. She went once and she had to leave me in Plainfield. Oh, I guess I was a big boy. I was about in eighth grade. We kids were much more sophisticated, I guess, as kids. Now, [if] we had to do things, we had to do things, that's all. I was fourteen years old and I told Mother I was going to go down to the seashore, to Asbury and what-you-call-it, and get a job, … my friend and I, and our mothers talked about it and they didn't want to let [us go]. Now, I realize, you know, but, then, … we thought, "Well, heck," said, "we're going to go down and get some work, because we're going to bring some money back," … but think of it, a kid, fourteen years old, going. … The two of us just left and went on down. Warren lost his job and he came down to [my area]. … Warren was

in Asbury and I was in Avon-by-the-Sea and was at a little cottage there, working. I was washing dishes and scrubbing floors and whatever else, and Warren lost his job and he couldn't get anything. He would come down to my [cottage]. My brother lost his job, too, and he would come, and I was feeding both of them, [laughter] you know, food from the kitchen.

SI: Was your brother still in Virginia at that time or did he come back?

DV: Well, yes, you must realize that waiting hotels, waiting restaurants, being busboys, was an avenue of work for a lot of black boys, black kids. … He came up to Atlantic City, or Asbury. I think he was at Asbury, I think, because one was at Asbury, and he was waiting tables and he had waited tables down at Virginia Beach, when he was down in [Virginia], because Virginia Beach is not far from Suffolk. … He had waited tables down in Virginia Beach. So, he was pretty experienced at it, but, when things get slow, you know, they let everybody [go]. … You have to let the help go. So, they were out of work and they'd come to get food from me. I was the only one that had a job, and, oh, they got a job again. They got a job again. … Then, I went up to Atlantic City. I can't remember [why]--I guess I lost my job, too. I went up to Atlantic City and I stayed with my friend.

SI: How many summers did you do that for, just the one or for others?

DV: I think it was two summers. I'm not sure now, because I was able to go back to Atlantic City, to the family. … There was a black family that I was able to stay with. They were very nice.

SI: Did you just stay with them or were they your employers?

DV: No. I just stayed with them. I worked odd jobs around Atlantic City. Atlantic City was--it was a fast place. [laughter] Yes, Atlantic City was fast.

SI: What makes you say that?

DV: Well, I knew it was fast. They had women, whores. We worked in kitchens--we worked, well, wherever we could work--and the traffic of people who went in and went out, … they were the fast people. They were the people who lived by gambling, dancing, music. This is on Kentucky Avenue, Kentucky and, oh, I've forgotten the names of the other ones. This is where the black people lived, stayed, entertained, were entertained, and so forth. It was a short period of my life and one that I was never really particularly happy about.

SI: Why were you unhappy? Was it just the nature of the work?

DV: Well, I knew there's something wrong with it. I hadn't come from that kind of [background]. … In Plainfield, I was raised in a church and, outside of the bootleggers, taking bottles to the bootleggers, there was no drinking in my house, and so, it was strange to me.

SI: Okay.

DV: You know, I had never really thought that much about it. Right now, I'm thinking more about it than [ever], and I realize I must have kind of pushed those memories out of my mind. I never thought about it too much, but I didn't like it too much.

SI: It was more the sinfulness than the work or anything else.

DV: I didn't even think about the work. I just knew I was in a bad place.

SI: Okay.

DV: I just knew I was in a bad place, and that's what it was.

SI: Which church were you active in in Plainfield?

DV: … My grandmothers and grandfather were members, or … they were--originators? not originators. What is it when you organize something?

SI: Founders?

DV: Yes, they were founding members of Bethel--oh, at that time, it was called Bethel Chapel. … I don't know what you want, but you know the big Presbyterian church? …

JW: Crescent?

DV: Crescent Avenue Church. Yes, we were a missionary, [laughter] … because they didn't want the black people coming to the big, white church, up Crescent Avenue, the big, white church, Presbyterian. … So, they formed [a mission]. I don't know how they got the building. Evidently, Crescent Avenue must have bought it or had it and we had our church there, at Bethel Chapel. [Editor's Note: The Bethel Presbyterian Church of Plainfield developed from the Hope Mission chapel established by the Crescent Avenue Presbyterian Church in 1884.] … Once a year, at Christmastime, they allowed us black people to come up to Crescent Avenue and sit and we could sit up in the …

SI: The rafters?

JW: Balcony.

DV: Balcony, sit up in the balcony. … I think they gave the kids candies and things like that.

SI: In Plainfield, were businesses segregated? Were there businesses you could not go to? How else was segregation present?

DV: All right, segregation in Plainfield, number one, there were no black teachers, there were no black principals, there were hardly black janitors, and the businesses in town, where did black people work? They worked either as domestic workers [or] there were cart men who picked up--you see, at the time, houses were heated with coal and the ashes had to be removed. There were

cart men who did that. There were hardly any street sweepers. … I don't remember any black street sweepers. There was one black cop. I don't remember any black fireman. So, domestic work, hard labor, that was where the black people worked, the men. Women worked domestic work. Businesses [were] up and down Front Street, and Plainfield was a very prosperous town, city, at that time. It was the hub of all the towns around, Scotch Plains, Westfield. … Plainfield was the big city. It had Rosenbaum, the big department [store], Rosenbaum, had Tepper's. … Oh, Front Street was very active … and the only workers were floor sweepers, deliverymen, some of them delivered. Van Arsdale, I remember, the shoe store had a black man, Van Arsdale, because I went with his younger daughter when I got of age to. [laughter] There were no black bus drivers, hardly any black truck drivers. So, you see, there were two, almost two, as there always has been in segregated America, there are two entities, a white entity and the black entity. That's the way it was in Plainfield.

SI: Growing up in that environment, in the late 1930s and 1940, when you were about to graduate from Plainfield High School, where did you see yourself in the future? Did you think you would just become a laborer or something like that?

DV: Yes, yes. … Truthfully, I thought I'd get a good job and be a truck driver, and my sister, she thought I was crazy, my older sister. I didn't have the inspiration to be a college graduate, or anything like that. No, I didn't have any great inspiration to, and, as I stop and think back on it, it was very minimal, very small, what I dreamt of or what I thought to become. These were the things that … we talked about and felt when we were here [pointing to his wartime papers, indicating the war years].

SI: When you were overseas?

DV: When we were overseas. "What the hell we doing here?"

SI: You did wind up going to Virginia State before you went into the service.

DV: Yes. Well, now, that's a long story. I've got to tell you that one.

SI: Go ahead. [laughter]

DV: Well, I was working then. Oh, yes, we worked in factories around, … because I was working in Bound Brook, at Calco, and I was just a young boy then, you know what I mean. [Editor's Note: The Calco Chemical Company, founded in 1915 in Bound Brook, New Jersey, originally manufactured dyestuffs. After being acquired by American Cyanamid in 1929, Calco expanded into the manufacture of sulfa-based drugs, polymers, herbicides and other chemical products.] Now, Calco was a chemical plant and it's all according to what color chemical you came out with. … I was working in (oramean?), so, I came out with yellow hands and yellow around my eyes and face. Guys who were working [with other chemicals], I forgot the name of them, but they would come out with purple, green, and these were--excuse me, Jan--these are the "asshole jobs" of the place. [laughter] So, I was working at Calco at the time the war broke out, December 7th, and, oh, I was so concerned, because I knew my older brother would have to go in the war, and never thought that I'd be. [laughter] So, there was a program that I found out

about. I don't know how I found out about it, that guys who were in college could join the Enlisted Reserve, and they would allow you … four years to finish college and, if you were still [in school] and the war was still going on, … you were earmarked for a commission. So, I figured, "Well, four years, the war would be about over, and so, I'll go join the Enlisted Reserve," and that's how I got to Virginia State, but, [as] soon as I got there and I got in one semester, they called the Reserves in. [laughter] So, instead of being inactive, I was active.

SI: Before we get too far into your military career, I have a couple of questions about before Pearl Harbor. How long did you have this job at Calco and what did you do there? You mentioned that they were very bad jobs.

DV: Oh, yes. Well, they were bad jobs, but they were jobs. … Hey, as far as the black community, we were getting regular, good money and I worked at Calco, well, I was young--I was just out of school.

SI: You were, like, eighteen or nineteen

DV: Yes, yes, maybe two years, because, I remember, I got my driver's license and I got my first car when I was working there, yes, oh, yes. [laughter] So, I was seventeen or eighteen years, eighteen years, nineteen, maybe nineteen, yes, eighteen, nineteen years old, … but, see, the money was welcome, because it went to the household. … We just expected--we knew--that whatever money we got was first to go to the household, and then, if there's anything left, we could have it.

SI: Yes. Many industries were helped by the war even before Pearl Harbor, through the lend-lease programs. Was Calco affected by that? Did they see an increase in business because they were sending things overseas? [Editor's Note: In March 1941, the Lend-Lease program established a steady stream of war materiel from the United States to the Allies.]

DV: Evidently, because we got jobs. There were more openings for black men to have jobs. I don't know about what they were doing, but there were openings, and, also, down at Bayway Phelps Dodge. These were places that I went to go get work. Now, this was hard, physical work. I remember, there was a foundry. … They were hiring and, two or three o'clock in the morning, we would go there to wait in line, to see if we could get hired, and the guy would actually come out and he'd just [say], "You, okay. You, okay. You," and I don't know how many times I'd gone down. [Editor's Note: The Phelps Dodge Corporation (Freeport-McMoRan Copper and Gold, Incorporated, since 2007) was a mining firm renowned for its copper operations. The Phelps Dodge facility in Bayway, New Jersey, produced copper wire and other forms of wire and cable, including material used in the Manhattan Project.]

SI: They would only hire you for a day.

DV: No, they would hire you, but, I mean, he picked at the guys who [got hired]. … Maybe the guys were paying him, I don't know, because, see, down at the docks, you know, that was regular practice, you know.

SI: Like kickbacks.

DV: No, they called it "shape up." The captains were the ones--well, I learned that out when I went to school, down at Hampton. I worked at the docks at Newport News, but this was after the war, but there was a foundry on South Avenue in--what was it, Elizabeth, or somewhere there? … I can remember, they were hiring and everybody--when I say everybody, all us guys, the black guys--we'd get up and [it would] be two or three o'clock, we didn't care, and go to get a job, and I finally [was picked]. He looked at me all the time, the guy, said, "You're too small there. You go on. You go home." [laughter] I was--I only weighed 125 pounds, … but, finally, he gave me a job. I didn't work long. I guess I couldn't do all that damn work, [laughter] but we had to ram up sand and shovel [laughter] and, oh, it was abysmal. At that time, I didn't think too much of it. I was young, and I guess that was before Calco. Then, I got a job at Calco and stayed there a couple years. … Here, again, it was a dirty job, probably poisoned a lot of the guys that worked there. I guess I was just one of the lucky ones.

SI: Would you say the conditions were safe, or that the work was safe or not safe?

DV: Oh, hell, no, it wasn't safe, now that I think about it. I didn't think anything about it then. You were handling barrels of material and you got so [that] you can handle two barrels at a time, roll that down. They had big vats that you dumped the barrels in, you dumped the ice in, and then, you had to go back and pick up the ice loads. … The temperatures had to be [regulated], remained [warm or cold]. They had a certain time. That's why you had to have the ice. … Of course, now, I can't remember, but we didn't know too much about what processes we were doing. Some of us, some of the older guys, they knew more [about] what was going on, and they had a powder. … We kept our gloves and your face [mask] and your gloves [on]. It was a white powder. It must have been like a chalk, and the old guys told you, "Make sure your hands and your sleeves and your face and all stayed white," because, … if you worked and you sweated and you got the color [on the white areas], that meant the chemicals were getting into your skin. … See, so, when you protect [yourself], that's how you protect [yourself], "Make sure you stay white. You keep your gloves … [white]," and you had overalls and what-you-call-it, all buttoned up, and a hat here and … goggles here, and you're always warned, "Keep covered. Keep your skin white," … and that was hard, because you're sweating. You're working like hell, … but it was a job.

SI: Were there any accidents that you recall?

DV: Oh, yes, oh, yes. Every now and then, they'd have reports where somebody had fallen in one of the vats or something like that. One man got killed out there, that I remember. I'm sure there were others who were killed out there, but this one man from Plainfield, his name was (Wormley, Van Wormley?). His grandchildren, I know today, … his son and his grandchildren, I know today, but he got killed out there. … There were accidents and they used to try to keep a safe record, you know, "Two days without an accident. Five days without an accident," or something, but we all knew about it when somebody got killed. We all knew about it.

SI: Was there a union?

DV: Oh, that was the thing. [laughter] That was the thing, and the company made sure that there wasn't no union. [laughter] … There were a couple attempts to organize. Funny, later on, I became an organizer, but that was after the war. I was always interested in why the organizers were there. They'd be at the gates, you know, at the gates when you came out, and they'd have leaflets for you to read.

SI: At Calco?

DV: [Yes], and this happened at most of the plants that were around, at Calco, out at Phelps Dodge in Bayway, I've forgotten the name of that company where I told you they were casting, as a foundry company--(Smith?) Steel Company, down the street. Oh, yes, there was a big--well, there always has been--a big struggle between labor and management. There always has been, and it was very evident at that time, because business picked up as the war efforts around the world became more intense. We knew that, eventually, we were going to be in the war. Everybody knew that, eventually, there was going to be a Pearl Harbor--well, not a Pearl Harbor there, but there's going to be a 7th of December, [an event that propelled the United States into World War II]. … Yes, the businesses increased and, when they increased, we got work.

SI: Do you recall any incidents where you saw this clash between labor and management? Was there any violence, protests or strikes, anything?

DV: Yes, Calco went on strike, I think, once, while I was there. I was there, I think, a couple of years. I think they went on strike, because they were trying to organize. I don't know whether they were ever successful.

SI: Do you remember being in a picket line?

DV: No, I wasn't ever in a picket line, not then; later, but not then. I didn't know too much about it. I would have been. [laughter] Had I known now what I knew then, I'd have been in it. [Editor's Note: Mr. Van Blake means to say, "Had he known then what he knows now."]

SI: I would assume it was mostly men that you were working with; there were no women in the plants at that time.

DV: Only down at, you know, where if … you got hurt …

SI: In a medical dispensary?

DV: Yes, dispensary, down at the dispensary. That's what it was called, yes, and you go there, but, outside, no, no women, no women.

SI: How did those men treat you and other African-Americans coming into the workforce?

DV: Well, here, again, … the ugly, nasty jobs, we were there. There were other jobs in the factory that weren't so nasty and the white guys worked there. One of them, I remember, was the icehouse and, see, a lot of these … divisions of the plants, they made different chemicals at

different parts, and ice was a very important [part of the] process of them, because, … after the vats had been turning for so long--I hadn't thought about this in a long time, man [laughter]--they had to cool them down within a certain length of time. … Then, that's when you called up for ice and, now, … the guys who worked the icehouses, a great, big icehouse that produced tons of ice, and they'd produce a lot of cube ice, too, because, see, the ice had to get into, what-you-call-it, [the solutions], to cool down real quick. … So, the white guys worked in the icehouse and there were trucks, I remember, big, old Mack Trucks, chain drive, you know. You know what chain drives are?

SI: Not really.

DV: All right. Chain drives, see, the average vehicle now has the center, the what-you-call-it drive [drive shaft], that goes down the center, turns the back wheel, but … these were trucks that had individual chains on each wheel on the side that drove them. They were heavy, working trucks and they were made by Mack. You know, Mack Motors used to be in Plainfield.

SI: Yes.

DV: Yes, Mack Motors; in fact, the buildings are still there. So, I'm trying to remember when, because I had gone down to go to school to get in [the service]. Well, I had gone down to get in the Reserves and I got in, and then, they activated the Reserve. … There was a certain period of time there that I knew I was in the service, or I was going to be, but they hadn't called me in yet, and so, I went back to Calco and I got a job again. They hired me again, because I had been there a couple years before, had a good work record, what-you-call-it, and I can remember, [laughter] we needed ice at--oh, a couple of the what-you-call-its [divisions] needed ice--and they called down to the icehouse one day. Then, they couldn't get it out; the trucks, there weren't enough drivers for the trucks. So, I went down there to that icehouse and got a truck, got up in the truck and drove it, and I can remember them saying, "You'd better not do that. You can't do that. … Only the white guys do that," you know. I said, "Hell, they need the ice down here in," what-you-call-it, [laughter] and I remember that incident. … I took the damn truck down and drove it down, and I think they gave me a job in the icehouse after that. [laughter] I drove [the] truck to several of the [production sites], yes, and they let black guys start working in the icehouse. [laughter] …

SI: However, initially, the African-American workers were saying, "Do not do that."

DV: Yes, yes, because, … "The white guys drive those. The white guys, that's part of the white guys' jobs," and, yes, I had forgotten all about that.

SI: You were working at Calco when Pearl Harbor was attacked.

DV: Yes.

SI: What do you remember about that day?

DV: The radios were on. You know, a lot of us carried our radios with us or, no, we had radios that we could plug into the place, and the news came over that [the attack had occurred]. I was on the afternoon or the night shift and news came over that Pearl Harbor had been bombed, and we all knew that this is it. … Like I said, the first thing I thought of was, "Oh, God, my brother's going to have to go to war."

SI: Was he already in the service? Had he been drafted in the peacetime draft?

DV: He was working--where the heck was he working? … He had gone to school before the war. You remember, I told you, he went down to Virginia to be with my aunt and my uncle. My uncle was a doctor and she was a nurse. So, he was able to go to school and that's why she took him, because my mother was having such a hard time with us kids, you know, raising us. She'd lost one son, and I don't know how the heck he came back up here. Had he finished college? He went to Virginia State for awhile, too. That's how I knew to go there. He finished up at North Carolina A&T [Agricultural and Technical State University]. He had been put out of a couple schools before he got there, [laughter] … but I'm trying to remember how he got back up to New Jersey. So, it had to be after Pearl Harbor. Things were moving now and he came up and I felt, "Oh, gosh, he's going to have to go to war," and, oh, I felt so bad--ended up, I went to war and he stayed home [laughter]--and the reason he stayed home [is], he volunteered for the Air Force. Now, there was only one place where black men flew and that was down at Tuskegee and, at that time, there was no Tuskegee, because … the pressure had not been put on the administration and the people of the United States to develop black pilots, but he had volunteered for the Air Force and they didn't have any place to put him. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Pressure by Civil Rights activists and the passage of Public Law 18 in April 1939, which created pilot training programs at African-American colleges, led to the creation of the US Army Air Corps' segregated 99th Pursuit Squadron (later Fighter Squadron) in January 1941 at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. The first class of African-American aviation cadets began training at Tuskegee Army Air Field in July 1941 and graduated in March 1942. From 1942 to 1946, Tuskegee produced 992 single and multi-engine pilots and African-Americans trained in other flight and ground crew positions at facilities across the nation. African-American pilots served overseas in the 99th and the 332nd Fighter Groups in North Africa and Italy.] … He would report, I don't know how often, every six months or so. Heck, I remember guys, … when I was in and I was getting basic training, guys who'd been in a year or two and … had volunteered for the mechanized division, tanks. Because, at that time, there were no black tank outfits, they just moved them around from one basic training to another, and that's all they did, [laughter] basic training, but I don't know how the heck he [came back to New Jersey]. Well, I guess he came back to get a job and the jobs were getting plentiful. The war was on. All kinds of things were opening up. I hadn't thought about this in years, and so, everybody was all up at that time. The draft was already in and you registered, and [they said], "You're going to get your call," and the whole thing, … "So-and-so got his call last week."

SI: Before Pearl Harbor, had you followed the news of what was happening in Europe?

DV: Oh, yes, all of us did. We knew that Poland had been invaded and, oh, yes, we knew that the Germans were marching across Europe, yes. Oh, yes, we knew it, yes.

SI: It sounds like you thought that America was inevitably going to get involved.

DV: Oh, yes, oh, yes. Everybody knew that, yes. Oh, we'd all hoped that we were not [going to be involved], you know, and so on, but we all knew that we were going to be in [the war].

SI: Do you remember, before you went off to Virginia, any changes that happened on the home front, in the Plainfield area? For example, were there any blackouts or rationing restrictions?

DV: Yes, they had started. Now, I don't know too much about the blackout. Well, I was in the Army, all right, but, at the beginning, yes, there were blackouts. Yes, there were rations. … You got tickets for meats, I'm not sure [what else], but I knew there were rations, and then, by communicating with your family while you were in, you know, … your mother, your father would write, you know, "We got so-and-so many stamps for this or for that." Gasoline was rationed, too, as I remember, yes. Well, I guess you know more about that than I do, really.

SI: I am just interested in hearing how it affected different areas and different people.

DV: No, but, I mean, you've studied it, see. [laughter]

SI: A little bit.

DV: Yes, and you probably know more about it than I do.

SI: It is different for historians, because everything is already written and you get the information all in one shot.

DV: Yes, but you've got it all encapsulated and you know, and I'm just trying to pull it from memory. [laughter]

SI: Yes, that is what I want, to see if it was as important as historians make it out to be, but it sounds like you went into the military so quickly that many of the policies had not yet been implemented.

DV: Established, yes, and hadn't really been worked out, yes, yes. Well, I was in [the military] in--what is the date it [says on the pre-interview survey], '42 or something?

SI: You wrote here October 13, 1942, so, pretty quickly, less than a year after Pearl Harbor.

DV: Yes.

SI: This date of enlistment, was it after you went to Virginia State College?

DV: … No, my enlistment was when I went to Virginia State, … because that was where the Reserves were, in college, and they called them the Enlisted Reserves. … I went there to get in it, because I figured that, you know, I could stay out of the war.

SI: Could you tell me a little bit about going down to enlist and going to Virginia State College? What was it like? What did you study during that period?

DV: What, at the school?

SI: Yes. What was it like to leave New Jersey and go down there?

DV: Okay, let me tell you about that. I had never been to a black school. I had come out of Plainfield and white people had run everything, but, for the first time in my life, I was in an institution that was completely run by black people. The president of the college was black, all the administrators were black--and the prettiest girls I had ever seen in my life were all black [laughter]--right there at Ettrick, Virginia, and it was really an awakening period for me. I got in, and my brother had told me--I didn't have any money, now, I know I didn't have any money--but he had always said, "Donald, get there. Put your feet on the ground. Get there," and this has always been true of black colleges. They will take [you in] and, you know, if you're a halfway good student, halfway, you know what I mean, and not even that they will make you a good student, but they will find jobs for [you], or they did, and they still do find jobs for kids who were trying to go to school. They will find placements for them. I thought, at first, it was only true at Virginia State, but, then, after the war, I went to other black schools. You know, I went to Hampton [University], I finally finished at Hampton, but I knew of people who went there and we talked all about the remedial programs that the black colleges [had]. The white colleges, when they started admitting black students, they had to come to the black colleges to find out … how to do the remedial work, because so many of the black kids came and they were short on the math requirements or the English requirements. … So, they ran tremendous remedial programs for kids. They wouldn't let them go home … unless--it had to be awful bad for them to go home or go out--but they would see to it that the kids got in school and got studying, what-you-call-it, yes. So, going to Virginia State was a tremendous experience for me, to be in an all-black situation and see how wonderful and beautiful it was. I went out for the football team there and, here, again, all the guys were black, coaches were black, we played other black colleges. It was quite an experience, yes.

SI: Was that your first time being down in the South for an extended period of time?

DV: Well, as far as an adult. No, I had gone down to Suffolk, where my aunt and uncle lived, but I was a kid then. I was a kid, … but that was the first time I had [gone as an adult]. Yes, I didn't go down [for anything else]; what else would I go down for? I don't remember going down there for anything else. No, that was the first time, yes, and, of course, we had all stories; everybody told different stories about different things.

SI: You mean the students?

DV: Yes, fellow students, yes, oh, yes.

SI: Were most of them from Virginia or were they from all over?

DV: … Most of them were from Virginia, but they were actually from all over, because you had contingents. You have them from New Jersey, and you know how it is--you go to a place and … the Virginia kids would stick together, the New Jersey kids would stick together, New York kids would stick together--and so many of us had been denied coming to these white colleges, up here. So, naturally, we went to the colleges that were open to [us]. Everybody didn't go to college at the time for the same reason I went. I went to stay out of the Army, to stay out of the war--that's why I went--but a lot of them, I even ran across kids, that was the first time I ran across kids who were second-generation college [students]. I'd never seen that before. Well, my mother hadn't even finished, like I said, high school. … I don't even know if she finished sixth grade or not, and most of my friends, we were like that, but, being down [at] Virginia State, I tell everybody my neck grew two sizes looking at all the pretty black girls going there, yes. [laughter]

SI: You mentioned that the college would get you jobs to get you through. Do you remember some of the jobs that you had?

DV: Yes. At first, I went in and I was going to [try out], I went out for the football team, but I needed a job. So, they found me a job in the kitchen. I certainly wasn't cooking, because I damned as sure didn't know how to cook. [laughter] I was sweeping the floors, you know, what-you-call-it, and serving the tables, bringing the food in, you know what I mean, and taking the dirty dishes out, washing the dishes, and so forth, until Mr. (Cotton?)--I never will forget him. I got in some trouble because … I went to football practice late once or twice, because I couldn't get through the dishes in time enough to get to the practice, and … the coach gave me hell. He didn't know I was working. The coach didn't know I was working and Mr. (Cotton?), he was head of the kitchen, and I can remember him saying, "Boy, you playing football? You can't work here and play football." He said, "We've got to get you another job," just like that. I said, "Okay." You know what he got me a job doing? sweeping the library, [laughter] after school, after practice. I could go up to the library and turn the lights on any time after I got through practice, you know what I mean, because practice, sometimes, would go late, you know what I mean, and I could go up … any time. … So, you see, things like that that they did, to make sure [we had work], not that I was that great a football player, either. I was just a scrub. …

SI: What did you think of the classes? Did you enjoy the classes?

DV: Yes. I guess I enjoyed the girls more, oh, yes. [laughter] Well, I did okay, you know what I mean. The first term, I got a "B" average, you know.

SI: Yes, we saw your transcript. You had "Bs."

DV: Yes. …

SI: Was it difficult to go from Plainfield High School to college?

DV: No. You have to remember, back in those days, Plainfield … was one of the selected schools. Kids could graduate from Plainfield High School in their upper quarter and go to any college in the nation without an examination, without entrance [exams]. The education at

Plainfield, then, was excellent. So, with the academic subjects, I had no problem, I had no problem. I didn't even think about it. … I never will forget English. English, the diagramming of sentences, do you know anything about it? You wouldn't know anything about it.

SI: Yes, I did that.

DV: You diagrammed sentences?

SI: I could not do it now, but I did that. [laughter]

DV: I couldn't either, but I learned that in seventh grade, and I remember going to school, to Virginia State, and there were kids who'd never heard of it, had never heard of it. I said, "Yes, do this, do that," you know. … No, there was no problem meeting the requirements of the classes, at that time, no, no problem at all.

SI: Do you remember if the war impacted the campus and the people there at all?

DV: Sure, a bunch of guys just like I, who came down there to get in the Enlisted Reserves. Sure, there were a bunch of guys like I. I wasn't the only one.

SI: Were most in the Enlisted Reserves?

DV: No, most of them had been kids who were already in school, and then, a bunch of us heard about the Reserves and we came in and joined, and they kind of let us in. You know, one thing, I don't ever remember taking an entrance examination, not for Virginia State and not for Hampton, either one. Well, that was the kind of school Plainfield was. … If you had finished Plainfield, … you came from a very good school--no, no problem.

SI: You were in the Enlisted Reserve. Did that mean that you had to do any training or wear a uniform, anything like that?

DV: No, we had to wear no uniforms. I don't remember any training at all. It was just that we were earmarked to finish school, to be allowed to finish school, and earmarked for commissions, which never came about. …

SI: One day, you just got a notice saying to report somewhere.

DV: Yes, that's right. I was down in--was it Richmond, I think I had to go to?--because I had to leave Virginia State and I think I had to go to Richmond, was the center that they activated [us at]. I think so.

SI: You wrote Richmond here.

DV: No, I didn't write it; they wrote it. No, I didn't write that thing. [laughter]

SI: Yes, "Place of entry, Richmond, Virginia."

DV: Yes.

SI: On your discharge, it says you enlisted October 13, 1942, and you entered active service on March 22, 1943. That time in-between was when you were at Virginia. Then, in March, you were called back.

DV: Yes. During that time, yes, you remember, I told you I went down to Calco and they gave me a job? … It was during that time, and that was the time, during that time, I took the truck, the ice truck, and drove it, but they were very willing to give me a job, because they needed workers and I had a good record with Calco there. I came to work on time and did my job.

SI: Obviously, one change in the working environment at that time was that they let you drive the truck. Were there other changes? Were there more women in the factory?

DV: I still don't remember seeing women in there, not in that work. That was "buggy-luggy," hard work. Now, there may have been later on, I don't know. I don't know, there may have been later on, because, you know, … there began to be a shortage of men during [the war], and so that, later on, I don't know, but, at that time, no, no women, except in the dispensary.

SI: After you enlisted, take us through the process of actually getting into active service. You reported in Richmond. Did you have to go through any testing? Where did they send you?

DV: Where did I go? I believe I was told to report back at Fort Dix, because I can remember the first night being in the Army at Fort Dix. I reported and I had my little trench coat … and they gave me my GI stuff and I went out in the garbage can and threw my clothes away, [laughter] because I wasn't going to need them anymore.

SI: Your civilian clothes.

DV: Yes, civilian clothes, [laughter] and I did not take basic training at Dix. I was sent out to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Fort Sill is an artillery, basic artillery, you know what I mean, … at that time, anyhow, and I did basic training, artillery training, [with a] 155 howitzer, the great, big guns, but something that discharge does not tell you, I was one of the few black soldiers who was sent down--what the hell is the name? Oh, it's awful, you get old, you can't remember names. I was in Fort Sill, in Oklahoma. I took a basic training there.

SI: You wrote that you were at Fort Clark.

DV: That's it. I was selected to go down to Fort Clark, Texas, as was … I don't know how many, maybe a couple thousand, and we … became a mounted outfit. By mounted, I mean we rode horses, and [I was] issued new clothing, riding britches, boots. … I think I wrote something, in my entrance [papers] or something, what I liked. I used to like to go horseback riding. … I often wondered if the rest of the guys had written that they went horseback riding, or liked to go horseback riding, before the war. I knew there were a couple guys there who were excellent horsemen. They had had experience with horses for years, but [we were] at Fort Clark,

Texas, which is way down at the Mexican border. It's right across from Del Rio, I think the little town called Del Rio, and we would go on weekend passes there, get drunk and raise Cain, and so forth. [To Jan Warner] You didn't hear that. [laughter] … When we were put into this mounted [unit], we became [horsemen]. They mounted us, they put us into a mounted [unit], so that meant most of us had to take equitation. We had to learn how to ride horses and, for me, that was no great problem, because I had experience, having … done some riding before. I liked riding horses.

SI: Where did you ride horses before the war?

DV: Where did I ride horses? [laughter] There was a stable--where the heck is that now?--and it was a black stable, black people owned it, and they had these old nags down there and we'd go down and ride. Where the heck was that? Oh, we thought we were having fun. [laughter]

SI: Was it in Plainfield?

DV: Oh, no, oh, no, and we couldn't go riding up at Watchung Stables. They wouldn't let us go there, because we were black. You know, before I enlisted in the Reserves, as most young men [were] at that time, we were awful war conscious and we knew the war was coming, or was that right after? Had the war started? I've forgotten. … Right after high school, we went down to enlist, in the Navy, the Marines and the Army. No, we stopped at the Army; a couple of us went in. The Marines wouldn't have us. The excuses were, "There's something the matter with the bite of your teeth," or something. This is because we were black. The Navy said, "No, we can't have you, except as messmen. You can go in and cook the food and serve the [officers]." So, we said no to that, and there were a couple of us who did take the Army and they went into … West Point, where there was a black unit. Did you know that?

SI: No, I did not.

DV: … See, all this segregation was so prevalent. There was a black unit up at West Point who trained the plebes [members of the lowest class at the US Military Academy], who gave the equitation to the plebes, the students at West Point, and they kept their horses. They raked the stalls out. … A couple of our friends went there and I said no, and that's how I got into the Enlisted Reserves. … [Editor's Note: From 1907 to 1947, a detachment of African-American enlisted cavalrymen from the Ninth Cavalry Regiment served at the US Military Academy, training West Point cadets in riding, drill and tactics.]

SI: Okay. You had mentioned that you went to college to stay out of the war. Was that because you knew that if you went in, you would not be able to fight or go into an infantry unit, anything like that, that you would be limited to these menial tasks?

DV: I just did not want to go in the war, that's all. Number one, I knew … the Army ran segregated units, I knew that, and here I was, down in Fort Clark, Texas, in this big, segregated horse outfit. I ended up there, anyhow, which was very unusual, because, at that time, … outside of the show outfits who'd run the funerals, … they still have them, there were no mounted outfits. … In fact, we used to question, "What in the hell are they going to do with us in the war,

overseas, riding horses?" and we were an artillery unit. We trained and fired the seventy-five-millimeter howitzer, which is a small gun. It could fit from here to there. We did not need the tremendous lead teams of horses. … We only had four horses per gun, oh, and a caisson [a horse-drawn vehicle used to haul artillery ordnance and coffins during military funeral processions], and that was normally for a 105-[millimeter], which is a bigger gun. That's the infantry support; … well, at that time. I don't know what it is now. You had the lead, the swing and the wheel teams. You had six horses pulling, but, for our little gun, we only had four. We had the lead and the swing team. Oh, I forgot, we just had four horses, that's all, two teams, and we trained down in Fort Clark, Texas, and the rumor was that we were going to go over as a mounted outfit. Well, you've got to go over as something--at least we knew we were going to go over as something, so, okay. There was one outfit they kept, though. You know, when we got over, that's when they disbanded the mounted, and we were very angry about that, too.

SI: When you went overseas.

DV: We went overseas, they disbanded, and we became truck drivers, engineers. They just disbanded us all together, with the exception of the Fifth Reconnaissance. … I ran into some of these [men] and they used them over in the mountains in Italy, and that wasn't the purpose. We were supposed to have been a harassing unit, with the horses, to be able to [get closer to the enemy], and we could go into the mountainous terrain, because we had the horses that we could [maneuver on], and we were supposed to move in, fire, move back out, move, go, fire, to be able to harass [the enemy] and support infantry. … When you got there, they disbanded us, with the exception of the Fifth Reconnaissance, Fifth Recon, and I don't know why they kept [them], but they're recon. Just like their name, they reconnoitered. They moved about to observe and what-you-call-it, and then, send back what the situation was. So, they kept them. … They fought in Italy. That's all I know.

SI: You trained with this mounted unit in Fort Clark, Texas. Then, did you go overseas right after that or were there any other training posts?

DV: There was no training and we were still in boots and britches when we got aboard the troop train and rode all across Texas. Texas is big. Oh, God, we rode [for] days in Texas, all across, and went to Hampton Roads, Chesapeake Bay, [Virginia], where the Atlantic Fleet is--well, they bring it in when they want to--and that's where we … got ready for getting aboard ship and we were in a convoy, you know. …

SI: Do you remember the name of the ship you were on?

DV: No, I don't remember the name of the ship that I was on going over, but I remember very well the name of the ship I was on coming back. Coming back, we were more--we were at sea a longer time than Christopher Columbus took to come from [Spain] to discover [the Americas]. [laughter] We were. We were twenty-some days at sea. Well, at that time, the boat was named the SS *Joseph Gale.* I don't know who Joseph Gale was, never did find out, [laughter] but I can remember, we left from Marseilles, [France], because, see, we had come up from [Africa]. [Editor's Note: The SS Joseph Gale, Hull Number 0594, a War Shipping Administration transport operated by the Army Transportation Service, carried a maximum of 550 troops. It was

named for Joseph Gale (1800-1881), an American pioneer who helped settle Oregon.] … When we first went over, we went into Africa, North Africa--where the heck was it? I've forgotten where the heck it was.

SI: Oran?

DV: Yes.

SI: Casablanca?

DV: Yes, Oran; *Dirty Gertie from Bizerte*. [Editor's Note: Mr. Van Blake is referring to a bawdy song American servicemen sang in North Africa.] [laughter] Anyway, we weren't there long, because the Italian Campaign opened up and we were immediately sent up. Now, we're truck drivers or engineers. I don't know what the heck happened to the rest of the guys. Well, there's a side story I didn't tell you about. I got married back while we were back in POE, Port of Embarkation, at Hampton Roads. I got married there. I went AWOL [absent without official leave] to get married [laughter] and, when I came back from my wedding ceremony, and I didn't stay but two or three days, my outfit had been put aboard ship and were gone. So, I never knew what happened to them. They didn't even have records, my records. My records were put aboard ship, too, and I came back to the post. … Then, the way I left was, I told the clerk, "Write me out a pass," and so, he wrote me out a pass. … I believe I've got that; I used to have it … at the house. I'll bet you I know where it is, and he wrote me out this pass and signed this captain's name and I walked out, and I had contacted Fran. Fran was in Philadelphia and I had an aunt in Washington and I told Frances, "Meet me in Washington at my aunt's house," and she went to my aunt's house and I don't know that she might have been there a day or so before I got there, or something. … Then, when I got there, my aunt tried to discourage me. She said, "Do you kids … really want to do this?" We said, "Yes, we want to get married." In what state was it, Delaware or Maryland, that you could get married without any problem? You can walk up …

SI: Maryland, I think.

DV: Maryland, I think it was Maryland, too.

SI: No blood test.

DV: Yes. So, see, it wasn't too far of a ride from Philadelphia to go to Maryland and we got married there and went back to Washington, DC, and stayed for a day or so. … Then, I came on back to Hampton, Hampton Roads, and they didn't know who I was. There was no record of me. They didn't even know what outfit I … had been in [laughter] and it was a POE. It was a Port of Embarkation for all of the troops going over. … I mean, many different outfits were there, in different stages, getting ready to go over, and my outfit had gone, so, I didn't know what to do. … I went to someplace and … they had a bunk there and I went to sleep. I woke up the next morning and ate, and so, I stayed there a couple weeks and, [laughter] finally, this captain, he said, "Soldier, where are you supposed to be?" [I] told him, "I don't know. I'm just here." He said, "You make messes, you don't do any duty, you don't do any…" He knew what the heck I [was doing]. [laughter] So, I think he arranged it real quick that I was on the next group out, …

but, see, now, see, I was cut off completely then from any of the other guys that I had been training with. …

SI: You came over by yourself.

DV: Well, no, then, they stuck me in an outfit … and I was in a trucking outfit. They put me in a trucking outfit.

SI: That was in Virginia that they put you in a trucking outfit.

DV: I guess it was there, I've forgotten, yes, or was it in Africa, when we first got there, and then, they gave us the trucks then? but, anyway, we weren't long in Africa, and then, we went over into Italy, to the Italian Campaign. It says it in there somewhere, and we went in just below Naples, in Napoli.

SI: In the Salerno area; were you there?

DV: Yes.

SI: I am trying to figure out what it says.

DV: What, you mean this purple stuff [referring to the ink on copies of orders and other military documents] there? I don't know.

SI: No, it says ETO.

DV: ETO is European Theater.

SI: MTO, is that Mediterranean?

DV: Mediterranean. Yes, that was it.

SI: You arrived there in March of 1944.

DV: '44.

SI: You were sent to Italy in September of 1944. [Editor's Note: The interviewer misinterpreted Mr. Van Blake's military records and misspoke here. Mr. Van Blake left the United States on February 27, 1944, for the Mediterranean Theater of Operations (MTO) and arrived on March 9, 1944, in North Africa. The MTO included North Africa, Sicily and Italy. He departed the MTO for the European Theater of Operations (ETO), meaning Southern France, on September 11, 1944, arriving on September 14, 1944. He left the ETO on November 17, 1945, and returned to the United States on December 5, 1945.]

DV: … Yes, September 11th, yes, took us four days there. Yes, that was quite a trip. We were put aboard this British [ship]. It was a dirty ship, oh, God, and we had--they weren't bunks, you

had hammocks. You slept in hammocks and you ate right underneath. You rolled the hammocks up in the day and you're served [there]. … I'll never forget, they had bitter beans, but they had butter, the British had butter, and this was coming across the Mediterranean, because I remember we saw the Rock of Gibraltar, saw Gibraltar. … You know, they didn't give the soldier, the average soldier, … much in the way of what direction he was going. … Sometimes, we'd look at the *Stars and Stripes* to see, "Where the hell are we?" … because we didn't know. Oh, we could tell, later on, by the towns that we went through, and so forth.

SI: When you were in North Africa, you were pretty much in the same area. You did not move around much.

DV: Yes, yes.

SI: Did you have any duties there?

DV: No, not that much, no. We really didn't get into it until Italy.

SI: Okay. I was wondering, since you were thrown into this trucking unit, how long did it take you to …

DV: Train?

SI: Train, but, also, become friends with the people you were serving with, get to know them.

DV: You learned it as you went along, and, no, there was no training or anything. … In Italy, you know, [there are] a lot of mountains, you know, and the area along the coast is about the only flat area around, and truckers moved around a lot. That's good and that can be bad. You know of Anzio. Well, we were put aboard ship to truck for supplies … at Anzio. Now, all this is along the times where, with the guys we knew and what-you-call-it, there's discussions and what-you-call-it, "What the hell are we doing here?" There were fights among us. "Should we be doing this?" and, of course, you know they shot the hell out of us up in Anzio. I'll never forget, one night, this officer had us line the damn trucks up and we told him, "No, you don't want to do that," because, you know, they had the white stars right on [the trucks] … and, sure enough, that night, they did that. That was one of the targets of the shelling. It blew up the entire [unit]. [laughter] My truck was blown up, the other guys' trucks were blown up, and we were only about, maybe, a hundred yards or so from them. I had a little musette bag [canvas backpack], I remember, I had some things in, lost. [Editor's Note: In Operation SHINGLE, the Allies landed an invasion force at Anzio and Nettuno on January 22, 1944, to bypass the German Winter Line and seize Rome. When the Allies failed to move in from the landing zone, a marshy basin surrounded by mountains, German forces were able to encircle the beachhead and flood the area. The Allies endured months of intense shelling and casualties until a breakout was achieved in late May. The Allies then liberated Rome on June 4, 1944.]

SI: It was in the truck.

DV: Yes, it blew up with the truck. [laughter] …

SI: When you got to Italy, were you sent into Anzio, or was that later?

DV: No, we didn't go in to [Anzio]. We came in at …

SI: South of Naples.

DV: Yes, Naples, yes, and we moved up. … We were supplying, you know, wherever the shells, food, anything [was needed]. So very often, we were in convoy and we're strafed, you know. They were attacking us. … They'd see these trucks moving along and we were strafed, and a lot of us got it there, and then, you remember, they had the Jerries [German soldiers] on the run, the Germans are on the run, at that time. They had moved them out of North Africa, out of Africa, and they were moving them up the Italian Peninsula, and so, a lot of times, there were small outfits who were abandoned there.

SI: Okay, they were left behind.

DV: Yes, they were left, and we're coming along and, surprise, we'd run into them, and this is where we caught the hell, but it makes no difference if you're killed from some major action or what the hell, if you [get killed].

SI: Did they arm the truckers?

DV: Yes, well, yes. We had machine guns on them and, I'll never forget, [laughter] one time, it was wintertime and the Jerries were going up this hill and the Jerries were hitting us, going up the hills. … They tried to have a driver and a gunner, but, I remember, they didn't have enough guys for the guns. … [laughter] They got some lieutenants, they got some "shavetails" [slang for a new lieutenant], to come along and they would put them on the back of the trucks with the guns and sit there and these guys had to do the firing when we'd go out. We tried to drive the goddarn trucks and we got past a point [laughter] and I had this officer on the truck and it was cold--it was wintertime--and the truck, you know, … the trucks had the temporary sides you could put up, you know. … [laughter] After awhile, I heard this knocking on the side. He said, "Hey, soldier;" I'm warm in here, now, see. Well, I'm [relatively] warm, you know, not warm, but I'm warm. You know, it's not toasty warm, but [he was] saying, "Let me come in." I said, "You're supposed to be out there with the seventy-five," [laughter] [Mr. Van Blake may mean a fifty-caliber machine-gun] and he said, "Yes, but, man, it's cold out here." I said, "Come on in," and I let him come in, [laughter] but it was just so funny. I'm a private, driving the truck, and he's an officer, out there, freezing to death. I don't know where he went, I don't know what happened to him, I don't know anything, but that was just one of the funny little … things that happened. Oh, there were hundreds of them.

SI: What do you remember about the first few days and weeks once you were in Italy?

DV: Well, see, we had been over in North Africa and I heard the people speaking French. Well, I'd studied French in high school and I began recognizing some of the words, and after awhile--and they gave you books, you know. They gave you little books.

SI: Like phrase books?

DV: Yes, well, you know, how to say, "Good morning," how to say, "I need some bread," "I need directions," and things like that. They gave you books and I'd study them, and they found out that I picked it up pretty good. [laughter] … They used me as interpreter for the outfit for quite awhile, and this was in Africa, and then, we weren't there long, though, because the action in Africa was mainly over and Italy, the campaign had moved into Italy, and so, we went into Italy. … I was able to transfer the French to Italian, because … a lot of the words, I could pick up, you know what I mean. [laughter] So, again, I was still [interpreting]. I got so [that] I could converse with the Italian people, you know what I mean. I got what's going on and they named me as--now, this was nothing official, on the books, or anything--I was the interpreter for the outfit again, but, there, I mean, this meant, a lot of times, I didn't have to do any kind of duty. I just sat back and waited for something, [laughter] … but we moved up Italy. We moved past Rome, never got to Rome, but they didn't bomb Rome. I didn't know that at the time, you know what I mean. Now, I know that it was a general pact that was made between the Allies and the Germans not to shell Rome, which is a beautiful thing, but there were towns, little towns we went into, on the coast. … Then, they pulled us back to Naples, those of us who was going into Anzio, and they put us aboard these ships, trucks and everything, infantry, artillery, everything. … I believe [World War II soldier and cartoonist] Bill Mauldin said something about the port battalion guys. Do you know what the port battalion guys are?

SI: They were in charge of loading the ship; is that right?

DV: Loading the ships and unloading the ships, and these were black outfits, and, on the way up to Anzio, about a day or so before we got there--no, I guess maybe more than one day--these guys got awful quiet and got awful busy, getting things unleashed, getting things lined up, and those of us who hadn't been there, we didn't know what the heck was [up]. Well, we knew something was going on. These guys are getting ready for a landing and, [when] they got into the area where they were going, they were going like crazy. The front of the ships dropped down, "Boom," and off we came, but we didn't meet the [same situation as in Normandy]; well, at that time, there was no Normandy. … Anzio was before Normandy. … I kind of get the feeling they might have used Anzio as a training ground, and the port battalion guys, I mean, they gave you hell, "Get that damned truck out of here. Let's go, goddarn it. You guys move up there. Come on, because we're getting the hell out of here," because they knew what the hell was coming. The Jerries were up there on the hill and the airplanes, they'd send what-you-call-its [bombs] down. So, that meant they got you off that damn boat quick, and that was it.

SI: Anzio is famous for the fact that it did not have to turn out the way it did. The Allies could have gotten off the beach, but the Germans were allowed to move in. What, if anything, do you remember about that?

DV: I don't know any tactical points. …

SI: Was there a point when it was obvious that the Germans were now in a position to attack? Do you remember being under attack there?

DV: They were in a position to attack all the damn time. You know, Anzio sat down here and there was a big, almost like a big hill around it.

SI: Like a bowl, almost?

DV: Yes, yes, almost like a bowl, yes, and any time they got ready, … whatever they decided was the day's firing problems, and they just [fired in artillery], yes.

SI: Were you under attack the first day?

DV: No, we weren't on the first day, no, but we weren't in the first movement, either. [laughter]

SI: You did not land in the first landing.

DV: No, no. They had established the beaches before we got there, but, now, we were the truckers who were to come in and we'd bring in supplies and move them around and what-you-call-it and that was our job.

SI: How long were you at Anzio?

DV: I don't remember--six months? I don't remember. It got quiet after awhile. I guess they drove the Jerries out and it got quiet, and then, we were put aboard a boat, again, and went into Marseilles, but, I remember, one day, I'm--[laughter] you know, truckers move a lot. You get a truck with a [shipment], you had to go five miles over here and find, sometimes, an outfit to unload something, pick up a load there and you go ahead, … maybe had ammunition shells for an artillery unit, and then, you'd go back and pick up something or other or they wouldn't want something or other. So, you'd move around a lot, and so, the opportunity for you not to be certain places at certain times was very available to you. [laughter] Before Anzio, I was, yes, this was in Naples, and this was in Naples at the time of Vesuvius. [Editor's Note: Mount Vesuvius erupted in March 1944.] You know, Vesuvius erupted during the war and we were there, and I saw this truck and it had, "376th Engineers," on the what-you-call-it, down there, [bumper], and the only reason I knew about the 376th Engineers is because I had a buddy, … with whom I was raised, and I knew about the 376 by the what-you-call-it letters, the little V-mail. [Editor's Note: Victory mail or V-mail used a system of microfilming letter forms to conserve cargo space on ships carrying war materiel.]

SI: V-mail, yes.

DV: Yes, that's what [it was], and everything was blocked out and marked out, you know, … but I remember one letter anyhow, that had, "376 Engineers." … Where he was, I didn't know, but, when I saw this truck, I asked the guy, I said, "Hey, you, you with the 376th?" He was a black guy. He said, "Yes." I said, "You know Chris Lipscombe?" [He] said, "Yes, he's Sergeant Chris Lipscombe." "Okay, when are you going back to the outfit?" So, I went back with him, and, yes, now, that's how I remember--after Anzio, we were put aboard troop[ships], but I came back and I ran into Chris. … I don't think I was a good soldier, because I took advantage of the

fact that, when you're a trucker, you could move a lot and people didn't know where you were all the time and you could say that you were at certain places when you weren't. [laughter] … I really think my company commander was ready to get rid of me, which was all right with me, but, somehow or other, the 376th Engineers came up and he sent me there. Well, this was like throwing a rabbit in a briar patch, [laughter] because my friend, my buddy, Chris was there, and I went all the rest of the way with them, with the engineers. I don't know what happened to the trucking outfit, and we went into Marseilles, and then, we stopped there. Just beyond Marseilles, we stopped. We stayed there until the end of the war, yes. [Editor's Note: The unit listed on Mr. Van Blake's discharge is the 1372nd Engineer Depot Truck Company.]

SI: What did you do when you were with the engineering unit?

DV: … The first duty they gave me was, you know, the communications was a what-you-call-it box?

SI: Switchboard?

DV: Yes, a switchboard box, you know, and for the different companies. It was never liked very much, because it drew fire, you know, and you never got close to the rest of the outfit, because they set you off somewhere out there by yourself, but I got that first, and I had had some experience as a …

SI: In the artillery?

DV: No, not the artillery; the company clerk. They needed a company clerk, up in headquarters, and so, I applied and I got it. Oh, I don't know whether I applied, but they told me, "Just come up there," that's all, and so, I went into headquarters and that's where Chris was, in headquarters, because he was "Heavy Equipment Lip," and engineers work--you know that. Anything that had to be done, we did it.

SI: Were you doing engineering jobs around that one area?

DV: Well, I was in, … now, I'm [in] headquarters. …

SI: However, the unit was doing those jobs in that area.

DV: Yes, there were four companies, A, B, C and D Company, yes, whatever needed to be done, roads, bridges, water. By the time [I got there], water was a problem, getting water to units, … and we had, this is where Chris had, … we called him "Heavy Equipment Lip," because there was a big tank truck and we could get it filled with water and deliver it to the various companies.

SI: I want to go back to when you first got into Italy. You mentioned that there was a lot of strafing [air-to-ground firing] and the *Luftwaffe* [German Air Force] was still around.

DV: Well, that was--I was in the trucking outfit then.

SI: Yes.

DV: Yes, sure, there [was].

SI: The German Air Force was still a big problem.

DV: Yes.

SI: How often were you attacked by German planes?

DV: There was no clock on it.

SI: Okay, do you remember it happening a lot?

DV: No schedule. If it's one, it's a lot. [laughter]

SI: Yes, I can imagine that.

DV: Hell, what-you-call-it, bullets coming down, the tracers coming down. You see them popping and hitting off rocks. I don't know, I guess the length of time we would get strafing, once or twice a month, and the other thing is all according to where we were, what we were moving and where we were going. If we were carrying shells to artillery units, we might run into a problem.

SI: Did you get as far up as Monte Cassino?

DV: No, I was glad I wasn't there, no, no. I was very glad [that] we didn't do any supplying there. No, … we all knew it was a hell hole, because, you know, word of mouth gets around, yes, "Guys up in Monte Cassino [are] catching hell."

SI: During an attack, whether it was one of these units that was left behind or an air attack, would you have to stay with your truck or would you try to find shelter outside of the truck?

DV: We'd try to find it [shelter] outside … the truck, and this is when we questioned that damn officer who told us to line the trucks up for our overnight what-you-call-it, because it put all the [trucks in a row], and they dropped them what-you-call-its, those flares, and they could see the damn things as good as hell. No, you stayed away from your truck as much as possible, during an attack.

SI: When you were attacked by these small units, would you just get out of there or would you have to fight them?

DV: Yes, we'd have to, yes. It's all according to who was available. If we had one or two guys, we'd try to do what we could. If a whole unit was in, we'd wipe them up pretty quickly, because, really, there wasn't no [resistance]; … they were left behind. … They had been cut off from their

supplies. They had been cut off from their what-you-call-it. They were just left out there to do the best they could. Most of them surrendered.

SI: During those attacks, would you have to fire a weapon?

DV: Huh?

SI: Did you ever have to fire a weapon?

DV: Oh, yes. You didn't go … to the bathroom [if] you didn't take your rifle with you. We didn't have rifles; we had the carbines, the small carbines, [rifles with short barrels]. …

SI: Okay, the smaller version.

DV: Yes, because they were much more convenient, yes.

SI: Particularly in Italy, what about the weather? The weather has been talked about often, with the mud and the rain.

DV: … Let's see. Well, down in Naples, we had the Vesuvius erupting.

SI: Did that cover everything with soot in the area?

DV: Soot, dust all over the place. Most of us didn't even know what the hell was happening and didn't think of it too much until we got home and found out that this is a very rare thing for a volcano to be [erupting]. You know, it don't erupt every week, you know, and the weather, [when] we were there, wasn't too bad. Italy has good weather. It wasn't too bad. …

SI: Okay. Did you have any problems with the trucks, like not being able to get through because of mud?

DV: Not only that, sometimes, trucks, oh, I can remember not having enough wheels for your truck, and so, you would, as best you could, you may steal the wheels from the truck that was next to you, if it was parked there. … I've forgotten the number of our trucking outfit. There was one trucking outfit, was all-black, and it was called the Red Ball Express. You know about it?

SI: I have heard about that. They were in …

DV: They were in North Africa and Italy, I know, and then, I think they stopped at Marseilles, too, but those guys, … all of them had one, two trucks shot out from under them, and this is a black unit. Trucks [would] run off the side of the mountains in Italy. [Editor's Note: The term "Red Ball Express" describes the logistical supply line established by trucking units, primarily African-American units, from the Normandy beachhead to the front in Northern Europe in the Summer and Fall of 1944.] I understand that in the movie *Red Ball Express* (1952) soldiers were white.

SI: You would have to travel at night and you could not have your headlights on.

DV: It's all according [to the situation]. Yes, if you did any night traveling, you had those little slit, those little what-you-call-its? [light blockers on headlights and taillights], and that was hard, because you had to stay close enough to see the light. The only lights are only little slits and, nine times out of ten, you were tired.

SI: When you were in the field, how did you live? Did you live in tents or did you dig a foxhole? Where did you get food?

DV: Yes, if we felt we're going to be in [a bad area], we were truckers, and so, we'd move. Oh, I can remember times, … you remember, the Italians were an enemy at that time, you know, and I can remember the time we would go into a town and order the people out, leave the trucks out where we could and just order the people out, so that we could sleep. I remember one town we went into, and, you know, I went back and saw … my grandson, (Brian?), was located in Bari. I think it's Bari.

SI: Yes.

DV: A little town between Rome and it's farther north of Rome, a little town, and I think I was in that town during the war, yes. [Editor's Note: Mr. Van Blake may be mistaken. Bari is approximately three hundred miles southeast of Rome.] … We rolled into this town--and this is during the day--and the town had built washtubs for the people of the town. There was big, great, big tubs, like here to here, and they went down the hill like this.

SI: Like in tiers?

DV: Yes, no hot water around, just cold water, just water, and so, the object was, you started with your dirty clothes at the bottom and you wash in there, and then, you went up to the next higher one and rinse it there, then, you went up to the next higher one, and, about the fourth one or so, you're in fresh water, but your clothes are all clean up there. [laughter] So, we started washing our clothes, because I don't remember the last time we [could]. Socks were stinking and whatnot. So, all of us got out and washed up, and so, we started bathing, right there in the middle of town. [laughter] All the women all ran and we said, "The hell with them," and so, we bathed, right there, and we bathed ourselves just like the clothes were bathed. We were dirty at the bottom, so, we started there and we worked our way on up, until we rinsed off at the top.

SI: You mentioned that you were the *de facto* interpreter for your unit.

DV: Yes.

SI: What were your impressions of interacting with the Italians and the French?

DV: Well, you remember the Italians, like I said …

SI: They had been an enemy, yes.

DV: Yes, they had been an enemy. Back in Africa, they were the enemy, and Italy was quite tired of being in the war. They were very cooperative, even though we were the enemy. If they had anything they could give us, bread, soup or anything like that, they would give it to us, especially [since] we were walking around with the guns and they didn't, the what-you-call-it people, didn't have guns, civilians didn't have guns. … Some of us … took advantage of them, of this power, and there were some ugly things, but there are ugly things in war all the time. There's no difference. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Let me just turn the recorder back on; go ahead.

DV: We were the black, one of the black, supplying [units]. We were one of the service units, but, like I said, there were those of us who were killed and, always, you knew you were in harm's way, you could be. Like I said, … if you got to a place where you could go outside to the bathroom, you made sure you carried your gun with you, because you never knew if one of those units would be, … the Jerries would be, moving in or moving around. They were left [behind], so, they were [around]. As far as the great movement, going moving up the Italian Peninsula, no, they weren't shit. They were abandoned, really, they were abandoned, but they'd kill you just as dead. Like I said, though, most of them surrendered.

SI: Would the Germans mine the roads? Was that a danger for you?

DV: Oh, yes, it is. That's where the engineers came in and the mine sweeps. There's one in here--where the heck is it? [Editor's Note: Mr. Van Blake is referring to *Up Front* (1945), a memoir and collection of illustrations by Bill Mauldin, World War II veteran and Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist, a copy of which was in the room where the interview was conducted. Mauldin's work, originally published in wartime publications, particularly the US Armed Forces newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, depicted the daily challenges faced by the typical American foot soldier through his characters Willie and Joe.] [laughter] Where the heck is it? Well, anyway, in here, he's got a drawing of a whole damn army behind this one little GI, [laughter] this one little Joe, with a mine sweep. He's going along and this whole army's behind him, [laughter] waiting for him to clear the road. Yes, … as engineers, those were one of our jobs, yes, the whole time.

SI: You mentioned, before the interview, that you saw a lot of Bill Mauldin cartoons when you were in the service.

DV: Well, the *Stars and Stripes* came out. I think they came out every two weeks--was that it?

SI: I am not sure. I do not know how frequently *Stars and Stripes* came out.

DV: Yes, and we used to joke about it, "Let's get the *Stars and Stripes* and see where the hell we are," because nobody knew. Yes, I remember this one, "The retreating blisters hurt you as much as advancing blisters." [laughter]

SI: How did you get along with the French when you were in Marseilles, and then, north of Marseilles?

DV: … Oh, the French came back to me again, see, because, … in North Africa, we spoke French there. I don't mean "we," but you know what I mean. The communication with the civilians was French, then, there was Italy, Italian, and then, in Marseilles, there again, and it came back and it evidently came back better than it was, … because, then, we were stationed [there], you know. … Now, I was in the engineering outfit then. I was in headquarters. … We were outside of a little town called Marignane [a suburb of Marseilles] then and, because [of my language skills], here again, … well, I didn't get any pay for it and I doubt if you'll find anything in any--oh, the records, they say, are gone now, records of it--but I was the unofficial interpreter for the unit. [laughter] In other words, if any of the civilians came in for any problems they had or anything, and if they couldn't get the communication, they'd call me in for communication, and we were outside this little town and we had stopped then, see. We weren't advancing and the war had gone on. I don't know who our company--not our company--but our battalion commander was, but he must have known somebody pretty high up there, because we didn't …

SI: You just stayed.

DV: We stayed there, and so, [laughter] outside of this town called Marignane, which I understand, now, you know, it's very nice now, you know.

SI: Fancy, yes.

DV: [Wealthy] people there. It's on the Cote d'Azur [in France]. … I remember little towns that I read about, that we were in in Southern France, and now it's really [upscale], but we were outside of Marignane. … We had been there so long, they used to call me "The Mayor of Marignane," [laughter] though we knew the mayor, we knew the people, the people knew us--we knew the bar, the restaurant owner, the what-you-call-its. [laughter] … Really, you know, that wasn't bad then. … The fighting had passed us, so, we were living, and the war ended and we were there.

SI: What was V-E Day like? [Editor's Note: V-E Day, or Victory in Europe Day, occurred on May 8, 1945.]

DV: I remember, well, you know, just general happiness, what-you-call-it, drunkenness, and then, we gave a march. We marched through town, because we were the only unit that was there, and we marched in the town of Marignane. I've got a picture, too. I don't know where any pictures are anymore, but there was a picture of us parading after the war, battalion commander and the rest of us--not the rest of us--battalion commander, the officers and what-you-call-it, and then, the rest of us. … Yes, we paraded after. We had a V-E parade, Victory in Europe parade.

SI: Up to the point where you stopped in Southern France, did you go in as part of the invasion force or were you there afterwards? Was there fighting when you first went into Southern France?

DV: No. Well, evidently, they had done--I tell you what I think, as I stop and think about it, see, they were getting ready for Normandy. [Editor's Note: The Allied invasion of Normandy, France, began on June 6, 1944.] The biggest pressure, the biggest what-you-call-it, was over in England, getting ready for it and what-you-call-it, and I imagine, … after they had run the Jerries out of Africa and conquered Italy, they were just bottling up [a military tactic used to contain forces] the bottom. This is what I imagine--they were just bottling up. We were there just as bottling up forces, that's all, … and going into Marseilles, we [took] ships, came off boats, you know, and got on small boats, came aboard. …

SI: You were in communications for a little while, but, then, you were moved into the headquarters unit.

DV: Oh, yes, yes. When I first got with the engineering outfit, yes, … they made me; it was just I was the …

SI: You operated the switchboards.

DV: Yes, switchboard, that's all; communications? That's all, [laughter] but that was the center of the communications for the whole battalion. For the whole battalion, that was the center of communication, and so, it was a very important point, I guess. [laughter] Anyway, I didn't want to be there and, as soon as I got the chance to get into headquarters, I went in.

SI: When you were in headquarters, was it more like a set job?

DV: Yes, as far as I was a …

SI: A clerk?

DV: A clerk, yes. I wrote up the daily reports, you know what I mean, and, you know, I was typing whatever had to be done and, you know, the general things that clerks do, yes, and I considered myself very lucky to have it.

SI: Would you have a set shift or would you be on call all the time?

DV: Yes. There had to be a CQ [charge of quarters] there, had to be somebody there at all times. … Then, you had a CQ, somebody who was there at all [times]. Now, that went through shifts [for] enlisted men, but there had to be one commissioned officer also who was available. He might be back there sleeping, but he was available, he had to be, and we had our daily duty then. We'd come in there every morning, seven o'clock. Was it seven o'clock, eight o'clock? I've forgotten. … It was good duty, yes.

SI: I imagine, when you were in the trucking unit, that it was more like an all-day thing, and all-night, too.

DV: It was all the time, all the time. You were supposed to have been on duty twelve hours on, twelve hours off, but, if you were moving a lot, you couldn't. A lot of times, you didn't get those twelve hours off. You were on call to go any damn place. … I remember, your arms and your muscles in your legs, especially arms, they were always twitching, you know what I mean, and we learned that we weren't getting enough rest. We were young, but we weren't getting enough rest. … When you stop and think of it, even driving a truck or doing any other thing, for twelve hours, and then, twelve hours off, that's a long stint, but that's what you had to do, and I can remember, … they went through the records and they found the men that had the higher IQs, you know, and they were calling for men who were capable to go to OCS [Officer Candidate School] and officers' training school. They needed officers, and I'm trying to remember when. This was in Italy, because I remember having the feeling--see, I was now married. … I had gotten married before I went over and I was married and I began to think--evidently, I had a pretty good score on my IQ test or something--and I was thinking, "Jeez, I ought to do something in this war to make my wife proud of me." So, I signed up for that officers' training thing. Of course, the Captain of the outfit came up and said, "Van Blake, you got the score. Don't you want to become an officer?" "Okay, I'll go," but, then, before he put my name in, I went to him, "No, you take my name off it," [laughter] because they needed lieutenants. In other words, they were killing them fast, and I said, "That's all right. I'll go back to my wife alive and be a no hero, rather than her hear from me as a hero, killed in the war. No, I'll go back alive, that's all right, if I can." [laughter] So, I didn't go into it, and then, on the other hand, I thought to myself, "Why the hell should I go up and volunteer for something and get my butt killed?" no, and then, I haven't told you about the arguments that we would have and the fights that we would have over resisting and hating--not just the war, but the fact that we were in a black unit in the war. We were fighting in a segregated unit and, of course, you know, there were, you know about the flying--what was it, 99th Pursuit Squadron, the what-you-call-its? That was a black unit and they had a tremendous record and, in Italy, I went on pass one weekend, I think it was, and I don't know how I found them. I don't know whether I knew they were there or [what], but I found the base where they operated from and they were so glad to see me, and I knew a couple of the guys.

SI: Really?

DV: Yes. Oh, we were all young men and, yes, they were glad to see me. Nobody came in to see them. … They'd have their flight duty and they'd go out, and I didn't know what it was all about. … Then, I can remember looking up and seeing our airplanes come over, the bombers, [Mr. Van Blake claps], "Go get them, go get them." Yes, so, there was a tremendous mixture of feelings.

SI: Where did most of the men you served with stand on that?

DV: Whether we were right fighting or whether we were wrong fighting, is that what you mean?

SI: Yes.

DV: I mean "we" black units--oh, no, the war effort, we knew, was necessary. We knew that that crazy nut up there, Hitler, was a son of a bitch. So, we knew we were right as far as being in

the war for that. We should have been in a regular outfit, you know what I mean. Whether we were truckers or infantrymen or whether we're artillerymen or what, … it should have been all [integrated] and, at the end of the war, or toward the end of the war, it was, because, I remember, I was in my tent and we had what-you-call-it tents, big ones, company tents--not company, squad tents--and I was in there one day and these white guys came in. … I'm looking at them, because I wasn't used to having white guys next to me. "What the hell [are] you guys doing here?" "Well, this is such-and-such outfit." "Yes, I know." "Well, we're a part of you." "How the hell [did] you get to be part of us?" "This is where we're ordered," and I remember them coming in. [laughter] … I never bothered with them, but I don't think most people knew that, know that, this had happened before--now, when was [it]? I remember when Roosevelt died. [Editor's Note: Franklin D. Roosevelt, 32nd President of the United States, died on April 12, 1945.]

SI: That was in April of 1945.

DV: Yes. See, I remember when he died, so, I guess that was when what-you-call-it took over.

SI: Truman. [Editor's Note: Harry S. Truman succeeded Franklin Roosevelt and became the 33rd President of the United States.]

DV: Truman, and one thing he did, he integrated, or the integration [of the US Armed Forces] came during his [Presidency], and I wonder if that's what was the beginning of it, but I remember these white guys [had] come in. [Editor's Note: In July 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981, ending segregation in the Armed Forces.]

SI: This is in the engineering unit.

DV: Yes, this is in the engineering unit.

SI: Okay.

DV: These white guys came in, "What the hell are you doing here?" [laughter]

SI: Was it just a couple of white guys or were there more that came in?

DV: Yes. No, I don't remember a whole lot. I just remember about three or four to our squad, to the squad, you know what I mean. We were in headquarters and I really don't know what the hell job they were doing. Now, the V-E Day was what?

SI: May [May 8, 1945]. It was just a few weeks after Roosevelt passed away.

DV: … We were out in '45, December '45. We were discharged. … Remember, they had the point system then. Oh, you know about the point system?

SI: Yes, but, please, go on.

DV: Huh?

SI: Tell me about your experience with the point system.

DV: Well, you know, the guys who'd been over the longest and the guys that'd seen the most action, they got the most points, and we'd been over quite a long time. Was it two years, two-and-a-half years, something like that? … I remember, they sent us to a "repple-depple," replacement center, you know, where they sent [soldiers to be reassigned], and, there, the old guys were going out and the new guys were coming in. [laughter] Of course, the war was over, so, … there wasn't no big, real problem about it. We were glad about going out [returning home] and it wasn't too bad for them, because they were coming in [when] the war was over. What I remember, … the war was over, so, we felt we could do pretty much as we damn well pleased, and this officer, a black officer--and I ran across him again at Hampton after the war--we were bivouacked [stationed in a temporary shelter] in a town, … like a housing development almost. [laughter] … See, one thing they don't talk about, they don't talk about the role of the woman during the war. Somebody mentioned something about Eisenhower's tankers. I don't know about it, but I read of it somewhere, and it didn't surprise me that Eisenhower's tankers carried women with them, but this is what I have read, and Eisenhower damn sure wasn't going to stop them, as long as his tankers were moving. Well, we were in this bivouac area and some of us had women in the building with us, sleeping with us and what-you-call-it, and this officer, this "shavetail"--no, wait, was he a shavetail? No, I think he was a captain then. … [laughter] He came in to just give orders about something and one of the women jumped up out of the [bunk]. We had bunks. … He [yelled], "What the hell are these women doing here?" "Keep quiet, Captain. Keep quiet. They're all right, you know." [laughter] "What do you mean, 'All right?' Get these women [out]." "Wait a minute, Captain, where [are] they going to go? [laughter] It's late at night, where [are] they going to go? We can't go and turn them out." [laughter] "You get these women out of here now, soldier." "Captain, we'll take care of them. Now, don't be [hasty]." This was in the "repple-depple." [laughter] We're going home, they're coming in. [laughter] "Captain, just calm down, just calm down. They're all right. They'll be with us for awhile, then, we'll let them go," you know, and he sensed it. He knew better than to push the issue right then, you know what I mean. [Rather than say], "They're going to go right this minute--I said they're going," [he said], "I want them gone when I come back in the morning." We took care of that, [laughter] no problem, and then, I ran across that very officer down at Hampton, Virginia, when I was in school. I came back, I went on the GI Bill. [Editor's Note: The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the GI Bill of Rights, offered funding for college or vocational education, as well as one year of unemployment and loans to buy homes, to returning World War II veterans.] I went to school and I came across him. He's dead now, (Shavers?), Lieutenant (Shavers?), or was he a captain? I think he was a lieutenant. [laughter] It was funny.

SI: You mentioned that it was a long ride back on the *Gale*.

DV: Oh, the SS *Joseph Gale*?

SI: Yes.

DV: Yes, but we had oranges.

SI: Did you just take a long route? Did you hit a storm?

DV: I don't know how the hell they steamed, kept that boat running all that damned time, [laughter] but I remember, we left out of Marseilles and there were ships that we left in the port and, after about a week or so out, these ships passed us at sea. [laughter] They passed us. We were waving at them and everything. Well, there was no convoy, because the war was over, [laughter] and we said, "Goddarn it." It took us twenty-eight days and somebody figured out that Columbus had done it in shorter than twenty-eight days from--he came from Italy, didn't he? Yes, he came from …

SI: Originally, he was from Italy, but I think he sailed out of Spain. [Editor's Note: Explorer Christopher Columbus was born in the Republic of Genoa, now Italy. On his first voyage to the Americas, he left Palos de la Frontera, Spain, on August 3, 1492, for the Canary Islands, leaving there on September 6, 1492. On October 12, 1492, he arrived in what is today the Bahamas.]

DV: All right, anyway, we figured that we were longer by … I don't know how much time than Christopher Columbus was when he discovered [the Americas], [laughter] but it was the first time they had oranges aboard ship. We had fresh oranges.

SI: After you came back, where did you land? Did you come back into Hampton?

DV: Yes, we came back to Hampton Roads, yes, and that was something, too, never will forget that. First place, coming in, I'm watching, I'm aboard deck and I'm watching and it got cloudy and the water got rough, and I said, "Oh, shit. … This is foreboding of what the hell we're coming back to." Now, we'd been over there two, three years and, now, the weather's stormy and what-you-call-it. They got us off the boat. They took all us black soldiers and they put us--they had, I don't know whether it was a church or something, assembly hall, somewhere--and do you know an officer came out there and actually asked us to, "Cool it, guys. Just stay quiet. We know you're ready to go home. We're going to get you out of here as quickly [as we can], but, please, don't start any trouble." That's what they told us black guys.

SI: Was it a black officer that came in?

DV: Hell no, it wasn't a black officer. It was a white officer. We booed him the hell out of the place. They gave us a big turkey dinner. I slept two days, but his biggest problem was to try to keep us quiet, because he knew that the same old shit was going to happen again. The attitudes of the people had not changed, the situation had not changed, and we suspected that it was still the same.

SI: During your time overseas, had things been looser, in terms of, particularly, white Army personnel not being so rigid regarding race relations, or were you usually with the all-African-American unit, so that it was not an issue?

DV: We were still a black unit and, as a black unit, we knew we faced certain difficulties, like supplies. We hoped we would get the same supplies that the white guys got, or we would get

what was left. If there was any shitty part, we knew we were going to get it--sectors, things like that, we knew we were going to get it. There was no [reprieve]. Oh, occasionally, we'd go on the town, we'd get drunk and, all right, we'd get friendly with them, but, generally speaking, I remember one time, in Italy, I was a trucker then and I looked up there and there was a guy on the back of a truck who was in school [with me], Bill Evans, Billy Evans, and we waved at each other, but we wouldn't go to each other. He was in his white outfit and I was in my black outfit and, yet, we knew each other, from school, you know. So much of it, I've forgotten. Sixty years is a long time to remember anything.

SI: You remembered a lot.

DV: … No, I don't think so. I know there was a lot more that I don't--I can't, like I can't. Some things happened, I can't remember whether they were in Italy or whether they were in France. I don't remember, and, yet, there wasn't that much happening in France, not our part of France. Now, later on, you know, the invasion happened, and I'm trying to remember how we heard about the invasion, because we were down in Marseilles, in Southern France.

SI: The Normandy invasion was before the Southern France invasion.

DV: Yes, I know that, I know that, but I'm trying to remember how we found out about the Normandy invasion. …

SI: Was it broadcast on the radio?

DV: Maybe we got it from the …

SI: *Stars and Stripes*?

DV: The *Stars and Stripes*, but I don't think they put too much into print there. They got enough in to get guys--and what did you say about [how] it came out in Italy?

SI: Yes. Bill Mauldin was in the 45th Infantry Division and started publishing his cartoons there, and then, it got picked up by *Stars and Stripes*.

DV: Yes, I remember all these, all of them.

SI: Does anything else stand out in your memory about Anzio and that period?

DV: Yes. One damn time, I was a trucker then, [laughter] … I got separated and this infantry company was getting ready to feed and I told them, "Look, I don't know where my outfit is. Can I?" They said, "Yes, come on in," and these are white guys. These are white guys. So, I … ate with them. I must have eaten and stayed with them a couple of days, two or three days. It was pretty nice, really, but, then, the Captain came up to me, he said, "Hey, I need somebody for patrol." I told him, "Well, I ain't in your outfit." He said, "Yes, but you've been eating our food. You get the hell out there tonight with the patrol." [laughter] Oh, shit, I couldn't say anything. I'd been eating his food and sleeping in there.

SI: Did you end up going on the patrol?

DV: Yes, I wound up--what the hell else was I going to do?

SI: What do you remember about the patrol?

DV: I was scared as hell. I was scared as hell. We moved about--we couldn't move too damn far, because, goddarn it, the Jerries were right up there--but we moved, I guess, about a mile-and-a-half, a perimeter of a mile-and-a-half around. … We weren't told to bring back any prisoners, but just to report what we could find in the way of who was there, how many were there and how tight it was, that's all. We didn't have to bring back prisoners. No, so, I got back to my outfit quick, pretty damn quick, after that. [laughter] Patroling's no fun.

SI: Before we leave the war experience, are there any other vivid memories that stand out in your mind about your time overseas?

DV: No more, they're no more vivid memories--what I mean to say is, they've all kind of dulled away. The good ones, the bad ones, they've all kind of dulled away. I can remember the time--I was down in Virginia--the first time I heard a what-you-call-it plane.

SI: A jet?

DV: Jet plane. I was working up on a house and I damn near ran down the roof, because I'd never heard it, but it sounded bad to me, sounded--well, it didn't sound like a damn propeller plane, but it made a hell of a lot of noise and I was very frightened of it. … I realized then, "You ain't right yet," [laughter] and I can remember … waking up in the middle of the night, screaming, and my wife holding me, telling me. I can remember shell attacks and they had--this was in Italy, too--they had areas where people went, it's supposed to be for civilians, but I had gotten caught out or something, I don't know, but I was down there with all of them and I'm the only GI down there [laughter] and the rest of them were [civilians]. I didn't like it too much, because these guys, I didn't know who was friendly or who was not. They were Italians, but it was all right. After the attack was over, I got out. No, I guess I had it relatively easy.

SI: You went through a lot.

DV: Huh?

SI: You did go through a lot.

DV: Well, I don't know, … not like, you know about the guys … who made the landing in Normandy.

SI: Few did.

DV: Yes, well, they went [through] more than that. For God's sakes, they had the hedgerows to go through, in France.

SI: You mentioned that you came back into Hampton Roads, and then, this officer told you guys to …

DV: Cool it.

SI: Cool it. What happened after that? Were you discharged right away?

DV: Yes, they got us out [of] there quick. They did whatever paperwork they needed to do with us and got us out, because we were--well, you could understand that. We were a potential [threat]. Here are a bunch of old guys, been over two years, two-and-a-half years, three years maybe, some of them, and then, to be told, "Now, please be quiet and don't start any trouble." Yes, we were a potential bomb getting ready to go off right there and, of course, we were all grumbling, "What the hell is he talking about?" Oh, yes, it could … have gotten real ugly, real quick, and they got us out of there quick, but I'm trying to remember, did they send me back to--what does the paper [say]? [The] papers say they gave me two dollars or something to ride the bus, or something? … I thought, "What the hell is that going to do?" Fort Monmouth, they sent me back to New Jersey, right?

SI: Okay, Fort Monmouth.

DV: Did they?

SI: Yes, it says the place of separation is Fort Monmouth.

DV: Yes, yes, … and they gave me seventeen dollars and twenty-five cents, [laughter] and, oh, they gave me a hundred dollars there, didn't they, "mustering out pay;" see it?

SI: After you were discharged, what did you do next? Did you go back to Plainfield or were you able to find a job?

DV: Yes. I went back to Plainfield. Hey, I was from Plainfield. That was home. I went back to Plainfield. They had something called 52/20. What do you know about 52/20? [Editor's Note: The GI Bill included a "52/20" clause, which provided twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks to discharged servicemen while they looked for work.]

SI: People have talked about it, twenty dollars for fifty-two weeks.

DV: [laughter] Yes, you got that. What was it, twenty dollars for fifty-two weeks, or something like that? I've forgotten. … That was our money, you know, to … tide us over until we got a job or something, and Fran came down and we were married and we went to my mother's house. …

SI: Had you met your wife before you went into the service or after?

DV: Yes, I told you I got married before I went overseas.

SI: Yes, but did you know her …

DV: Yes. [laughter]

SI: Where did you meet here? How did you meet her?

DV: I had met my wife sitting on the floor of my mother's living room house, polishing my boots. … My sister came in from Philadelphia, because she heard her brother was coming home for a furlough, and she brought this pretty girl along with her and that's how I met my wife. … Then, we got married about a week or two later, after that. [laughter] …

SI: Really?

DV: Yes, yes. … I couldn't have known her but about a couple weeks, I guess. Well, see, you remember, this is part of the war hysteria.

SI: Yes, you did not know if you were going to …

DV: Come back.

SI: Live.

DV: … But, I lived. We lived together for twenty-five years after that.

SI: You were on the 52/20 Club; did you start thinking about going back to school at that point?

DV: Yes. See, you know, everything was coming up, but, yes, hey, you registered for the GI Bill, you know, to see what kind of qualification you got and what kind of what-you-call-it you could get, yes, and I was working in Plainfield. I don't remember what I was doing--I think I was painting--and we both decided that I should go to school and my wife's mother worked at Bordentown. Do you know about Bordentown?

SI: Yes.

DV: What do you know about Bordentown?

SI: Just personally, I was looking at houses there a short time ago. [laughter] It is pretty far south of here.

DV: All right, let me tell you about Bordentown. You know about the town, you were looking at houses and whatever else--nice, little town to live in, very good--but, at Bordentown, there was--here again, we go into the segregated thing--there was a school that provided training, trade training, for black kids in the State of New Jersey. … It was at Bordentown and it was quite a school there. The kids came and they lived there. They were housed, they're fed and what-you-

call-it, and it had been going on for years, and I've forgotten when they finally cut [it], but, anyway, my wife's mother worked at Bordentown. She taught laundry science, how kids should run laundries and what-you-call-it, and so forth, and so on. … She was in touch, naturally, with the faculty there and one of the faculty, no, a couple of them, were from Hampton, had finished Hampton and so, they asked me, "Do you want to go to Hampton?" I said, "Yes, I'll go to Hampton. I'll go anywhere, really." [laughter] That's how I got in Hampton. I never took an exam. I never took [an exam]--I don't know how. I probably would have fared horribly if they made me take an entrance exam, … but they had my record. They knew who [I was], where I was, what I had done, and I drove down to [Virginia]. I had this old, it was a 1928 or 1929 Chrysler, and I left Plainfield and it burned oil so bad, I used to carry a couple gallons of oil in it, so that, every twenty-five, thirty miles, I would stop and put some oil … in the old car. … I drove down … from Plainfield to Hampton, which is in the southern part of Virginia, yes, and it's right there. … Fran stayed up here at first with David--David is my son--and she stayed here, I think, a semester and I lived down there on campus. …

SI: What was it like being a GI in college? Were there a lot of GI Bill students there?

DV: Yes, yes. … It was very interesting. First place, … we formed a separate unit. Out in Newport News, which is five miles from Hampton, they had a … temporary housing for people there and they had set aside a part of Newsome Park, it was called Newsome Park, for veterans. … We lived there with our families and we commuted to school, about five miles to school every day, and, oh, we were older than, you know …

SI: The average student.

DV: The average student there. Actually, I guess we were about ten years older, on an average, but it was very interesting, you know, being in school with "kids," as we called them. [laughter]

SI: How did the two groups get along, the kids and the GI Bill guys?

DV: Basically, the kids respected us. Well, they knew we were older, they knew we were veterans, and I'll never forget, one time, we were at a football game and this young boy came up and sat down beside me. "Hello, young man, how are you?" "Hey, you know," and I and this other veteran had a bottle of whiskey that we were drinking from [laughter] and he was sitting there talking to us. You knew he was a very intelligent, fine young man, you knew that. [laughter] I said, "Hey, you ever drink whiskey?" "No, sir." "Here, try it." [laughter] So, he looked for a cup--I guess he was looking for a cup, I don't know--[I] said, "Here, drink it, right out [of] the bottle." So, this poor boy, he must have been about eighteen, nineteen, right out of high school, you know, and goes [Mr. Van Blake makes a spitting sound]--he can't [swallow it] [laughter] and we laughed like hell. "Oh, try it again. It won't be so hard this time. Try it again." Do you know that boy became, he was a freshman then, … president of his class in his sophomore year, I think? I read about him. It's (Fielding, James Fielding?), I think was his name. Oh, he became quite a student and I kind of felt sorry that we played with him at the game, yes. [laughter] In fact, I think he became a member of our fraternity.

SI: You joined a fraternity there.

DV: Yes, I joined a fraternity. I joined the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, and mainly because my older brother--oh, now, see, … I had been in the war and come home and my brother hadn't gone in yet. He was still here. … The main reason was, … he volunteered for the Air Force and they couldn't find a place for him to go. So, they just reluctantly--I mean, they just let him slide around, that's all. He reported when he was supposed to report and they'd say, "No." … What was I talking about? I'm talking too much.

SI: We were talking about Hampton and you mentioned that your brother had not gone overseas. We were talking about the fraternity.

DV: Yes, he was an Omega. He became [an Omega] … when he went to school. So, I joined the Omega Fraternity.

SI: What did you study at Hampton?

DV: At Hampton? I was an industrial vocational major and I was a shop teacher. I studied to be a shop teacher and I became a shop teacher, and I taught twenty years in Plainfield at a middle school, Hubbard. I taught metal shop and, to this day, it was one of my good twenty years, because I really enjoyed it quite a lot, but, at the time I was at Hampton, I thought … I wanted to get out real quick and make money. Number one, I felt I had to make up time. Number two, I felt it was incumbent upon all black, young black men, to make money, lots of it. Of course, that's a [varied thing], but as much as you can, because money gave you position, gave you certain powers. So, I think all black men should have done it. I never did it. I never made money, and I became a teacher, so, you know I didn't make any money. [laughter]

SI: It is a noble profession.

DV: Oh, it's been [good]; I have not been sorry at all, no, no. I gave up my dream of being rich and became a teacher and … I've done pretty good in Plainfield, huh?

JW: Yes.

DV: Yes. … Oh, we'd better hold this one, this part, for another time, because that's a whole other story, my life in Plainfield after the war.

SI: Do you want to tell me a little bit about it?

DV: [laughter] Oh, I had quite a life in Plainfield, didn't I? Yes, I became a teacher. Well, first, I was [in] the trade that I took at Hampton. At that time, Hampton was still Hampton Institute and Hampton Institute had the tremendous trade school, where they taught all the building trades--tailors, blacksmithing, painting and decorating, which I went into, automobile mechanics, automobile bodywork. Hampton became known, nationally, because of the trade school, and so, at that time, it was known as Hampton Institute, but, I don't know, the whole world went academically crazy soon. So, all the schools set up their programs, stepped up their programs and all that, and they all became universities. So, now, it's Hampton University, but, when I

graduated, it was Hampton Institute. … My trade that I took was--now, it was not just a trade that you took. You had to take academic courses, so that you were able to go into education and teach. It was a tremendous school, and that's when, when I graduated, I [said], "I'm going to go get rich now," see. [laughter] … I didn't get rich and I changed, because I was in education, I had education courses, … and Plainfield was going through a transition. Oh, I didn't tell you about that, huh? I led the marches and the what-you-call-its in Plainfield, back in the '60s? I organized [them], and you had the Civil Rights Movement there and I was very much a part of it. Oh, God, you don't want that now. That's a whole other thing.

SI: We could come back and talk to you about that in a second interview.

DV: Yes, I think you're going to have to come back, [laughter] because that is a whole lot there. Oh, my life kind of took off there. I organized, I was one of the founding organizers, of the fraternity in Plainfield, the Omicron Chi Chapter of what-you-call-it [Omega Psi Phi Fraternity] in Plainfield. I became very interested, at age fifty-five, in tennis--did you hear what I said? age fifty-five, [laughter] to start to play tennis?--and I organized a tennis association, Plainfield Tennis Council. I became the coach of the Plainfield … High School tennis team. I formed programs for kids. I organized the middle school to have a tennis team, too. Before I was there, the middle school never had a tennis team. Tennis really became my obsession. She [Ms. Warner] knows that. I ate, slept tennis. Oh, by the way, did I tell you?

JW: Last night?

DV: Did I tell you?

JW: Yes, that you're elected to the …

DV: … I have just been elected to--the Eastern Section of the USTA [United States Tennis Association]--I've just been elected to their Hall of Fame.

SI: Congratulations.

DV: Yes, thank you. [laughter] I was really surprised at that. That's a big thing.

SI: That is quite an achievement.

DV: Yes, … I don't know what I did to get it, you know, … and, also, in Plainfield, there is a beautiful tennis facility there that they named after me.

JW: Just about six years ago, six or seven. …

DV: Yes, '01, it was '01, yes, yes.

SI: That is remarkable.

DV: Yes, yes, it's really quite an honor.

SI: I would definitely like to do a second interview with you and talk more about your postwar life.

DV: Can I take this home with me and bring it back to you?

SI: Yes, sure, no problem.

DW: I'd like to look at it.

JW: What book is that?

SI: *Up Front*.

DV: *Up Front*. You don't know about Bill Mauldin? …

SI: I am going to pause the tape.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Let me end with a conclusion.

DV: Have I said anything?

SI: Absolutely. Yes, you said a lot. You said some very interesting things.

DV: Oh, get out. …

JW: I'm sorry I missed a little bit. …

SI: We are going to conclude this session with Mr. Van Blake now and we are going to do a second session on your postwar career. Thank you very much, thank you for coming.

DV: All right, I hope I've said something that's worth anything.

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

Reviewed by Joseph Dalessio 4/1/10
Reviewed by Kassandra Kelly 4/1/10
Reviewed by Steven Ng 4/1/10
Reviewed by Mary Joyce Poblete 4/1/10
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 1/8/13
Reviewed by Donald Van Blake 3/1/13