RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN VAN KIRK, JR.

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

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

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Jeffery Skolnick: This begins an interview with Mr. John Van Kirk, Jr., on October 28, 2003, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Jeffrey Skolnick and …Sandra Stewart Holyoak: … Sandra Stewart Holyoak. First of all, Mr. Van Kirk, thank you so much for coming today. To start, could you tell me where and when you were born?

John Van Kirk: I was born in Long Branch, New Jersey. That's the actual location of the hospital and it was on December the 22nd, 1921, which converts to the best numbers you can have, 1-2-2-2-2-1.

SH: [laughter] That is great. Can you tell us about where your father grew up and a little bit about his background?

JV: Well, he grew up in the same place that I was living. He was born in 1886 and lived there all of his life, and his father lived there before him. So, our house is all through the generations. My father was a veteran of World War I. He was in the machine gun battalion, 309th Machine Gun Battalion, 78th Division, and he was a very athletic man. At that time, the messages were carried by hand, from one company to the other, and he was what they called a runner, at that time, besides being a machine gunner. He served in Europe for a whole year and came home after the Armistice, back to Red Bank, New Jersey, where we lived, and that was about his history as far as the war goes. … Then, he worked in the construction [industry] and what-have-you. The times were not excellent at that time, but he had a job … until he went in business for himself, which was [the] granite monument business, and he had that for the rest of his life. That's how I became involved in the monument business because, when I was discharged, he was ill and couldn't get another job. So, I filled in with the business, and I probably should have done some other things, but I took that as my life's work, too. So, here I am, busted up and retired, [laughter] and that's where I stand.

SH: What did your grandfather do in Red Bank prior to World War I?

JV: Well, he was a blacksmith, but he was in the Civil War. My grandfather was in the Civil War and I have his discharge at home.

SH: Do you really?

JV: Yes.

SH: Can you tell us a little about that family history? It sounds like you really know your family history.

JV: Well, at that time, they didn't enlist or were drafted not for a period of time. It was a set time, of so many months and days, and, if you're in the middle of a battle and your time came up, you went home. So, he went with the 27th New Jersey Volunteers and he was at Gettysburg, and so forth, and he got home, and then, his brother was in the war. They went in [at] the same time, but his brother was captured by the South, and then, the North took over, that encampment. … He returned to the North, where they captured him again, and he spent half [his time in the field] and half his time in the prison, but he became ill and the last we knew [of] him, he was in a

hospital in Tennessee and he was writing letters to my grandmother. … She finally got one, on December the 1st, that he was going to be home for Christmas, and we never heard tell of him since then. My wife and I made a trip to Tennessee, near this hospital, but, right now, that's been taken over by the Peay University, I don't know if it's familiar, P-E-A-Y University, [Austin Peay State University, in Clarksville]. … They have a burial ground there and they have twenty-four unmarked graves, and we imagine something happened to him and he's in one of those unmarked graves. That's the only thing I know about my uncle and my grandfather.

SH: Were they Van Kirks as well?

JV: They were Van Kirks, and that's where we stand with the back history of the family.

SH: Did your father have many brothers and sisters?

JV: Yes, he had three brothers and three sisters. … In those days, it was like a split family. I mean, half the family was of one generation and the other half was another generation, and so, I knew very little about the first half, but I was familiar with the second half, and that would be his brother, George, and his sister, Mary, and his brother, Bill. They were the second half.

SH: Did they also live in the Red Bank area?

JV: They started out there, and then, they traveled to different places. … One settled in North Jersey and his brother, George, stayed in Red Bank, in a different location. … Mary, also, they were in the Red Bank area. Nobody went to California or distant places. [laughter]

SH: Can you tell us about your mother?

JV: Well, my mother was also born locally. She was born in Port Monmouth, or lived there at the time. I don't know what hospital she was in, and she was born in 1890, and she married my father in 1917. They were married in Fort Dix, just before he went overseas.

SH: Really?

JV: And the minister's final remarks were that my father was the bravest man in the Army, because he was starting one war before they finished the other. [laughter]

SH: That is something to be remembered in your family history.

JV: And we went back to the church where they were in Fort Dix, but, of course, everything has changed so much in my generation. It's the generation that was, and with the *was* underlined seventeen times, that we're all out of it now, but everything, the travel and so on. … My mother's mother, which would be my grandmother, she was raised in Toms River and Toms River was named after her ancestor, Tom Luker, and that's where they get Toms River, I understand. … That's backed up by work in the Toms River Library. … So, he was Tom Luker and it's Toms River. So, that's all I'm putting together.

SH: What did Tom Luker do in Toms River?

JV: Mainly fishing industry. They fished and clammed, and so forth. … [It is hard to imagine] with the [Garden State] Parkway going ninety miles an hour today, my grandmother left Toms River and never went back, after she married my grandfather. It was too far to go, [laughter] so that it gives you an insight of how much things have changed in a hundred years. …

JS: That is interesting.

JV: … A lot of people came up to Belford and Port Monmouth, … in the fishing industry, from Toms River, Barnegat and that area, and the bay people. They were in the bay area, and they were fishing down there, but they saw the greener grass on the north part, so, a lot of them came up.

SH: Did anyone in your mother's family remain in the fishing industry?

JV: My grandfather did. He was a shellfish man, but it was so small, as compared to what they do today, with the draggers and all this stuff. … That's very modest and that's where he was one of the original clam diggers, … they call it, up in the Raritan Bay.

SH: How many brothers and sisters did your mother have?

JV: She had … four sisters and two brothers, and, again, there was a lot of difference between, George, who was her oldest brother, and, Joe, who was her youngest brother. The boys were over the [generation gap], between the two. …

SH: Did your mother and father tell you how they met?

JV: No. I do not know that.

SH: Did your mother and father both go to school in that area?

JV: Yes, and that was the one-room schoolhouse for both of them. My mother had a little more education than my father. My father went to about the sixth grade, approximately, we figure, and then, high school was out, because of having to work, and so forth. My mother would do what they call "finish grade school," at that time, but she didn't have any high school education.

SH: Did she work outside of the home at all?

JV: Yes, she did. She took a job in Long Branch, in the clothing factory down there, at the time. … She stayed down there all week and came home on weekends, back to New Jersey, back to Red Bank.

SH: Did she stay in a rooming house or something?

JV: Yes, with her sister. The two of them worked together.

SH: After your father went to World War I, did your mother continue to work outside the home?

JV: She worked, somewhat, at that, and she came to live with my grandmother. … My grandfather had died at that time. He died in 1914 and she stayed with her, served as another member of the household.

SH: Was this your mother's mother?

JV: No, my father's mother.

SH: Your father's mother, okay. That was quite a nice thing for her to do at that time.

JV: Yes, and, of course, she was looking for a place to stay, too, at that time. It's two sides of every coin. [laughter]

SH: When your father came back from World War I, did he immediately go into the monument business?

JV: No, he worked, for several years, … as sort of a laborer in different jobs, house moving and building walls, and so forth. He worked on the walls in Atlantic Highlands, on the scenic drive. He was with the contractor that built them, and he also worked on Sandy Hook. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

JV: Working on Sandy Hook, he worked on the lighthouse, which was put on the tip of the Hook, and that was back about 1913 or '14 and, in that area, that lighthouse was on the Hook. … My father said he remembers the boats going by, right close to the lighthouse, and how things have changed. If you look at Sandy Hook today, that lighthouse is inland. The Hook is extended probably three-quarters of a mile farther toward New York Harbor. It's just a coincidental thing about the [Hook]. I'm very interested in geology and formations of land and barrier beaches, and so forth, and that's why my ears perked up when I say that.

SH: This is great, because I have just found out how little I know about New Jersey, the coast lines and things like that. I am glad to hear all this. We have been involved with the Monmouth County Archivist, who directs the Public History Internship program. Each year, we go down to the Monmouth County Library for Archives Day. I always enjoy walking through the archives and looking at the different maps. When you fly over the area, it is amazing how it has changed.

JV: Totally different.

SH: Please, continue. What was it like to be a young man growing up in that area where you lived? What did you do for fun and entertainment? What are your earliest memories?

JV: Well, it was quite isolated at the place, and, at that time, … to have an orchestra was the big thing, high school type of living, and I was in one of these five-piece orchestras and we played around different spots in the area, and it was fun, at that time.

SH: What did you play?

JV: Piano. …

SH: Where or when had you started learning to play the piano?

JV: At that time, they had traveling teachers and they came to the home, and it was an hour a week, or something, for a buck. … It's a little different today, but that's what they had at that time. … I took lessons from her, and then, I took lessons with a fellow by the name of Gottschalk. He was a very wonderful musician. He was an inspiration, actually, because he [was] one of these types that could play anything, any time, from Rachmaninoff to the Beatles. … He'd just sit down and play it, and a talent that I'd admired and can't believe it.

SH: Me, too. As a young man, what was your earliest memory of growing up in that area?

JV: Probably, the earliest memory was going to Middletown Grade School, and that's where my mother got me the first dog, picked him up from a friend. I remember that very well, and I remember having my tonsils out in a house in Red Bank, which is now part of where Steinbach [Department Store] was, in the building there.

SH: Really?

JV: And, of course, that was all gone; it was given over to Riverview [Medical Center]. That was back in, probably, 1924, something like that, and then, the dog situation, I guess you have things that remember [remind] your mind, an incident that makes you recall memories, and I remember getting the dog and almost sitting on him when she brought him home in the car. I didn't know that she'd gotten the dog, and then, that was my dog. … Then, I was going to Middletown Grade School, which is about three miles north of us. … Then, the big memory is, they built the grade school right across from our house, and so, at the third grade, I went to the Fairview School, which was a modern, up-to-date place, no basketball court. It was a dirt basement. [laughter] You can imagine how we looked when we played basketball down there, and then, I went to Leonardo High, at that time, Leonardo High School, and we had 153 people in the class, and that was all Middletown Township, Hazlet, Sandy Hook, which was a sending district to Middletown Township, at the time, for the Army personnel, their children, from the people that were stationed there. They had a bus that went to Sandy Hook every day. … In all that, it's one of those things that makes such terrible changes, because, today, they have two high schools and they have about sixteen hundred students in both of them, and we had this 150 group, but it was the same old routine, day after day. I guess you went from room-to-room and that's how you got your education.

JS: Could you describe your summer vacations, any trips or sporting events you went to?

JV: No, we had very few sporting events. My father took me to baseball games, at the Newark Bears, which is now forgotten, too. That was my big sport, spectator sport, that we went to, and then we played baseball, pickup baseball, and football. We had no coaches, no uniforms, and no baseballs, to say, [laughter] and we used to tar tape a baseball, and I think the kids today would wonder, "What do you do when you tar [tape a ball]?" Tar tape, we called [it]; that's duct tape or vinyl tape. The vinyl tape would have been an improvement from the old tar tape, but we used to tar tape the balls, and then, tar tape the bats. The bat would be broken and you'd wrap it with tar tape. Of course, the bats, at that time, cost about a dollar-eighteen, but nobody had a dollar-eighteen. That was the problem. So, it was mainly pickup sports that we did. …

SH: Did you take any trips at all?

JV: No, not with my family. We didn't go anyplace. We stayed close by.

SH: Did you go to the shore, like to Keansburg?

JV: Oh, we went to where my mother was raised, and that was in this Port Monmouth, which was adjacent to the bay at Port Monmouth. … We did a lot of activity there, swimming in the bay, at that time, before it became polluted. Now, they've cleaned it up again, but it got so [that] you couldn't put your finger in it [for] awhile, but, when I was young, I remember going there very often, to visit my mother's mother and, also, to go to the beach, but that was all things that are gone.

JS: Did you grow up idolizing any particular figure? I know Babe Ruth was around then.

JV: Yes, well, I had Babe Ruth on my mind. … You know, I remember him being sold to the Yankees from Boston, which is [why] "the curse" still goes on today. … Lou Gehrig, I admired Lou Gehrig very much, and I was also a fan of the Detroit Tigers at the time and they had Charlie Gehringer, who was a second baseman. I remember him.

SH: What was your favorite subject in school?

JV: Well, my favorite in high school or in college?

SH: High school.

JV: High school. I liked algebra in high school. … I liked algebra and I liked the physics course I took at that time. They'd be the ones that I'd say I enjoyed and remember most.

SH: How important was going to school for your family? Your mom and dad had it really tough and could not go. For you, was it very important?

JV: Oh, very important, didn't miss a day, sickness or what-have-you. … School was number one on the list. There was no getting up in the morning, saying, "I don't feel good." You felt good. That was it, period, and we went on a bus to both Middletown and Leonardo, but … going

across the street was like getting up and grabbing a sock and going, but always traveled [by] a bus. …

SH: Were you involved in Boy Scouts at all as a young man?

JV: No, I never joined the Boy Scouts.

SH: Were you involved with your church or church youth groups?

JV: At church, I was a member of the church, or Sunday school, in those days, and that was another thing. My grandmother had enough for us of that when she was living. She, every Sunday, [went to] church. She was a two-session church person. She'd go in the evening also, which was a lot of time for me, because, at that point, … I wanted to do other things, [laughter] but she always went to church. I don't think she missed double sessions more than four times a year.

SH: That is impressive.

JV: Yes.

SH: Can you tell us about how the Depression affected your family and what you remember of the Depression?

JV: Did it ever affect the family! I mean, it was really [bad]. That's really how my father got started for himself. He went into the monument business, but he was working for some people. At that time, it was very ridiculous pay, like three dollars a day he was getting, when there was work to do. He had to go every day with, … you know, the fear, being there early, [not knowing] that he was going to work that day. … There was no quitting at five o'clock and, [if] they gave him an assignment to do, he did it. If he had to take monuments of granite to Lakewood, that was it; he'd get back [at] seven o'clock at night, or whatever, no union or anything. That's what he was in when the Depression hit real badly. … [When] the Depression hit, why, I remember, everything was just desperate at the time. … I tell people this and they laugh at me now, but eating was another problem. You'd go to the store and get a pound of hot dogs and some white beans and put it "on the book." We lived by "the book," and, every two or three weeks, my father got enough put together to pay the book off. Then, we started over again, but it was quite a serious time and, of course, the economy is so different today. I mean, we talk billions, where, in those days, they were talking millions. … In the Depression, they were talking ten-dollar bills. That's how much it changed.

SH: Did your father, or any of your family, work on any of the New Deal programs that FDR put together?

JV: No. We were aware of them, but he never went on the WPA [Works Progress Administration] or any of those programs. He always managed to stay off.

SH: Were there other members of your parents' families that were involved at all?

JV: My uncles went to work for the WPA. My part of the family had a big thing about welfare. Welfare was the "poorhouse," and, if you went to the "poorhouse," you were disgraced for life, in their book.

SH: What did they think of the politics of the day? What were their views?

JV: Well, I know my father was; we've always tried to be independent, even in those days, and my father was very much influenced by Roosevelt. That's Franklin Roosevelt, and he liked his policy, when he said he was going to be turning the economy around and starting things over, and that fear itself is what we're afraid of, paraphrasing Franklin's words. … They lived in limbo for awhile, just hoping for the good times to come along, and they were slow in coming, in those days. … I remember, the first term of Roosevelt, it didn't change much in that period of time, but, then, the war economy started and everything went crazy, with contracts and building buildings for contract people and the machinery of the war. … So, that made a difference and started the economy, in the absolute different phase of things, different spinning of the wheel, as I call it, with the economy.

SH: Throughout the Depression and into that period, your father stayed with the monument business.

JV: Yes, he worked it all the time.

SH: Did he buy out the man that he worked for?

JV: No, no, he started his own business from scratch.

SH: Okay.

JV: He had a devil of a time doing it, but he did it. …

SH: Did he work at another job while he did this monument business?

JV: No, once he started that, he pulled up all the stakes from his permanent job and went to work for that.

SH: Did your mom help with the business? Was she involved in it at all?

JV: Only to the extent of … answering the phone, taking care of the books. She did a lot of that work.

SH: As a young man in high school, how soon did you realize that you were going to go to college? That was your goal.

JV: Well, that's another part of my history that's hard to explain. My father wanted me to go to college and I was not going to college, because I thought I could do better with his business,

helping him. Being seventeen years old, at that time, I could conquer the world, but he thought I should go to college and he contacted the principal of the school, who was very favorable for me going to college and he said he thought I had the wherewithal. … I knew I was going to college about three days before I went, and I came up here to Rutgers and I met the registrar, and so forth.

SH: Was that Dean Fraser Metzger, at that time?

JV: Dean Metzger was the head of the men's college. I forget who I met at the time. It was before [Dean Howard] Crosby.

SH: Luther Martin, or was that after?

JV: It was in that area. Anyway, we met, and then, the principal of the high school practically talked me, and them, into letting me in, and me into going. So, that's how I went to college.

SH: Did you have a scholarship?

JV: No.

SH: Wow.

JV: No scholarship. Of course, in those days, the tuition was a hundred dollars a semester. So, all of the young people will look at that and say, "This guy, get rid of him; he's had it." [laughter]

JS: Why did you choose Rutgers? Were you forced into it?

JV: Oh, it was the nearest place, and it was not that far from home, where I could go home weekends, and so forth, and my father wanted me to be that close, I guess, to keep an eye on me, and there I stayed. … I lived in Ford Hall when I was here, and, coming in late, I was put in with the group of seniors and juniors. There was none of my class that went with me. Some came in later on, some of my friends that I had through college, but the first few weeks, I was with juniors and seniors.

SH: Who were your roommates?

JV: I had one roommate, a fellow by the name of Ted de Gomar, very nice fellow, and he was very helpful in keeping me in college, I mean, telling me where the buildings were, for one thing. [laughter] … Then, there was (Salison?) and (Remmelar?). They were the two people that lived in the rooms across from us. So, we had a little group of four there, and they worked very well; I mean, it went very well with me.

SH: When you were in high school, did you have a job after school or during the summers?

JV: Just with my father, that I would help and do things like that. With the business, it was mainly lifting something, and I was fortunate enough to be big enough to lift. So, that's where I settled in.

SH: Were there activities that you really enjoyed? We talked a bit about baseball and things like that, but were there other things, such as music? You talked about playing piano for dances.

JV: Yes, music, dances, yes.

SH: Did you dance?

JV: No, no. I was a perennial wallflower, I think.

SH: [laughter] Were there other interests or hobbies that you had before coming to Rutgers?

JV: Well, I've always liked photography. I worked with photography before I came to Rutgers and always enjoyed doing that, [to] a limited extent. I wasn't a great photographer by any means, but I enjoyed doing that.

SH: Had you been involved in any sports at Leonardo High School?

JV: Not really, only the sports that were given to you in physical ed. That's about the only sport.

SH: When you came to Rutgers, with just that three days' notice, did you have any clue what you wanted to major in or what you thought you would like to do? You talked about math being something you were very interested in.

JV: Yes. Well, I went into the business part, because it was associated with my father. I thought the accounting and the business and the economics would give me a background in that. That's how I got into business administration, and I was interested in geology, naturally, with the granite. I had a liking for the evolvement of the geological structures and the granite in the ground and the granite out of the ground, and what-have-you. So, I took some courses in geology, which I wanted in Rutgers. That's another subject I should have said before; I enjoyed geology. I took the full two years of that.

SH: Here at Rutgers, there were some things that were mandatory. One of them was chapel.

JV: Chapel.

SH: How did you take to chapel, to the convocation? I think freshmen met on Tuesdays, if I am not mistaken.

JV: I think that, yes, we had to go to chapel one day a week, … for chapel service one day during the week, and you had to go Sunday, had to go to Sunday chapel. You had to appear at so many during the year. …

SH: With Van Kirk at the end of your name, were you able to slip in or slip out more often than if your name started with "A?" [laughter]

JV: No, I don't think [so]. … I think they looked at the bottom of the alphabet as well as the first part of it, and I think it came up pretty close. We had cards that you had to sign for chapel, and they took the cards at the end of the thing, and your name [had] better be on there.

SH: What about freshman initiation? What do you remember of that?

JV: Very little. The place I lived, I mean, there was no [hazing]; you wore the green hat and you had to say, "Hello," all the time to everybody, but, other than that, I had no [hazing]. I didn't go to a fraternity. Again, that was a costly affair in those days, compared to the rest of the college. So, I never became a fraternity person. I was invited to two or three of them, had dinner with them and seemed to get along all right. … I don't think I was blackballed, but I just never pursued it to any extent. So, I was sort of a lone "barbarian," as they called them in those days. [laughter]

JS: Did you participate in any extracurricular activities at Rutgers?

JV: Well, I played soccer all four years, and I had my numerals, which they gave out for freshmen, and I played varsity soccer for the other three years. Of course, soccer was not the game it is today. It was a very basic game and we played other [colleges], made some trips, which were very interesting. We were playing Navy and, you know, Lehigh and Lafayette. We're in a group; we weren't in the big three, by any means, that's for sure.

SH: [laughter] What were some of the memories of those trips that you remember?

JV: Oh, I remember the gracious accommodations we had at the Naval Academy, and I think the Naval Academy was trying to get people to come to the Naval Academy, a wonderful dinner and wonderful dorm, very good, and, also, West Point, because West Point was close enough to Rutgers, where, at that time, it was a one-day trip and you came back on the bus that you went on, the [same] bus.

SH: You were in ROTC as well.

JV: Yes, the first two years. I didn't take the Advanced ROTC.

SH: Did you think about it? Why did you decide not to?

JV: I thought about it, but I thought it would be probably just as well not to be into a situation where you had to be an Army lieutenant. You know, that probably was lucky or unlucky that I didn't go in the ROTC, because things changed in the middle of our year. Very drastically, they changed.

SH: You came to Rutgers in 1939.

JV: That's correct.

SH: The world situation was changing in Europe at that time. Was there any discussion here on campus about that?

JV: Oh, yes, yes, very deep discussions. I mean, we had, you know, bull sessions. I mean, you did have some people that wondered about the war, about whether the Germans had a right to do certain things, you know. … They felt that some of the Germans were persecuted before … they went sour on the whole thing, and, of course, there was very much of a discussion about how Hitler could get so much power so fast. It was like overnight, when he appeared and took over, and we remembered, very well, the peace overtures back in '40, '39 and '40, and [British Prime Minister Neville] Chamberlain giving in to the Hitler regime by saying that he had created "peace in our time." With the piece of paper, he got off the plane, and that's vivid in my memory yet, seeing the movie newsreels of that, and people that … really thought it would be helpful not to have a war, and he said, … "We're going to have a peaceful solution to this problem," and, of course, he gave up Austria and part of Czechoslovakia. … Then, Hitler attacked Poland. Three weeks later, he was dive-bombing Poland, and that was very much of a discussion … right in the beginning. [Editor's Note: The Munich Agreement, in which the Great Britain and France acquiesced to Hitler's territorial demands for the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia, was signed in September 1938, a year before the invasion of Poland.]

SH: That sort of talk was going on here at Rutgers, but, back in Long Branch, were you talking about it back there or was it just something that was done more here on campus? Was the entire country talking about it?

JV: Well, it was pretty well publicized in the papers. Of course, I didn't get back for a firsthand [look]; I was here at Rutgers when all the discussions went [on]. I didn't have anything to discuss when I went home. I went to my folks' house and just talked to them. My father was very much against appeasement. He said, "It'll never work."

SH: That is what I wondered, what was your father's take on it, having been in World War I? What did he see?

JV: Yes. Well, he didn't like war. I mean, I don't think anybody would say they really liked war, and he was in some difficult times, being in the machine gun battalion. It was pretty much of a shoot or be shot, and he didn't like either side of that, and he hated war, but he said that he thought it was inevitable, with the way things were turning out. … What his comments were didn't mean a hill of beans with the world situation, because he's one little person. …

SH: That is true, but part of what we are looking at is how involved were Americans and university students in what was going on. That is the reason why we ask that question. The other question that I have is, in your part of the country, were there any *Bund* activities?

JV: The *Bund.*

SH: *Bund*. I am saying it wrong.

JV: Yes. There was no organization, as I remember, in the area that I lived. There was no sympathizer with the Nazi regime. … Of course, in the more populous areas, I think there was some feeling of right or wrong for Germany, and we had no heavy group of people that were German in that area.

SH: What about Charles Lindbergh as a national hero at that time?

JV: Oh, he was … top of the line, at that time. He was everybody's idol, I believe. I can remember, … they had little airplanes, with "Lucky Lindy," I think they called him, and I remember the flight, the takeoff of it. You've seen it so many times, I don't remember whether I saw the original or whether it's been from newsreels later on, but, to get the plane in the air, the first thing, [it] was a miracle that he ever got off the ground, and then, to fly over the ocean. … The plane started to ice up and he came low enough to the waves where the salt would take care of the ice on the wings. It was quite a feat, and all the way to Paris. It was really a big feat [that] he went that far.

SH: Were there other events that were going on in New Jersey that you remember, for instance, the *Hindenburg*? [Editor's Note: On May 6, 1937, the German airship *Hindenburg* caught fire while attempting to dock at the Lakehurst Naval Air Station in New Jersey.]

JV: The *Hindenburg* was very much in our area, because Lakehurst is only about thirty miles from our home, and I didn't see it, but, of course, the newsreel made it very vivid in your memory. A lot of people went that night, to get to Lakehurst, which, of course, was the dumbest thing they could do, because the traffic was backed up all the way to Red Bank, but that was a pretty tough thing to see. We'd seen it in the afternoon, when it flew over, and then, to have … this tragedy at night was really something.

SH: Since you were so close to the water, were there any tragedies or events that you can remember from along the Jersey coast?

JV: The *Morro Castle.* That came ashore there, with the terrible fire and all the different ideas of what caused it to happen. [Editor's Note: The SS *Morro Castle,* a Ward Line luxury cruise ship, caught fire and burned off the Jersey Shore en route from Havana to New York, killing 137 passengers and crew, on September 8, 1934.] It caught fire just probably around Cape May, off the shore, and the captain proceeded to go north, then, dropped an anchor over and the fire was up near the front. So, it was like a fire that swept right through the ship, and a lot of the fishing people there, that we didn't know personally, but they picked up a lot of the survivors with the boats that were actually fishing boats. Then, they had a cable on it to tow it away, after the thing was devastated, and that broke and it came ashore at Asbury Park, right at the Convention Hall, and I went down to see that many a Sunday.

SH: Really?

JV: And we went down the night it arrived. My father got in the car and we went down. It seemed to be nobody knew it was there, because it had broken free, and we were there and saw

many things. They were still putting water on it from the shore, on part of the vessel, but it was worthless. I mean, it wasn't doing any good just to have a stream of water at that time.

SH: It was still burning when it broke loose then.

JV: And it's still so hot when it hit the shore. Then, they took it off. … I made many a trip on Sunday to see the progress of them moving it out. … It was beached entirely, fully out of the water.

SH: Really?

JV: We were in a storm at the time. It was quite a heavy storm, and the tides were high and the wind was pressing it toward the shore and it came up there and it was parallel to the beach, just north of the Convention Hall. … They took it off by trenching it and pulling it with tugs. Every week, they'd move it about three or four feet, and they went south and southeast, until they got it back in the water. That's how they took it off the beach. There was some talk of [it] being a landmark at the time, and very few people remember that. I remember that, Asbury Park's landmark, to be an amusement place. They, later, have done it with the *Queen Mary*, out in the West Coast, but that would have been a disaster, to try doing anything with that hulk. So, they got rid of it and took it off, and I never knew the final result of where that went. I think it was cut up for scrap, finally.

SH: We talked a bit about politics and your remaining independent. Was there ever a candidate that you or your family got behind, of either party, here in New Jersey, that you were supportive of?

JV: Well, [in] the local politics, they were Republican, because there was nobody else around. My father always said he wanted to vote for the people that are in office, because they had already stolen the money. They wouldn't steal too much more, [laughter] but that was one of his favorite topics.

SH: He had a great sense of humor, anyway. That is great. I think we can now come back to what life here at Rutgers was like. Did you take advantage of any of the musical programs?

JV: No, they used to have concerts and things, and I tried to go to several of them.

SH: Were you ever able to realize your talents as a piano player at Rutgers?

JV: Never utilized it at Rutgers, never.

SH: You never played in any bands here.

JV: Never, never, didn't play anywhere here then.

SH: Did you keep it a secret? You did not tell them you could play.

JV: Well, it never came up and I never said it, I guess.

SH: I had thought maybe you would be down at the Corner Tavern or something, playing away on a Friday night.

JV: No, no. The Corner Tavern, there, that was one of the things my folks were pretty much against, and any alcoholic beverages before twenty-one in those days. It wasn't a written law; it's your family law, and that's a better law than they have on the books of the towns, when your family says, "You're gone if you have a beer." …

SH: Did you date anyone over at NJC [New Jersey College for Women], or the "Coop," as I hear it was called?

JV: No, never there. I had a girlfriend at home, but never at the "Coop."

SH: Can you tell us what you remember about where you were when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

JV: I was listening to the Washington Redskins and the New York Giants in the football game when the first bulletins came over the radio. [Editor's Note: On December 7, 1941, the Washington Redskins played the Philadelphia Eagles in Washington, DC, and the New York Giants played the Brooklyn Dodgers in New York City's Polo Grounds.]

SH: Where were you?

JV: I was in my father's car. We were going someplace and we had a car radio at that time, and that's where I first heard of the attack on Pearl Harbor. … Of course, from then on, … that filled the complete airwaves, all of the stories about that.

SH: What kind of a discussion did you and your father have at that point?

JV: Well, it was pretty much, my father said, "Looks like you're going to go to war," the second word out of his mouth, after the Pearl Harbor [announcement], and I think it was pretty self-evident that that was coming.

SH: Had you, in any of your studies or any of your research, realized how the situation was in the Pacific with Japan?

JV: No, I think that was pretty much [an unknown]. I never got to know the politics and the economic situation in Japan. We knew that they were attacking China and moving in there and they were having what they called a "gun boat battle" and they had taken it, but it wasn't publicized, … the damage that the Japanese were doing in China and Korea, the different places.

SH: Did you expect to go to war against Germany at some point, before Pearl Harbor?

JV: I thought it was almost inevitable, with the lend-lease program and different things we were doing. I thought we could get ourselves in the war. … Of course, yes, they were building the defenses for the New York City [area], that if we ever were attacked, they had the turrets for the guns on the beaches up there. I knew some people in Fort Hancock and that was the prime defense area of New York, which is about as worthless as you could think, because it only took one *panzer* division to strike at Asbury Park and circle around, they'd have New York, because all the guns were facing to the water, had all the technology of great cannons there. I've seen some of them, the disappearing battery, so-called, where the sixteen-inch guns would be underground and come out on a looping mechanism and come up in a position to fire, and then, they had boat drills, with, you know, targets being drawn by tugs at fifteen, sixteen miles, and they'd see how accurate they could be.

SH: This was all prior to Pearl Harbor that you are talking about.

JV: Pearl Harbor, yes. Oh, this is before Hitler even, I mean, when things were starting to generate over in Europe. In Europe, they … had these [plans and were] beginning to assemble these defenses. … Of course, see, the kids that were [at Leonardo High School], or their parents were on Sandy Hook, they had an insight that something was going to go on. We talked to them, because they were aware that it was not a good situation at that time.

SH: You were just starting your junior year, half way through your junior year at Rutgers at that time.

JV: Just beginning my junior [year] when Pearl Harbor was struck.

SH: Right. You would have started in September and this is December then. What happened next? That happened on a Sunday and you were back in school on a Monday. Do you remember what happened next?

JV: Well, the biggest thing on Monday was, I think everybody skipped class to hear Roosevelt's speech.

SH: Where did you gather to hear it?

JV: In the dorm room, in a room. … I think everybody [was listening]. There was a hush over the whole campus when he was going to talk, and you know the words, "A state of war has existed as of the time that they struck Pearl Harbor," and that really threw it in.

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

JS: Side two, tape one. Please, continue.

JV: With Pearl Harbor, everything was definitely a different tone, different mood. Then, we were committed, at that time, and, of course, within days, the Advanced ROTC, which I was not in, they had moved everybody out to the gym. … My roommate went, and I was just trying to be friendly, … getting friendly, with a fellow of my own class and it was Frank Hutcheon, [Franklin

Eadie Hutcheon, Jr.]. … I remember, distinctly, he left and said, "Well, here, the room is open," and then, I had another roommate, very shortly, but it'd have been a different year had he not had to go, or had I gone with him. … So, they ate all their meals and all their everything was at the gym. They set up kitchens up there for the food, and they were Advanced ROTC, advanced, really advanced, right on the uniforms and during the class and all this, and so, that was the start of the [war].

SH: Did the administration here on campus address you as a student body at all after hearing Roosevelt's speech?

JV: I can't remember. I think it was just a convocation, where everybody knew what we were going to do, and so forth. It was not definitely put on the war basis; it was a general convocation.

SH: Did President Clothier advise all of you to stay in class until further notice? Were they worried that people were going to enlist right away?

JV: … Yes. Well, they had made that known, that your education was very important. If you could possibly complete your education, why, to hang in [and finish]. Of course, the ROTC people didn't have a "yes" or a "no." They were in.

SH: Were there others in your class that went down and enlisted?

JV: I can't remember too many people pulling out of college to go enlist at the local recruitment [center]. I think that … trying to finish your education was quite important. A lot of the townspeople, I know, they enlisted the day after and all that, did all the things that were really patriotic and looked toward as a real gesture, to be a real patriot.

JS: Did you notice if it was difficult for your professors to teach following Pearl Harbor?

JV: No, I think they pretty much stayed right with the course of what they were doing.

SH: Did any of the classes speed up in any way? Did they change?

JV: The time? … Yes, some people took [an advanced program]. They had an advanced program, which, if your marks were high enough, you could go in that and you graduated a couple months early. At that point, I changed my courses. I took physics and more types of engineering courses, of that nature. It was a thought that that's something you should do. If you're going to do something, well, you might be better off being an engineer, and so, that's how I got into the physics part of it.

SH: What about the ASTP? Were you involved in that at all?

JV: No, I wasn't involved. … My course, at that time, was, I joined the, or contacted the, Air Force. They had what they called pre-enlistments, where they would let you finish your education, which was the ASTP, and you stayed in school until they needed you. So, I had

joined the Air Force, at that time, just put my name, like, on the list, that I was ready whenever they were, and then, I was called by the local draft board, because I was a 1-A, plus, [laughter] and I went to them and I told them where I stood at school. … They gave me a real break, I think, by the fact [that] they said that, … as long as they didn't have to take somebody from my group, which was the 1-A classification, they'd let me have a delayed induction, as they called it, and I could go to school until my number came up the second time. … Luckily, they didn't have anybody that they had to take out of the next level and I managed to finish school. Of course, two days after I finished school, … I was inducted, right then and there, which was part of the deal. I was [eligible].

SH: Did you graduate early?

JV: Just a few weeks early, with the speed … everybody was moving at that time.

SH: Were any of the people who were in Advanced ROTC part of that graduation?

JV: They started to move out.

SH: Right after graduation?

JV: Well, a lot of them before graduation.

SH: Okay.

JV: I can't remember many people being at the graduation ceremonies.

SH: Really?

JV: And, you know, in uniform or something, and they were in the service, right then and there, and, of course, being drafted, why, I went through the draft procedure, go into Newark for a final examination, … [after] which I was immediately in the Army, and so, I was shipped to Fort Dix very quickly. A day or so is all I remember, just get on the train to Fort Dix for being in the service, and, there, they gave me the original testing, and so forth, and shots and a pair of shoes and a uniform, and I was all set. At that thing, at that point, things started to change for me. I could never understand why. Everybody was there and they were going in groups to different areas for training, at that point. Some were going out West to take, I guess, boot camp or basic training out West, and, when … the people I came in with were ready to go, the Sergeant came back and he says, "Pack your bags. You're staying here and going to the cadre barracks. You'll be here for at least thirty days before we move you out," to which I didn't know why it was done that way, and so, I spent ninety days at Fort Dix, just waiting for assignment.

SH: Really, and never an explanation?

JV: Never said a word about why or when or how. Finally, after ninety days, I got the notice that I was to go to Camp Croft, in South Carolina, Spartanburg, and, there, I was in the seventeen-week basic training, and, of course, I had some humor in the whole thing. I had never

gotten a pay [envelope] while I was at Fort Dix, because I was on temporary duty, and I got to Spartanburg, South Carolina, and the first month down there, they came to the pay [day] and we had a very good sergeant, but very tough. He was a guard at Sing Sing. He was about six-feet-four and weighed about 280 pounds, and that gave you a real insight into the Army. So, he's going down the list, handing out the pay, and he said, "Van Kirk, I want to see you separately. What have you done?" and I said, "I didn't do anything." He said, "Well, how come you got all this pay?" I had, like, seven hundred dollars for this, back pay, [laughter] and he looked at me and he said, "Well, I don't know. You look like the kind that would be in a lot of trouble to me." [laughter] … He gave me the check, and then, I went on, and so, that was … my first big deal at Spartanburg, when I got down there.

SH: He knew you right away.

JV: He knew me right away. I had no trouble at all. …

SH: Did he invite you to join a card game or anything?

JV: Oh, no, no, he didn't, but, going into town, they had certain precautions that he had to talk to the young kids about. At that time, I was twenty years old, and the younger kids were seventeen and eighteen. So, he had a long talk with them about what to do in town, and he said to me, he said, "I know you've been in town so long in your life, I'm not even going to talk to you. Just come back; be back here Monday morning. That's all." [laughter] So, I had a very good relationship with, his name was Campamemosi. I'll never forget the name.

SH: What was his name?

JV: Campamemosi.

SH: Campbell?

JV: Campamemosi, all one word.

SH: Wow.

JV: So, that was my first deal with getting to Spartanburg, South Carolina, for basic training.

SH: How did the cadre at Fort Dix treat a brand-new recruit, who was a college graduate to boot?

JV: Sort of standoffish. … You could tell the people that were permanently there, which is the permanent cadre at Fort Dix. They were neither plus nor minus, because they're shipping people in and shipping people out. I had a job there, going through the files to see who didn't come back, that were on AWOL [absent without leave], and, you know, it's just a routine job. I think we had boxes and boxes of people that had come to Fort Dix and had been shipped out, and, when they didn't get to the place they were supposed to be after Fort Dix, they immediately

became AWOL, of course, and then, they go back to try to find them from that job. So, we had to keep everything in order, filed it; … the "J"s had to be with the "J"s and everything else.

SH: What was the training that you were sent to Camp Croft for?

JV: Infantry. I got there and I had my Air Force papers with me, yet, to go to the Air Force, and, of course, the fellow there says, "Put them away. Nobody gets out of the infantry here. You're an infantry personnel from now on," which there's nothing you can do about it, I mean. …

SH: Did you make any attempts to go to OCS [Officer Candidate School]?

JV: Yes. I applied at Camp Croft for OCS, and I was turned down before I did anything, never said a word, just I had one interview and they asked me about, some stupid question about where I'd be if the squad was attacked. … How would I know? I mean, I could be anywhere. So, he says, "Oh, you don't seem like the material." So, he rejected that and I was pushed off of that list, but I was not worried about it at the time. Do you want me to go ahead with this? …

SH: Please, yes.

JV: It becomes fascinating from here on.

SH: Good. [laughter]

JV: The people I was with, that went into this basic training corps, had their company, and so forth. … They divided them up to go to different places, Georgia and down in Texas, and so forth, and they had trains at a big depot, that they were going to load you to go to the other place, and so, everybody out, with all of your stuff on your back, the packs, all your equipment, stand there until they call your name, and then, go with the person that calls your name to the car you're supposed to go to. So, they're calling names, about an hour of names, in the Camp Croft assembly area and they wind up in this [train]. Campamemosi, you know, works it, "Van Kirk, what is the matter with you?" I said, "I'm fine." … He said, "Why aren't you on the train? They're getting ready to leave." I said, "They never called my name." "They called your name, because you're a dumb so-and-so and … wasn't paying attention," and he said, "I'll have to look, because guys like you make me spend … all my time trying to find things." So, he goes through his list and he says, "Your name's not on the list. Here you are. What am I going to do with you?" He actually said, "What am I going to do with you?" So, a second lieutenant came along and said, "Well, put him in a provisional company." So, a provisional company, I've learned, was a … sort of instant coffee type of thing. That's the company that does everything nobody else wants to do on the post. You're out collecting garbage, you're cleaning the mess hall, you're the bottom of the heap. So, I was in this provisional company and there I went, and I didn't know what was going on, and we dug [emplacements]. They have an artillery corps there in Camp Croft, so, we dug trenches and we dug foxholes for the people that worked the targets that were above them, and that was very interesting for about four weeks down there, still no word on what I was doing or where or why, and then, suddenly, almost as quick as the other time, they came to me and said, "You're going to Camp Shanks for embarkation for Europe." "Well, who am I going with?" "You're going with yourself. That's about it." So, they gave me a train ticket

and … I had four days at home, what they called a delay en route, at the time, and I went to Camp Shanks, on the Hudson. … I was in there and, still, this provisional company was hanging on to me. I had no assignment whatsoever. So, one evening, they said, "Get all your stuff on your back again, because you're going overseas." So, we went down and I went overseas. I got on a Liberty ship and away we went.

SH: Do you remember the name of it?

JV: [USS] *Dorothea Dix* [(AP-67)] was the name of the ship, and we sailed out of the harbor and, of course, looking at my hometown, which was right near Sandy Hook, and so forth. We went by that, and then, we went all over the Atlantic Ocean, I think, going to Europe. …

SH: Were you traveling in a convoy?

JV: Convoy, yes. They picked up a convoy just off of Norfolk. Well, they joined in as we went along. … We started out with, like, two ships, and then, there'd be, suddenly, six, and then, we got to be a big convoy. …

SH: This would have been in the beginning of 1944.

JV: '44, and we were [going] over. I mean, we knew we weren't going to Africa, because Africa was a dead situation at that time. So, in the convoy, we moved around. … I knew we were going from north and south, because you couldn't see land, but, one day, you couldn't get cool enough and, the next day, you couldn't get warm enough, and we were shot at by a submarine, on the way over. …

SH: Really? How did you know that? What were you doing in this convoy? What did John Van Kirk do?

JV: Well, I mainly didn't get seasick, [laughter] and I was doing the routine job of sweeping the deck, and, "Army sweepers, man your brooms," that was a favorite slogan, and we'd sweep the deck. It looked like we were polishing it, but, anyway, we had a load of landing craft, a deck load, they called it, with nothing in the hold, and, if you want to get on a rocking ship sometime, try that, for the ocean.

SH: Top-heavy.

JV: Yes, and so, we were proceeding to go through the Atlantic, with storms and what-have-you. One time, we dipped to a point where one of the seamen aboard said he thought we were going to upset. We went over more than the [maximum degree]. In fact, it went over so far that these landing craft they had strapped to the deck were damaged. They hit the water and tore the transom out of one of the boats, and that was a pretty neat experience. Of course, the food in the mess hall, you stood up to eat and everybody's standing up, and, of course, when it makes these dips, everybody's food goes down the end of the line, you, too, on the floor and on the food. It's a real jolly situation. [laughter]

SH: How many were onboard the ship? How many men?

JV: Yes, we had a limited load of people. I would guess somewhere around four hundred, 450. We weren't stacked, like they had on other ships, and the reason I knew we were shot at by the submarine [was], we were in the convoy and, the next morning, daylight, and I looked over and … went to the deck and looked out and we were all by our selves and we were just right out. … We made a right turn, it seems, right out of the convoy, and whether they thought that, by moving out of the convoy, they thought the Germans would think that they had gotten one ship, I don't know, but they moved us out. … We were by our selves for about twelve, fourteen hours, and then, the convoy sort of caught up to us. We'd slowed down at that time, out there, but that was as near as we, as I, got to it.

SH: Was the crew onboard this ship Navy or Merchant Marine?

JV: Merchant Marine.

SH: How did they treat the infantry?

JV: Oh, fine. … There was no hassle with that. …

SH: Was there a Navy gun crew aboard as well?

JV: We had one gun onboard, and I think that was in case a submarine came up where you could see it. That's about all, but it was very limited armament on the ship.

SH: It sounds like your crossing took a long while.

JV: Yes.

SH: Did you talk to any of the Merchant Marines or any of the Navy men at all?

JV: I talked to a couple of the Merchant Marine people that were on there.

SH: This was not their first crossing then.

JV: No, they had been established crews. I don't know if they were on that ship or not, but they had been in the service for quite awhile.

SH: Did they tell you any hairy stories?

JV: … No, they didn't say anything about being shot at or shot down or anything.

SH: At this point, you still did not know what you were going to be doing when you got there.

JV: Not a clue. … Infantry; I mean, I was going to be in the Army. That's basically [it]. Before we left, I mean, [well] before, we knew that the coast was being alerted for submarine attack, and

they did attack some boats right off of New Jersey, off of Mantoloking, but it didn't postpone anything. We just kept right on going. …

SH: Please, continue. I just wondered what somebody does with their time.

JV: Oh, yes. I had a couple books I was reading at the time, … but you have to read that on the deck, because the lights were very poor in the hole, and, seventeen days later, we got to Ireland, … to Belfast, in Northern Ireland, still in the provisional company, still not designated. I wasn't in … any division or anything else. So, we landed in Northern Ireland and they took us away from Belfast. You went to a town called Coleraine, and they had an Army camp, except with Quonset huts. That's what you were billeted in, and our job there was to mainly change uniforms, as I remember, which was a funny thing, because they knew that the Germans had put spies over on the other half of Ireland and we were on one half and they knew the Germans were on the [other half]. So, we marched with green olive drab one day, and, one hour later, we went and changed to suntans and marched, and they must have thought we had a million men there. [laughter] … We just did that for day after day, and then, we had some conditioning training, where … they wanted to keep everybody really active. … You know, you'd have, like, ten-mile marches and wind up with a run at the end, which, you know, is physical conditioning, mainly. Then, one night, again, I'm in the provisional company and the Sergeant comes in and says, "Don't eat. You've got to go over to the headquarters," and I'm over at the headquarters and, there, I met a colonel, and he was very cordial, said, "Come in, sit down," I, of course, with the traditional salute. So, he said to me, … repeating the same words of Campamemosi, "What did you do in the US?" I said, "I didn't do anything." He said, … "[You] didn't come out of a brig or anything?" "No," I said, "I was just a soldier that was trying to find my way," I think I said, or something. He said, "Well, it's unusual you're here," and that's about all he said to me for the interview, "What did I do?" Then, he said, "Well, who interviewed you at Fort Dix?" and I said, "Well, at that point, there was two men and a WAC, a woman, at that time." … The WAC was the Women's Army Corps, and he said, "Well, … I don't know what they did with you to do this." Anyway, he says, "Go on back to the barracks." So, I went back to the barracks, and, at that time, the training, what they were doing at night, was all over. … So, I just retired, went to sleep. Next morning, bright and early, the Sergeant says, "Where's Van Kirk? He's leaving," all by myself. … Finally, a truck came, a six-by-six, with one other guy aboard, and the driver said, "Where's your food?" and I said, "I don't have any food. I just have my belongings on my back." "Oh," he said, "they got things mixed up." He said, "You're supposed to have food for three days." So, the Sergeant gave me corn, cans of corn, [laughter] and that's what I had for my trip, and so, they took us down to the Belfast [area], and then, we got on a ferry to go across to [from] Larne [to] Scotland, and, on the way over, I met a nice English family and I traded them corn for a dinner. [laughter] I had plenty of corn, and we got over to Scotland and had everything ticketed, while I was on the train, for London, and what I was doing now, I'm still lost. I mean, I have no company, no designation. I'm not in the I Corps, the II Corps, or any corps. I get down there. … I remember, the train pulled into the station and we were met by a warrant officer and a sergeant and a jeep, and the two of us, and the fellow said, "Well, you've been assigned to SHAEF [Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces]." That's the first time I knew I was in SHAEF.

SH: Was the other man assigned to SHAEF as well?

JV: He was assigned to SHAEF, too. He was from a different place in Ireland, but the two of us went to SHAEF.

SH: Did he have a similar story?

JV: Yes. He didn't know where he was, either.

SH: Where was he from?

JV: Texas, and he just evolved, and we went to so-called Bushy Park. That's where the SHAEF was stationed, and Eisenhower and all the dignitaries were there, and so, I was interviewed and … I had taken typing in high school. That's the only typing I had taken. So, I was able to punch a typewriter fairly well, and then, the man in charge, a Colonel Paisy, I think his name was; I mean, Captain Swanson was my immediate captain. My job became, at that point, to take messages that came over from the United States, or were being sent to the United States, and to write a brief resume of what was in the message, keeping it to twenty-one words or less, and filing it with the Dewey Decimal System. …

SH: Really?

JV: The Dewey Decimal System, now, the young fellow [Jeffrey Skolnick] just fell off his chair, [laughter] because what I did would be done by a computer today or they wouldn't even need [anyone] doing this, because it would be on the computer. They could send it here and there and all over.

SH: Actually, they are learning how to abstract and index. Go ahead.

JV: … The job was to write these messages in short phrasing and put it on a card, which would be filed and cross-referenced, so that if somebody came from another group and wanted to know what was going on, they could look … at my synopsis, whether it was something about doing this or that. … The first few weeks, it was very limited, but, after that, they took my condition to be top secret. So, I was moved into the top-secret area and, of course, we had the French and the British and the Belgians. All the free states all had representatives in this headquarters and I was supposed to write these things so that somebody from France, or something, could pick up what was in the bulk of the messages that had come over from the United States, and that was done that way, and then, microfilm, I mean, everything was microfilmed, also. … I've often thought, today, it would be so simple, with the modern methods of [information handling], and, of course, in those days, … they didn't have guns that were out in the English Channel that were pinpointing a house in Paris, either. That was such a different war, so incredible.

SH: In the transfer from Ireland to England, did you see any difference in the countryside or the way people thought of the war or the way they were reacting to it? By now, London is being ….

JV: Oh, bombed terribly.

SH: Bombed tremendously.

JV: Oh, they had a very, I think, pragmatic attitude, I mean, … very few smiles in England.

SH: Bushy Park, how far is that from London?

JV: … The town on the map is Hampton Wick, but it's outside of London by about, I would say, twelve, fourteen miles.

SH: Southeast?

JV: We were outside of London, out of the south, southwest.

SH: Southwest, okay. What was your room like?

JV: We were on cots, and no beds, just the cot.

SH: Were you in a barracks?

JV: In a barracks. …

SH: How far would you go from your barracks to where you did your work?

JV: Oh, probably two hundred yards. …

SH: Were you in an office-type building or were you at a home that had been converted?

JV: Well, the barracks were just built in a cinderblock type of barracks, where we stayed, and that was [with] showers and, also, the mess hall, and then, Bushy Park was under a big tent. It looked like a hill, where the headquarters was; they had it all camouflaged and it was all strapped down. It was really netting, and I remember that being over all the buildings in this compound.

SH: However, there were buildings under the netting, under the tents.

JV: Under the netting, yes.

SH: Were those buildings built specifically for that or were you using an old army post?

JV: I think it originally was an army area, and then, I think they improved it when D. Eisenhower came there in SHAEF.

SH: To ask about your top-secret clearance, do you know if any investigations were done here in the States about your background?

JV: After the war, my neighbors all said they thought I had something terrible in the Army, because the FBI was questioning them, and the questions were, "Did I ever show sympathy

towards the Germans?" That was question number one. "Did I ever act in a disrespective manner?" and, also, "Did I attend the taverns and … drink?" That was some of the things they questioned [them about], and I understand that went on before they took me from the provisional camp into London. So, they investigated, and they investigated my school, the high school. The principals [were] quizzed about me, and so forth, and so, that's all that [I know]. I don't know whether this all went together or not, but, apparently, it did, in some way.

JS: Could you describe the security procedures you had to go through to go to work?

JV: Well, you had a pass that you carried with you, but it was nothing like it is today, where you have the picture and all this on it. It was nothing like that. When you're in the compound, that was fenced in, in London, and they had security guards all around that and, every time, you went in and out of that and you had to have your pass. … Then, they'd let us go to London, which was very unusual, but they knew I didn't drink or couldn't drink. So, I guess they thought it was all right, and I never caroused and did anything. So, while I was there, the British were there and, of course, they have their top-secret clearances. BIGOT, I guess you know about that.

SH: Tell me about that.

PV: Well, BIGOT is the classification of the British, their top-secret clearance people. It's comparable to the American "top secret" and I was what they called, "BIGOT-ed," in the British Army, to handle the papers that came from Britain, and BIGOT is; I don't know if you know … what the word means or where it came from?

SH: No, please, tell us.

JV: When they started the African Campaign, the soldiers that were shipped out of London, or England, to Spain and Gibraltar, they put on the bags, "To Gibraltar." … Well, anyway, it boils down to, if you turn it backwards, it's BIGOT. "To Gibraltar," is the end of it; that's the, "To G-I-B." … That's how they got the thing evolved. That's what BIGOT [was], how they picked the codename up. It's a codename, … but they picked one of the things that the people wrote, "To Gibraltar," and they'd just write, "To," and then, "G-I-B," and that's BIGOT, spelled backwards.

SH: Right, it is.

JV: Yes.

SH: Did you have to learn code? I am assuming all these messages came in code.

JV: No, they were decoded. When they came to me, they were all [decoded] and I didn't have any code [experience]. We knew about the machines they used. … I think the name of the one that did everything was the ENIGMA.

SH: Right.

JV: And that all came out. … When you worked in the top-secret area of the [headquarters], you were shut off from the rest of the people. All the messages there were classified and they came in and that's all, as far as they got. When you got rid of them, you had to hand them to somebody that you knew was also in [the top-secret section].

SH: Were you ever aware of anyone trying to find out information from you?

JV: No. I never ran into anybody that was a "fifth column," or anything of that sort. It was always the paperwork that came through. …

SH: What was a typical day like for you? What kind of hours did you put in and where and what did you do?

JV: Worked on a shift basis. The office worked twenty-four hours a day and you'd take your shift, like, eight hours, almost like being in the machine factory, and I'd put that in, and then, every so often, you had to take night duty. The night duty was not as large as the day staff, and so, you didn't have to take that every shift, but it was long hours and trying to keep things in order.

SH: The American contingent, where were most of them from? What was their background?

JV: All over and every background.

SH: Really?

JV: Yes. They had, this (Tyler?) … had actually been studying for oil, down in Texas, and he's … going to work with an oil company before he was in the service, and then, we had a person in from Philadelphia, who was working on the newspaper at the time. … Very diverse, no set thing; they didn't pick anyone out and say, "Your hair is green and there you go." It just seemed to be hit or miss.

SH: What was working with the other Allied forces there like? Was there good camaraderie?

JV: Oh, yes. [Of] the people that came, we were predominant, I mean, as far as other than the British. Even the British were very small numbers, compared to what the Americans had. The British were very good. The only thing [was], when I was BIGOT-ed, I was then a sergeant, and a sergeant in the English Army is a lot more of a sergeant than in the American Army, because … a lot of them came from the school, like their West Point, they had trained there; I think it's Sandhurst.

SH: It is.

JV: … They were down there and, of course, the pet phrase was, they'd see you and say, "Oh, hi, Yank. How long [have] you been in the Army? What is this, your eighth month or your tenth month?" [laughter] and some of these guys had been in for twenty years and twenty-five years and they were all an older crew, but that was their favorite. "You must have been in at least

eight months to be a sergeant," you know, [laugher] and here they are, sergeants in the British Army, … you know, didn't like that situation.

SH: Did you learn to break for tea as well?

JV: I never did, but they had that, but I ate with them, and the British mess was a hundred percent better than the American. We had a choice, when I got in this top-secret thing, I could eat at the British mess or the US mess.

SH: Were the French and the Belgians and the other free forces there as well?

JV: Very limited, very limited. We had French higher-ups, I mean, like, the generals and colonels, but, as far as individual soldiers, GIs, … I don't remember any French, or English, we saw some of them, but very few French or Belgians.

SH: How did they treat the "Yank?" Did they treat you well?

JV: Oh, yes. … Of course, the English had the feeling that if we weren't there, they wouldn't be there, because it was going to be all over.

SH: Did any of them invite you home to meet their families?

JV: No, I never got into that situation. Maybe that's why I was BIGOT-ed; I don't know. [laughter] No, I never got into [that], never dated a girl or anything of that, in the British [population], which many of the soldiers were out dancing at the USO [United Services Organization] clubs and what-have-you.

SH: Did you see any of that or any of the entertainment that came through?

JV: They used to have shows [that] would come through, the typical USO show, a saxophone player and a pretty girl, scantily dressed, and that was about the extent of that. …

SH: What did you do when you went to London?

JV: … Actually, I went to the Royal Philharmonic. That's pretty dull for this young fellow sitting here. [laughter]

SH: No, I am impressed.

JV: Yes? I went there twice and that was a wonderful thing. …

SH: Was it in Prince Albert Hall [Royal Albert Hall] at that time?

JV: Prince Albert Hall, that's where I went. … That was the "buzz bomb" era, when I went in, and the buzz bombs were going over and, of course, when they first started, they sent a buzz bomb and all of the sirens would go off and everybody would run for cover. … One night, the

singer was; they finally said, "Well, we won't set the alarm off, because, if you're going to get hit, you're going to get hit anyway," sort of a "no retreat." So, they were having a performance and it was a singer, and I'm sure I was there, but, anyway, she put her fingers up to her nose when those sirens went off and kept on singing. So, the British were [resolute]. The destruction in London, though, … you can't describe it, and the V-1s, that's the first ones that went over, the "putt-putt," they were terrible, and then, of course, the US shot at them for awhile, and that's exactly what the Germans wanted. If you could bring one of them down, you got a medal and, also, a bomb in your head, [it] could have come right down on the [gun position]. So, SHAEF fired at them for about three days, until somebody wised up and said, "Let them go, because, then, they won't hit the headquarters." They were really … trying to aim [at us]. They knew we were there. The intelligence would have told them that. They'd be pretty dumb if they didn't. But, that's what they were doing; they had the antiaircraft guns, they were trying to shoot them down. After three days, they stopped.

SH: Really?

JV: And let them go on to some other place, and the V-1s were the "putt-putts." That's the one that had the siren. Then, when the V-2s came, if you heard it, you lived through it, because, if you didn't hear it, … when it hit, you'd be it. … They were above the sound barrier. …

SH: Were you ever given a lecture on how to live with the British or how to be a good American soldier?

JV: No, they never got to that. I think their investigation of you would automatically make that not necessary, as far as that goes. … Do you want me to keep on going, yes?

SH: Please, continue to tell us your story and things that you remember.

JV: So, then, … after two or three trips to London, … you know, it was a pretty dull, routine thing from then on. Some of the papers I went through, I remember, which I think I can disclose now, it'll impress people that the frogmen that examined the beaches at Normandy, months before the invasion. They were getting samples of the sand, to see how much weight they could put on them with the tanks landing in the water. They were impressive. Those guys, I'd take my hat off to, to swim in there and scoop up sand, see how deep it was and make these (bearings?), and, also, the Mulberries. The British wanted the Mulberry; that was the artificial harbor. They had that planned and, of course, a storm came and turned the ships all over the place. So, that was out. … Some of the codenames we had, they had piping that was going to take supplies of oil over to Europe, which you never hear much about, and that was called PLUTO. That's "PipeLine Under The Ocean." That was the abbreviation for that, but … they moved so fast that they didn't have to use that. Then, I was sent to the advanced detachment of SHAEF, and that was really interesting, because we moved up; well, I was supposed to be going … closer to the front. Eisenhower didn't want his headquarters back in London, for several reasons. Number one, they [would] have the public relations [image] that the generals were all back in London and the doughboys were fighting in France; a lot of people say, "Oh, where the heck are they?" I mean, I know it was public relations, because the communications were advanced enough, at that time, they could communicate from London as well as they could from Portsmouth, but I was

sent with this detachment to go with Eisenhower to Portsmouth. That's where we [prepared to cross].

SH: Were you aware of when June 6th was going to take place?

JV: Not the date. I knew it was going to be in a week, give or take a day, and OVERLORD was their codeword and everything came through, "OVERLORD," … that was, "Get it out and hush-hush." That's the whole thing.

SH: When they started getting that close, were you then confined to base?

JV: No. They let us go, because I think that that was another thing to keep the spies from thinking something was up. They let us be free to move around at our own choice.

SH: What about Slapton Sands? Did you hear about that, the practice that went awry?

JV: Oh, the towing up the coast with the fake barges? Yes, that was a pretty good effort, but it didn't matter too much. I never thought … it was going on, but they had these things to assemble, you know, vessels, and so forth. They put them in the English Channel, towed them north and south, all over. … I think the Germans, at that point, knew as much about that as we did, because they never bit for it, never. [Editor's Note: The interviewer was referring to Operation: TIGER, in which several ships were lost to German E-boats during a practice landing at Slapton Sands in the United Kingdom. Mr. Van Kirk's response may be referring to diversionary ploys implemented during Operation: FORTITUDE designed to mask the true landing site.]

SH: There was quite a loss of life with some of those exercises.

JV: There was some, but nothing on the scale of a battle. I mean, it was just a [smaller operation]. That's another thing; I'm not a hero. I never fired a shot in anger and nobody ever fired at me.

SH: As someone with a top security clearance, and being able to wander as you would choose with your passes, were you armed?

JV: No. We weren't armed. We had nothing that pointed us out as being different [than] anybody else. We just meshed in with the crowd. The trains, also, when we went into London, we didn't have anything special to [identify us].

SH: You talked about public relations. Were there photographers and movie cameras rolling around your headquarters at all, perhaps watching or interviewing Eisenhower?

JV: Not too much. They kept that pretty much just in that one area. They didn't want, you know, that to be plastered on the home front. There wasn't a group of photographers. … During the battles, they had more photography and films, of the landings, and so forth, than what we did at SHAEF. …

SH: Did you have access to a jeep or a bike, anything like that?

JV: No, we had community jeeps and we'd, … you know, like, catch a jeep and go. … We were kept very close, especially when we got to Portsmouth.

SH: Describe what it was like at Portsmouth, as compared to Bushy Park.

JV: Yes. It was very limited to go any place at Portsmouth. Of course, … that would have been the staging area and they'd had thousands of troops there before, and, when we were there, we were sort of the "draggers," the end of the line. …

SH: Where did they house you then?

JV: We were in tents in Portsmouth. Tents were what they called permanent tents.

SH: When did you move to Portsmouth?

JV: We moved to Portsmouth about two weeks after D-Day, down in that area.

SH: During the invasion, did your duties change at all? Did you still work the same kind of shift?

JV: No. … The only thing that was different was the casualties. … Those figures were just frightening. …

SH: Were you still only working with communications coming from the States to SHAEF?

JV: And some going back, but very limited going back. They kept the casualties quite under their hat.

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

JS: Tape two, side one, of an interview with Mr. John Van Kirk. Please, continue.

JV: And we were talking about the casualties being kept under the shelf, under the cover, and that was the worst thing, … one of the worst things, of my job, was to have to see them most every day, and the numbers were really frightening, … especially the invasion.

SH: Did you see the names of the people at that point?

JV: Numbers, numbers, that was it, but you knew that people [had died] and you keep thinking about their hopes and dreams and everything going up in smoke in one second. … That was quite a devastating thought, and it's stayed with me all these years, which is a long time.

SH: In the time that you were in England, from London to Portsmouth, and even into Ireland, had you met anyone from Rutgers at that point?

JV: No. I never met anyone from Rutgers, … up to that point.

SH: Please, continue.

JV: I didn't meet anybody … working with us, … [from] Rutgers, around that area. So, at Portsmouth, one of the big things [was] where they were going to have a big Christmas show from Glenn Miller, in Europe. … The band had come to Portsmouth to give a final recital before they went to the Headquarters. Eisenhower and [General Omar] Bradley and [General Walter Bedell] Smith were all there, and they opened the gates and said the enlisted men could come, also. So, I was at that last concert … that Glenn Miller ever gave. … That was a fantastic show. It was, you know, part of the USO, I think I'm calling it right, part of their doings, and they were going to go to Europe and have this show, this band recital, … in Paris and, of course, we knew, two days later, that there was no Glenn Miller. He had gotten in the wrong plane, [with] a friend of his, and … we knew he was missing, and that was way along in October, and then, [we had] to keep everything quiet, until they announced it, at Christmas. Everything just stopped. … We were sitting there, wondering how they were going to break that to the US, which was more [traumatic] than citing thousands of casualties. I mean, Glenn Miller was a real, you know, icon. … So, the way they did it, they just let everything go until about three days before Christmas, and then, they announced it, here, that it'd be not that Christmas, "Glenn Miller was missing," and that's the end of the Glenn Miller era.

SH: You actually knew in October.

JV: That he was gone, yes.

SH: When you say he got in the wrong plane, do you mean the wrong plane as far as fate is concerned?

JV: Well, it's fate, yes, that he went with a private plane. It wasn't a US ship. It was somebody from England he knew, a wealthy person, apparently, because he had a plane, and he was going to go by himself, and I don't think that this story that he was shot down by the Germans, that that would hold water. I mean, I think either something went wrong with the plane, they either got lost, which is easy to do in those days, with the equipment they had, but I still feel it was something like that.

SH: At SHAEF, were the reports that were coming to you coming from all the different branches in the military?

JV: Mainly the supply, and that's one of the things with this present war that we're in now, [the Iraq War of 2003]. I don't think they were prepared to have the equipment, the logistics, to fight the war. … [Maybe] they underestimated what was needed in this Iraqi War, but, over there, [European Theater] they had things that you [would find] hard to believe, the way they were shipping things in there, flour, boots, uniforms, weapons, unbelievable, and we got into a lot of

the logistics of the shipping over there. They came on sheets, so, … if somebody wanted to know what the supply was, they would pick it up right away.

SH: Just from the reports that you were getting, were there any commanders that you formed an opinion of, what they were like or what they looked like? Were you able to do that from the reports?

JV: Well, I saw them most every day, in the SHAEF, and so forth, and I didn't know them, but we saw them and they were a real group that you really liked, just by looking at them.

SH: Did you?

JV: Yes. You would think that, if the country had to be at war, it was in the good hands.

SH: Did you?

JV: Yes, that's one of the things that I thought, because of the efficiency and their bearing, and so forth.

SH: What was their demeanor to an enlisted man such as yourself? Did they ever acknowledge you, talk to you?

JV: Well, the main thing is that when an officer walks in, especially a second lieutenant, you're supposed to jump up and break your hand saluting, but, from Eisenhower on down, the first day that Eisenhower came into our area, he said, "Just stay where you are. I don't want you to waste your time getting up for all this saluting business." He said, "I'll walk through and just acknowledge that you're there," and that's all it amounted to. That impressed me, for some reason.

SH: I would think so.

JV: Yes, and, with all the weight he was carrying, I mean, it's unbelievable.

SH: Did you ever see any exchanges between Bradley and Eisenhower, or any of the other commanders that were there?

JV: No, I never saw any of that. I mean, it was a very close relationship with the Americans. We knew there was a strained relationship with the British, with Montgomery wanting to go his way and Eisenhower wanting him to go another way. That's that.

SH: Was Montgomery also in and out of this headquarters?

JV: Very rarely. I didn't see Montgomery; I don't think I ever saw him, to tell you the truth, but we knew he was coming, because all of the security in the world would [come up], you know, when they had the "big deals" there. So, then, to keep on going, I went to France.

SH: Okay, Jeff has a question, before we get to France.

JV: Oh.

JS: Had you ever seen Eisenhower pacing or looking, some days, a little unsure, different than he was the other days?

JV: No. His demeanor stayed quite level. He was never one to throw his hands up or wipe his brow. As far as I know, he was pretty much a methodical leader. …

JS: The same composure?

JV: The same composure, the same walk, same everything that I ever knew.

SH: Was he always smoking a cigarette?

JV: No, no. He smoked frequently, but not continually. So, then, they sent me to France. I flew to France. I didn't go on a boat, I didn't do anything; I went to France by air.

SH: Was that your first time flying?

JV: No, I flew once before, in a small plane, but this is the first C-47 that I was in, and, there, I went with a French general, an American colonel, two or three British colonels and a sergeant, first class, in this plane. … We flew over to Avranches and the thing that sticks out in my mind, in that, we climbed very steeply. In fact, the whole time, they started from Portsmouth, we were going up in the air, we must have been; we didn't lose oxygen. We didn't have oxygen masks, but we were high and, when we got to the coast, I thought the plane was going to come apart. They dove through the flak line at very high speed. So, we set it down in Avranches. But, nobody shot us, we were safe and sound, and we landed on, you know, converted planking that they used to make temporary airports. … So, from Avranches, and I saw the battle, … you know, the remains of a battle. That's another thing. You'd see the tanks, both German and American, that were, you know, trapped. They'd put them in a circle, and then, you'd see all the devastation, where they were captured. … Then, we saw the train that was hit by the lucky pilot. He hit the train and hit the engine of the train, a German train, and that was a duck shoot, because, then, the train sat there and they just strafed it and strafed it and strafed it. I don't think anybody lived in that situation, but we arrived in Avranches, and then, they put us in a six-by-six, that was my favorite transportation, and we moved to Granville, on the coast, below Cherbourg, and, out there, we were stationed there. That's very temporary. I was only there a short while.

SH: Your duty was still the same.

JV: Same thing. They set up a temporary office, just temporary stuff, and we were handed the same papers that were coming through, and they had couriers from London that brought the actual stuff, in airplanes.

SH: Were they doing the same thing?

JV: Yes, and they didn't use too much of the telegraph at that time. I'm afraid, I think they were thinking of intercepts, and so, that was there and we were there. Eisenhower, they tried to attack Eisenhower there, the Germans, one time.

SH: Can you tell us about that?

JV: Yes. They had their commandos with boats and they were dissipated real quickly, but that was a real daring scheme for a couple of hours there, when they were trying.

SH: What was the reaction where you were? What did you have to do? Were you aware it was happening?

JV: No. … We got the news the next day. [laughter] So, I'm not a hero. I didn't have my gun out, shooting away. I said, "My God, pretty close last night, huh?" [laughter]

SH: How did you find out about this, in the reports that came?

JV: Out of the reports, yes, we knew. …

SH: No one came in and said, "Oh, by the way" …

JV: No, no, and we had what they called a battle map, which we kept up all the time, and so, anybody could see that, and, well, obviously, not anybody, but all of the people that … had classification, and they moved the pins, where we were with different things.

SH: Just like in the movies. [laughter]

JV: Just like in the movies, and then, after the stint of, probably, five or six weeks in this Granville, they moved us to Versailles, and then, Paris and beyond that. Some of the things that we're already well aware of; Patton, when he ran out of gas with the whole Third Army, that was a real doings, because that's one time Eisenhower, we didn't see it, but he was really upset, because, here, he had a crew that was just sitting ducks, out of gas. That's where the Red Ball Express came in. They carried gas in jerry cans, to keep the tanks going. So, I saw Patton many times. He was the one that would make you realize that that's what the Army's all about. He was, just looking at him, … raw boned and tough.

SH: Really? Did he ever bring any of his spit-and-polish to bear on you?

JV: No, no, never, never on that, but we knew some of the things, you know, his slapping incident, and so forth. That was all big news, and … how do you send that back to the …

SH: How did you send it back?

JV: We just, you know, sent it back to the staff in Washington, I guess, at that point. … That was pretty tough, you know, for the people home.

SH: There was such a delay between knowing about Glenn Miller, and then, waiting until Christmas. What happened with an incident like the slapping incident?

JV: Well, … we almost got it secondhand, really, because it had gotten through, back, and, of course, … they had another front planned, codenamed DRAGOON, which was supposed to rupture the soft underbelly of Europe, which never came off, but that's what the Prime Minister wanted to do.

SH: Churchill.

JV: Churchill wanted to hit the ["soft underbelly"], and he wanted to clean out the Balkans, as he said. "Go up through the Balkans," and, so, we wouldn't have had the Cold War with Russia, if he [succeeded], but we may have had a different war anyway, at that time. So, at Versailles, we were put in the stable that had held Napoleon's men, which is quite good accommodations, [laughter] but rather bleak, and we had a mess hall there and, also, we had, you know, our meals were pretty much on time.

SH: Was SHAEF, the headquarters, actually in the Hall of Mirrors, as we see in some of the photographs?

JV: Not really. We were in a building across the way, the headquarters was. The castle, or the Versailles [palace], was not used too much, because everything was down, the mirrors were all gone, everything was taken down for the war. There, again, it was a bleak situation. The grass wasn't kept. It was nothing [like] what you'd see today. I've always wanted to go back, but I never made it. So, we stayed at Versailles, and another thing there, you'd find that the French were [desperate]. Again, I don't know whether their supply was down, but we had a lot of French people, they're lining up in front of the mess hall. When we emptied our mess kits, … they'd have a pot and they wanted to dump everything right in the pot, all the food, potatoes or anything else, and that was quite upsetting, I think, for what they had to do, and the coffee, any veteran, they used to serve you coffee, which was instant, I believe, but the French would be there with pots, they would get your coffee, to dump it in. So, that was a sign of, you know, that war is a terrible thing for the population, as well as the people fighting it.

SH: Were you able to get all of the supplies that you needed? We know that Patton ran out of gas.

JV: Yes. We were pretty well kept up-to-date with supplies, and so forth, and at Granville was the first piece of white bread I tasted in three months. Yes, England had all brown bread. That was to accommodate the English, because they didn't have white bread. When we got to Granville, the first meal we had, we had white bread and [I would have] liked to fall [over], but that's retrogressing to that part of it. …

SH: What about holidays, up until this point? You would have been in England for Christmas.

JV: We had Thanksgiving meals. They'd tried to put the turkey on the table, … [at] Thanksgiving, Christmas, there was always some notation that you were still a part of the US culture.

SH: When you had Christmas or Thanksgiving dinner, did Eisenhower and some of the other people come to this as well or was this just an enlisted men's event?

JV: No, … enlisted men's mess, yes. We never got to see the officers' mess until we got to Germany.

SH: Please, go ahead.

JV: No. So, we were there in Paris, and then, the next thing, they sent us to Rheims, the chapel at Rheims. … We were there and, of course, now, we're getting up into the time where the war's getting over, and I was at the … so-called "little red schoolhouse" when the Germans came to sign their non-aggression pact or, you know, stop the war, stop the fighting. That's what is in my book here. …

SH: Okay. We will continue in a minute. I am going to look at the book.

JV: "Cessation of hostilities," [is] what they called it, and so, that was the beginning of the [occupation].

SH: How suddenly did that message come? Was it slowly? Did you just keep waiting? Did you think that the war was over and they just were not coming to the table?

JV: Well, everything was going down for the Germans. They didn't stand a chance at that time. We knew that, and we just knew that we were waiting for the Germans to show up, and so, General [Alfred] Jodl was the chief negotiator. He showed up with, like, a submarine commander, [Karl] Donitz, and they appeared. I couldn't get their signatures, [laughter] but, anyway, that was the peace agreement.

SH: How did the Allies treat Jodl and the other gentleman?

JV: Militarily. They were just [professional], no fraternizing or no, "Well, good to meet you, Joe," type of thing. It was very standoff[ish], I mean, very much cold, with just what they were.

SH: Interpreters, were they necessary that day, or were these men fluent in English?

JV: I think they had enough English, but they had interpreters, US interpreters, with them at the time.

SH: In preparation for this, because, as you said, there were many, many weeks prior to this that they expected it to happen, am I right?

JV: Yes. …

SH: How did it come about that they finally came there? What kind of communication had to go back? What kind of protocol?

JV: Well, I think the big thing that set it off was the death of Hitler. He died just a few days before this happened. I think, with that, then, they were, more or less, let loose [to sue for peace], where he wouldn't have had any of his people, assassinate them or something. I think they were kind of waiting for that, and we knew that, when that happened, there'd be some movement toward a peace settlement.

SH: Had you been aware of the other attempts on Hitler's life?

JV: Yes. …

SH: How did that information get relayed to you?

JV: Well, that was in general information, just coming along that, that's where things were getting bad for Hitler at that time and this group, well, it was quite awhile before it actually happened, that they tried that. … Of course, at that point, he just wiped out the people that were in the plot, but he kept on fighting as long as he could, I guess, until [he killed himself], but the destruction in Germany was really unbelievable, too, when I get over to that part.

SH: Jeff has a question.

JS: The day the gentlemen came to the schoolhouse, what was the attitude among the whole community?

JV: The whole staff of that? It was [that] we were all pretty darned happy, I think. [laughter]

JS: Relieved?

JV: … Because, at that time, we were all planning to go to Japan.

SH: That is the next part of the story. I think Jeff's question is, how did you treat the conquered Germans as a staff? Were there derisive comments or did you treat them with respect? You talked about the standoffishness between …

JV: Yes, between the Allies and the Germans. Yes, they were harder to get along with than the French, for example. They were very much that way, and, of course, the word was, "When you're going down into Germany, they're not going to throw flowers, they're going to throw bombs at you." So, that was the [feeling] when we moved into Germany. So, after the stint in Rheims, we went to Frankfurt.

SH: How long was the period of time from the surrender or the cessation of hostilities until you went to Frankfurt?

JV: Probably, I would guess about four weeks, about a month.

SH: Was it?

JV: We moved up. At Frankfurt, we were assigned to the IG Farben Building. That was the chemical works, huge building, a great complex, and we didn't know how to hit things, but we knew how not to hit things, because the IG Farben Building had one little incendiary bomb that hit the roof and that pilot, I guess they gave him the devil. [laughter]

SH: How did that come to be, though? Why did we not hit some targets?

JV: Well, because Eisenhower wanted that for his headquarters. He wanted that to be the whole shebang for the Europe Campaign.

SH: For the occupation then.

JV: The occupation, and … all the papers were going [there]. We had a tremendous amount. At that point, everything joined together again; SHAEF, the main body joined up with the advanced group, and we had filing cabinets and papers you couldn't believe, all over the place, and I was assigned to CALA, at that time, too, after the war.

SH: Assigned to what?

JV: CALA, Combined Allied Liquidating Administration [Combined Administrative Liquidating Agency]. That was one of the things, but, then, we were preparing to go to Japan. At that point, I had, more or less, been given the chance to be a lieutenant. Just, I guess, being in the Army that long and doing what I did, they said, "Well, you can go to Japan, … but, before you go to Japan," I was to go to, I think, Command and Staff School, I think it is, in Leavenworth. They said, "You'll be there about six weeks, and then, carry on the same types [of duties] you're doing now, only at a level higher." … My papers were at this colonel's desk and I didn't know at the time, but he called me one morning and said, "You want to go home to your family or you want to stay in the Army?" and, of course, to go [to] the Command School, I had to sign for six years. I said, "Well, my dad is sick," and what-have-you, "and I think he can use me at home, but I don't know what you're talking about." … He said, "Well, just let me put these papers aside for forty-eight hours," and the next morning, they dropped the bomb.

SH: Really?

JV: So, my papers never got off the table.

SH: When you talked about going to Japan, were you talking about; now, SHAEF, of course, would not be called SHAEF, but …

JV: No.

SH: The entire headquarters moving?

JV: It would be the Pacific Command. We'd be assigned to them. We would not carry our work over from Europe. It'd be a separate meaning altogether.

SH: You being, yourself and other people, at the same level that you are with in SHAEF, the same group that is receiving messages and making a synopsis of them.

JV: It'd be that type of work, because they didn't have the huge computers at that time, and we'd have been over, probably, working for [General Douglas] MacArthur, I would imagine.

SH: That is what I was going to say; would it have been a complete change or was there any thought that Eisenhower would then move to the Pacific?

JV: No. I think that Eisenhower would have been, not shelved, but I don't think he would have had his foot in the Pacific Campaign.

SH: Had there been any discussion, that you ever heard, of MacArthur and the Pacific Campaign prior to this thought that you would be shipped there?

JV: Well, that was in the back of everybody's mind, that that would be a longer war and a more devastating war than the one we were in now. … Everybody had in the back of their mind, "That's where we're going," whether you got a commission or just stayed where you were. That was the big thing with that.

SH: The point system, how did that affect you in the position that you were in? How did you accumulate points?

JV: It was the time you were there, mainly, how long you were there, and … what they needed you for. The points were very good, but, if they needed you for something, they took points off, [laughter] so-to-speak, but they didn't do it that way. They just kept you, which, when you're in the Army, you don't say, "I'm going over to Winants, [a building on the Rutgers campus], this afternoon." … This CALA was supposed to be a liquidating agency, but it was so overwhelmed with the papers, I mean, we'd have filled the Pentagon with the stuff that they kept ongoing.

SH: Liquidating what?

JV: The messages, you know, declassifying them, the things that we went through, putting them in boxes, and so forth, and destroying a lot of them that were, you know, of no use. Just being a history of the war, so-to-speak, you were just wanting the important highlights of what you found.

SH: Did you ever liquidate a document that you wished you had kept?

JV: No, no. They had so many chains it had to go through, you know. …

SH: Many people have talked about the mail censorship. What about your mail? Was it highly censored or did you just not bother sending anything?

JV: Oh, yes. Well, you didn't send much, but you couldn't, you just couldn't, and the things I got from home were all censored before they got to us, too.

SH: Really?

JV: Yes. That's one of the few things that most GIs didn't have.

SH: Who censored that?

JV: The same staff that did the outgoing and incoming.

SH: Do you remember what was taken out of your parents' letters?

JV: They never took much out, because my parents were [conscientious]. You know, in one of my letters, I said that I'm handling sensitive material, so [that] they never should [ask], "Gee, what are the U-boats doing tonight?" or anything. [laughter] It was just letters about home, about what my father was doing. He had an injured hand during the war. I mean, he fell on a milk bottle at night … and he didn't heal and we found out later that he was diabetic, … and so, mainly, the concern was, "How's Dad's hand?" and it would be a little better or a little worse and what-have-you. That was most of my correspondence with home.

SH: Is that who you were writing to most of the time, your mom and dad?

JV: My mother and father.

SH: Did you have other people who were writing to you?

JV: No.

SH: Friends from Rutgers or school?

JV: No. [I] had some bulletins from Rutgers that they let come through. I think they were shipped to my home first, and then, sent over by my parents, and then, we had a fellow in the church that sent postcards every week, calling himself, "The Sage of Red Bank." He was an elderly dentist and he'd put little things that happened in a movie that was showing at the Carlton Theater or something, and you'd get them all the time.

SH: When you got back to the States, we need to continue this story. Please, go ahead.

JV: Well, then, after that, I was assigned, taken back to the States and shipped to Hanau, first, a little town in Germany, north of Frankfurt. That was the staging area for people going back to the States, and then, they shipped us to Hamburg, and then, got the ship to home.

SH: Once you left the headquarters, what were you assigned to do? What would they give someone who had had your kind of a clearance to do in Hanau?

JV: Then, everything went back in the pot. … At that time, I had stripes up and down my arm and, you know, the hash marks for the time in service. I was over there three years, in doing all this. So, we got to Hanau and I was a sergeant and, you know, I thought [I was] pretty hot stuff. [laughter] At that point, I finally got assigned to a unit, a field artillery unit, and I was the top sergeant in the unit. So, I had all these people, and all, that have been over there fighting in the mud and, really, war duty that was terrible, but, here, I'm their leader. I didn't know which end of the cannon the bullet came out of, at that point, [laughter] and I got along real well with all the troops there. Of course, I had been [overseas] longer; they'd all been after me, and I was in charge of getting the clean up details in the mess hall. … One other thing that makes you great, … when you make a speech, you're always supposed to have a statement first. It has a special name. I forget what it is right now, but an arresting statement first. When you start to talk to a group, if you can have an arresting statement, which could be a joke or anything, you'll get their attention. Well, anyway, my arresting statement was, the first night out on the ship, we ran into a storm off the English Channel and it was rough. … The next morning, the posting came down for KP and, of course, we had people lying on the floor who were sick. … One thing, I'd done some boating around home, in small boats, and I never had a seasick problem. So, I was standing up pretty rigid and I was the top sergeant, and so, the guy said, "Well, it's your job." So, I went through the ranks and I said, "We need fourteen guys for the KP and anybody that can stand up and can do it, do it, but nobody [who is sick]. I'll take the list and forget it, I just need volunteers." So, I got the fourteen, and then, all the rest of the people thought I was pretty decent. Nobody was forced to say, "Joe Jones, in the kitchen." I didn't go for that. So, we all went on a volunteer basis. So, that was my first big assignment in an assigned outfit, [laughter] and then, we came home, interesting.

SH: Do you remember what you came back on?

JV: I remember … more after it's over, when I got home. We came with two ships. We sailed out of Le Havre and two ships joined [together]. We had a two-ship convoy and, every day, the one ship would be [in] back of us and we'd be up in front, and then, as it got to be twilight, the ship would get closer to us. "That's funny. You know, they should go by us, like … either pass in the passing lane or stay where you are." They'd move up so that you thought you could touch them. They were real close, and we kept on coming home. We were eight days coming home. That wasn't a very fast trip, compared to the Concorde, but, anyway. … You know, this arresting statement we talked about, I got back and one of the seamen said, "You know why we were going so slow and that ship was always in back of us?" I said, "They were supposed to pick us up if we broke in two. This ship is cracked."

SH: Oh, my gosh. [laughter]

JV: "My gosh," understatement of the week. I think I should have gotten one of my Battle Stars right then and there for that trip, but, anyway, the ship made it and we made it [laughter] and I got home.

JS: Were there any soldiers with you on the ship who just could not wait to get home? Were they talking about getting back to their families?

JV: Oh, everybody. … That was the only conversation going on, back to their wives and girlfriends and mom and dad, and so on.

JS: Did you have some of your stories, too, to share, to say, "I cannot wait to get home?"

JV: Well, I said I wanted to get home very well, but I couldn't share anything with what I did over there. Nobody knew that I was with SHAEF.

SH: Were you at liberty to tell where you had been?

JV: No. They said, "You're just on the way home."

SH: What kind of language did they use to tell you not to discuss what you had seen or done?

JV: They just said, "Remember where you are and we'd appreciate [you] not giving too much information to anybody."

SH: When did they talk to you about the GI Bill and things like that?

JV: That was available at Fort Dix. We landed in Brooklyn and they shipped us right from there to Jersey City, then, to Fort Dix. That was a "go" trip, you know, and, in Fort Dix, they said these things were available when they discharged you.

SH: Did you think about staying in the Reserves?

JV: I was in the Reserves. … You're automatically in the Reserves for, I think, six years or five years, after the war. That's why I was close to Korea; I almost went back in for that. …

SH: Did you go back?

JV: No, I was still a Reservist, but never called on that one.

SH: Were you concerned that you would be?

JV: I had given it some thought, because I had enough time away from home and doing things.

SH: When you were part of the occupation forces, what about the displaced persons? Did you see any of that?

JV: No, I saw none of that, of the refugees or that, never got to the point.

SH: In your activities in SHAEF, when did you first hear about the labor camps and the concentration camps?

JV: Oh, we had the messages of them almost immediately when they were captured or investigated, and the furnaces for the people, we had those horrible pictures. I mean, we saw them. I don't know whether they ever did publish them here, in the States. We had some awfully bad pictures.

SH: You did not go to see any of these places in person.

JV: No, we couldn't move. We had no freedom of movement.

SH: Once you left England, how often did you get to leave the area? Were you given any R&R?

JV: No, none of that. The only thing, a buddy of mine, that was in the same outfit, we used to take walks in France and Germany. He was very tightlipped, too. We'd just walk and we used to go out in an afternoon. We had, maybe, a glass of wine at a local French place and that was about it.

SH: You were never allowed to go into Paris. You talked about being able to go into London.

JV: Only when we had an organized trip to go into Paris. We were a group [that] went in. When you went in, you were confined to that group, like a tourist. You weren't given freedom. … I think that we had sixteen or seventeen men that went, and we saw the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower and everything of that sort. …

SH: Was that from Versailles that you went into Paris?

JV: That was from Versailles. From Rheims, we never went anywhere, except to the [office]. … We couldn't get in the cathedral at Rheims, either. There's a big cathedral there. That was off limits.

SH: Why?

JV: I really don't know, except they thought, maybe, [it would] have some structural defects. At the time, we thought, possibly, that was it, why we couldn't go there.

SH: How were they protected, some of these things?

JV: Buildings, and so forth? Just dumb luck, I guess, and the Germans didn't hit them, that's about it. …

SH: Of the information that you had access to, what was the most shocking thing that you ever received or sent?

JV: I would say that the shocking [piece] was the casualties. That was … foremost in my mind, again, the totals, just numbers. That made it so, you know, mechanical, you might say. In those days, it had to be. … There wasn't any way of identifying everybody.

SH: Were there any chaplains assigned to SHAEF?

JV: Yes. They had services you could go to anytime. Yes, they had Catholic Masses available and the Hebrew chapel or the Hebrew synagogue type of thing, and they did let some of the people that [worked there go]. We had very few of the Hebrew people in our outfit. We had one and he would go to services and they allowed him to go to services, and no restraint on that. …

SH: Was there a Protestant service available as well?

JV: [Yes], but there, again, it was [that] the people had to want to go. I mean, there was no force of going.

SH: Did you ever go yourself?

JV: I went to, I think, two or three services during my whole time there. I think that was what [I did], never any big chapel that I went to and said that I, you know, attended services at Westminster Abby or anything like that. No, I didn't.

SH: What about the services that were offered by the Red Cross? Were you aware of any of those or how they worked?

JV: Well, they had that thing in London, with … some corner, famous, where the Red Cross staffed it, [the Rainbow Corner Club]. … You'd get food there. I was there twice and did that, but the Red Cross, as far as being at the headquarters, was never [needed]. I think the Red Cross put us, like, [down as] not needing it. We were sort of a protected bunch, you might say. …

SH: You said you went to the BIGOT-ed mess.

JV: Yes.

SH: When you got into France and Germany, what was the enlisted men's mess like in that part of the war?

JV: … Mostly, it was mess kit type of eating, where you put the food all together, mainly "the mashed potatoes on top of the ice cream," that you've heard, that expression. That did happen a lot.

SH: Did you ever have to move unexpectedly? It sounds like you had a lot of equipment.

JV: No. They usually had those pretty well spaced out, so that we didn't have any emergency movements. The only time we had a warning, [that] was really a real warning, was the Battle of the Bulge, when we were in Versailles and they thought that the Germans had intended to move on down and hit the headquarters, at that time. … There, they wanted to protect the headquarters and they had all the things to get rid of the documents and, also, you know, to alert you that you don't tell anything but your name [and] serial number. That's about it. They had Browning

machine guns, which was a thing that I did know how to operate one of them, mainly from Rutgers. They had the Browning machine guns in the lower ROTC. So, I knew about them, but most of the people said, "What would we ever do if they came in the door?" [laughter] and the machine gunner said, "Help yourself, I guess."

SH: Was there anybody at the headquarters who regretted being in the headquarters and really wanted to be on the battlefront or in the thick of battle?

JV: I don't think anybody felt that they wanted to go. I was *gung ho* in the beginning in wanting to go. Mainly, … an experience I had, the day I went to Camp Croft, my roommate, this Hutcheon boy, he was out on the firing range. … Of course, the second lieutenants, they were all second lieutenants at that time, taking their basic training, I was just coming in for basic training and he was … out in the village fighting, as they called it, where they run around with live ammunition. … Somebody said to him, "Well, never point a gun unless you want to kill him," and he jokingly pointed the gun at my roommate and the gun was loaded and he was shot just above the right kidney. It came out of his left shoulder. So, the day I moved in was the day … he was shot.

SH: In Camp Croft?

JV: In Camp Croft.

SH: Oh, my gosh.

JV: So, I knew. Word had gotten to me somehow, by somebody [who] said they had an accident on the range. … They said, "It was those new second lieutenants," which I knew were from Rutgers. They had a group of them down there, and I said, "Who was shot?" and the fellow said, "I think somebody by the name of Hutcheon." I almost flipped over. I couldn't think the world was so small.

SH: Were you able to go and …

JV: I visited him many Saturday nights, that's the only night I could get loose and go up there. I didn't take a pass to go into town like all of the guys, all of the "cavalier actors" in the group, but I stayed home on Saturday night. … Many Saturday nights, I went to talk to him and, the first time I saw him, he was bandaged from his shoulder all down, just all the way to his waist, and I said, "You'll make it," I mean, much encouraging words, and I talked to him. He was able to talk and he was one of the *gung ho* people that wanted to go into battle and he kept insisting. … When he got out of the hospital, they had taken him to another camp and put him on limited service, which meant he would stay in the States, and he said he didn't want to stay in the States. He wanted to go over and see some action, get into doing something. He would have been one to talk to you that would have been a hero, if he'd made it, but, on the way up to Paris, or … outside of Paris, to the next front, he was in a truck, a transportation truck, six-by-six, and hit a mine, turned over and killed him.

SH: Oh, my gosh.

JV: So, that was a real, you know, horrible experience. …

SH: When did you hear about that?

JV: I was informed by; I'm lying to myself now. I did get a letter from his mother. She had contacted my people and that's how I got word that Frank had been killed.

SH: In your position, were you aware of the other men from the Class of 1943 that were lost?

JV: No, but I knew after, you know. I was very much alarmed by that, which it's sort of, the cream of the crop were the ones that were lost in the war. We have a monument out there for them [near the Louis Brown Rutgers Athletic Center on the Livingston Campus].

SH: It is just unbelievable that so many were lost like that.

JV: Yes.

SH: You know firsthand, obviously. Do you have other questions?

JS: When you arrived back home, from Brooklyn, you went to Jersey City, then, Fort Dix; did your family meet you anywhere?

JV: Well, we were on that limited; this is something I shouldn't tell. We were on that "no pass, no movement," because they thought people were bringing back parts of jeeps and weapons, mainly, you know, and German souvenirs, which should have been [confiscated], deadly weapons. So, when we arrived at Fort Dix, it was on a Saturday, I remember distinctly, on a Saturday, and much heavily instructive material, "You're not to leave the barracks, no way." So, I said, "Well, I only live in Red Bank." … Well, it was actually Camp Kilmer; I came back there. … I take that back. I arrived at Camp Kilmer first and I was in Camp Kilmer and that's only twenty miles from home. So, Sunday was a beautiful day. It was in March, but it was a beautiful day and I said, "I think I'm going to go home." So, of course, I had my stripes; having stripes on your arm is very helpful. [laughter] So, it was a busy afternoon. … The camp was going back and forth. So, I went out and said to the guard, "Hi-ya," with my stripes, and walked on out and got out to Highway 1. I started to hitch a ride. So, this car stopped, a man and his wife, and picked me up and said, "Where are you going?" I said, "Well, I'm trying to get to Red Bank. I just came in with a group last night and I'd like to get to Red Bank." So, they said, "Well, we're just out for a Sunday afternoon [drive]. We were going to go get some things from the market," or something. So, they drove me down, very nice conversation, really nice civilians, and drove me home. He said, "Where do you live?" I told him, "It's Cooper Road," where I lived. Well, he dropped me off on the highway right at Cooper Road. It was just like personal transportation. …

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

JS: Tape two, side two; please, continue

JV: So, he said that, "I'm the civilian in charge of civilian security at Camp Kilmer," and I said, "Well, I'm [from there], you know." He said, "You're not supposed to be here." He said, "You look honest to me." He says, "I'll see you later." That's all that ever happened to me.

SH: What are the chances? [laughter]

JV: I'm being picked up by the chief of security. I've always been lucky like that. … Going back, my dad said to me, "How [are] you home?" I mean, Dad had been in the service. I said, "Well, I [might] have problems getting back in," because the barbed wire was still at Kilmer, all around the whole unit, and they had holes cut, you know, but you couldn't find [the holes]. You'd have to find the right hole to go through to get back in. So, my father said, "Well, what are you going to do to get back in? Do you know where the hole is?" I said, "Well, I know about where it is, but I don't feel like going in there and getting torn up." I said, "Take me right to the front gate." [We] went to the front gate, again, the stripes, "Hi-ya, Sergeant," right through. … I could have taken a jeep with me and gotten [through], but that's the funny part of the war, which doesn't amount to much in the history, but it's things that happened to me.

SH: That is what we are after here. That is exactly what we are after. When you were in the Reserves, after having served as you did, was there any other contact with you? Was your discharge different than anyone else's?

JV: No, no, it was just the routine. … You know, it said, "You'll be required to be in the Reserve." I didn't sign anything, but, when they let you out or discharged you, you had definite status of being in the Reserve automatically.

SH: Were you recommended for any citations?

JV: No, no.

SH: For the service you put in.

JV: No, as I said, I'm not a hero. I didn't shoot down any airplanes or capture any tanks.

SH: I cannot believe that your service was not necessary or anything to be talked down about. Tell me then about your life since that point, what you have done since?

JV: Well, of course, the girl I was dating at home, before the war, I received the original "Dear John" letter, [a letter stating the relationship is over], and that was that, and so, just the normal [thing]. I went to work for my father right away. …

SH: Had you received the letter early in the war? At what point did you get your letter?

JV: The "Dear John" letter? That was probably one year into … [being] overseas. So, then, I met my wife at that time, but she only lived, … well, from here to the Bishop Place away from me. [Editor's Note: The interview took place in Van Dyck Hall, which is about one city block

away from Bishop Place on the Rutgers University College Avenue Campus in New Brunswick, New Jersey.]

SH: Had you ever met her before?

JV: Yes. Well, I was quite a bit older than she was. … My folks had, like, a dinner for the people, and the neighbors, and so forth, and friends. So, I met her then, took her home, and then, called her later and, slowly, gradually, pulled the wool over her eyes and, finally, got married, [laughter] and it's been fifty-four years [since] we were married.

SH: Congratulations. You continued in the monument business.

JV: Yes, all the time. Yes, it was the mom-and-pop business of mom-and-pop businesses. I was chief cook and bottle washer and, you know, two or three employees and that was [it], and then, I got into the monument [end], you know, doing the monuments. You know, I was very fascinated with, not fascinated, but interested in, the compressors and the cutting materials and the things that came along in the industry and that's what kept me going, I think, with the technical part of it coming in. So, that's where I am until I; you don't want to hear about my other operation, I don't think. [laughter]

SH: I would leave that up to you. Did you use any of the GI Bill benefits?

JV: No.

SH: None?

JV: I wasn't in the 52/20, nothing. [Editor's Note: The "52/20 Club" was a colloquial term for the unemployment insurance offered through the GI Bill, which provided veterans with twenty dollars a week for up to fifty-two weeks.]

SH: Did you use the mortgage or any of the loans?

JV: Oh, the VA [Veteran's Administration] loan I had, when we built our house, and that time, it was, I think, four percent for my loan.

SH: You can recognize the rates we have today, right? [laughter]

JV: Yes.

SH: If you would like to talk a little bit about your wife and your family before we conclude the interview, that would be great; if not, that is your prerogative.

JV: Well, my wife is my whole [support system]; today, I take everything, I mean, with my legs, and so forth. That goes back to my story about why I'm this way. … This wasn't an accident that happened to me. In 1956, I had two children, nice kids, and, in 1956, I had a testicular tumor, which, in those days, was ninety-five percent fatal. That's before they had the good X-

rays and the treatment. So, the doctor told my wife that … they had to have radical surgery. … They had the radical surgery and the doctor that did it was a real surgeon. I mean, he was head of the hospital, through my mother-in-law is how we got him. She made the appointment. I thought, "This is nothing." My local doctor said, "You know, when you have a weekend to do it, this would be nothing." So, she called this; this is a long story. I don't want to take all the time, not archives, but it's a funny [story]. She called the doctor and said that her son-in-law had a potential problem with a lump. … He was a urologist and he was head of the Monmouth Medical Center. So, he said, "Send him down." So, I went down. My father came out. We were working … in the cemetery. My father came out with the car and said, "You've got to go. Your mother-in-law said you have to go to Monmouth right now." So, he said, "I'll get in the truck and you take the car," and I went to Monmouth. I get to Monmouth and the doctor says that he wanted to examine me and the nurse, the receptionist, she said, "Oh, yes, Doctor," his name was Blaisdell; I say a prayer every time I think of him. He came down in a business suit and a suitcase and he said, "Is this the fellow?" … He said, "Well, come to the men's room," went to the men's room, and he looked at me in the men's room, not on a table, not a rubber glove, nothing. He looked at me for two seconds, said, "Get your clothes on and go." So, he said, "See the receptionist before you go," and I go out and he's on the phone and he's talking to his wife, apparently. He says, "You go ahead. I'll catch up to you tomorrow," and his nurse said, "He was supposed to go to a luncheon with [President Dwight D.] Eisenhower for the doctors … [who are] chiefs of medical staffs, and he's not going. He's going to have to have an operation tomorrow," and I said, "Well, somebody'll need an operation?" She said, "It's you." She said, "You go back to Riverview." That's the local hospital. She said, "He'll meet you at five o'clock in the morning for the operation." That's how I got the radical surgery, and I had one blood test, in case they needed a transfusion, and that was about it. The next morning, five o'clock, he showed up and he did the operation and, in the operation, there wasn't any testing of what was down there, no pathological [testing]. He looked at the trouble and he told my wife, he said, "I think I got it all, but I had to take the tubes out, the tubes that went into the lymph system," said, "That's where these things go to," and he said, "I think I got it all before it got going." So, then, he said, "We'd better use X-ray." At that time, it was broadband X-ray. They laid on a table and they put a lead covering over my legs and over my upper chest. Now, they do it in the machine. After this operation, for forty-seven days, you know, not continuously, it was like forty-five minutes, and they increased the time as you went along, and I could take it. My skin, I looked like I'd burn with a full moon, but I took all that X-ray with no trouble, and so, at that point, they examined me every month with an X-ray of my chest. … They said that's where it would drain to, in my chest, if this thing continued. So, I had them a month at a time, and then, three weeks, a month and three weeks, and then, they kept extending it. So, I got to be four years, and then, I had to go every year. That's how they worked it, and so, I've never had a repercussion or [it] coming back ever since that. The only thing is, when I got to be in my late sixties, I started to have the hips go bad and the doctors say that's probably from the X-ray. That's why, these X-rays caused my [present condition], and, now, my spine has collapsed. I have five collapsed vertebrae and I've had five artificial hips. … Now, see, when you help me down the stairs, Jeff, [laughter] and that's why I'm walking with two [canes], but I figure that … I'm going to have an artificial joint put in the cane. [laughter]

SH: Thank you so much for coming in today. This has been a great interview. I truly appreciate it.

JV: Well, I hope it's been worthwhile. … I was doubtful about doing it. My wife said, "You ought to go tell them what you did. At least somebody will know it."

SH: I am so glad you did.

JV: My wife is my caregiver and she has to put my socks on every day. I have to wear socks up to here, for the edema in my legs, and I couldn't possibly put them on. So, she does that and takes them off at night and feeds me. [laughter]

SH: Tell her we said thank you.

JV: She said, "You should go." So, I wrote the letter to you and here I am.

SH: Fantastic. Thank you so much.

JV: Well, thank you. …

JS: Thank you.

JV: Good meeting [you] and hope to see you again sometime. …

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

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