Robert Erikson
Narrator

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Minnesota Historical Society
Interviewer

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DB: [This is the Minnesota] Historical Society Greatest Generation interview with Robert Erikson on the 3rd of November 2005 in Minnetonka, Minnesota. Mr. Erikson, do you want to spell your name please?

RE: Yes. It's Robert E. Erikson. My last name is E-r-i-k-s-o-n. There's no C in it, and everybody makes the mistake and puts it in.

DB: And your birth date?

RE: October 13, 1919.

DB: And your place of birth?

RE: Loma, North Dakota, which is right near Langdon, the county seat of Cavalier County on the Canadian border.

DB: And your ethnic background?

RE: My father was Swede and my mother was mostly Irish.

DB: And what about your parents? Was your father a World War I veteran?

RE: No. He was not.

DB: Were they farmers?

RE: He was primarily a butcher in his younger days. Then he became a meat salesman for Hormel. Most of his life was spent in sales.

DB: And your mother?

RE: My mother was a house—well, when she was girl she had worked for the telephone company and she had worked in a laundry, but she was . . . most of her life was spent as a housewife.

DB: And did you have siblings?

RE: Yes. I have a younger brother and a younger sister. They're both much younger than me. My brother is fifteen years younger than me, and my sister is seventeen years younger than me.

DB: And when did your family move to Minnesota?

RE: Oh . . .

DB: Roughly.

RE: Very early.

DB: You were very young.

RE: Very young. I remember preschool in Minneapolis.

DB: And did they move to Minneapolis then?

RE: Yes.

DB: And how long did you spend in Minneapolis?

RE: I don't know. We moved to St. Cloud. He got transferred . . . anyway, he was in St. Cloud. And I went to kindergarten at Lincoln School in southeast St. Cloud.

DB: And how would you describe your economic situation growing up in St. Cloud? The Depression hit about 1930.

RE: In St. Cloud it was primarily pretty good in the 1920s because my dad was a salesman and he made a pretty good living. Of course, we weren't too well off because he was divorced, and he was paying alimony until his wife died. Back in those days, you paid alimony for life. I don't know when she died. But that caused us to not do quite as well as we could of. But we had a pretty nice life. We actually lived in Sauk Rapids and we bought a whole acre of land. It was a square block and it had been a farm. And we started to raise chickens and so forth with him working and my mother took a correspondence course. She knew how to caponize and we raised thoroughbred chickens. And then things went . . . I don't know what happened. Went to pot or something. But he went into partnership with one of his customers in Anoka, Minnesota and they bought a meat market in north Minneapolis, on Broadway and Emerson. And we moved to Minneapolis and I went to school in Minneapolis. I had gone through the fifth grade in Sauk Rapids.

DB: So this was in about 1929 or so?

RE: Yes. Well, 1929. That's when we moved to Minneapolis. I was in 5A so I went to 6A in the middle of the year. They had a robbery in the store and the Depression had started, the 1929 Depression, so they had to close down and we moved back to St. Cloud and he went back selling meat for Hormel. But because I went from 6A they promoted me to 7B. And when I got to St. Cloud they said I only had a half a year in the sixth grade so they made me stay in the rest of the sixth grade in St. Cloud. I went back to Lincoln School again.

When I went into the seventh grade I went to Sauk Rapids and I either rode my bicycle or walked. It was a couple . . . about three miles, four miles, something like that. We were way up in northeast St. Cloud. So I had the seventh grade there. It was in a Lutheran parochial school and the teacher, Mr. Wendt, had two classes, the seventh and eighth grade. And I suppose there were fifty to sixty kids in the two classes. I remember I sat in the back of the room and goofed around all the time. That's one of the reasons I have poor grammar and so forth. I paid no attention to grammar or English, and as a result I still don't know how to diagram a sentence and I make a few grammatical errors because—my test is whether it sounds right. Sometimes things that sound right aren't grammatically correct. But anyway, then I went back into the eighth grade to Central Junior High School. Then I went over to Tech High for my sophomore and junior years. In my senior year my dad had a heart attack and when he died we had no savings.

DB: That was in your senior year.

RE: That was in my senior year. And I can remember my father being ill. I had one shirt to wear to school and my mother had to wash it and iron it so the next day I could go to school. And then we had to go on welfare because we just didn't have anything.

DB: And you had two babies in the family now, too. Younger brother and sister.

RE: Yes. The younger brother and sister. And I remember us actually being on welfare. It's hard to remember this far back but I remember before my brother was born there was only the three of us and we were in this house. And the rent was twelve dollars a month and welfare would only pay eight. The landlord said, "I'll take it," because there were two or three empty houses on every block. I remember we got four dollars a week for groceries. [Like getting] food stamps, I guess, today if we went out for groceries. We got a little more than that because we could go to the commissary and there would be surplus grapefruit and sometimes surplus potatoes and surplus Farina, which is rough Cream of Wheat, really. Just like Cream of Wheat. I remember corn meal. So we ate a lot of corn meal mush. Fried corn meal mush with Karo syrup on it. That thick syrup, you know. We had enough to eat. My mother was a good cook. I just couldn't take that kind of life anymore so I went out and worked on a farm. I had worked on a farm the summer before that. I worked for a month for nothing to learn how to farm and then I got ten dollars a month.

DB: Did you finish high school?

RE: No. I left high school.

DB: In your senior year?

RE: In my senior year I quit high school. Then I went to work for a fellow named Boyd out in Highway 23, County Road 95, which is east of St. Cloud. I worked for them all winter and then the next summer I got twenty-five dollars a month because I was doing full time work then outside. Lots of fellows would work on farms for nothing in the wintertime.

DB: For room and board?

RE: For room and board. So anyway, then I decided to go into the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps]. I heard about the CCC. So I went into the CCC in January, I think, of 1938. I didn't realize . . . you got thirty dollars a month but twenty-five went home and you had five dollars a month for spending money. But they cut my mother's welfare and she was working as a cleaning lady. Cleaning ladies weren't scarce then and they didn't make too much, but between the welfare, the cleaning work and what I sent her, she was okay. I was in the CCC fifteen months.

DB: Who took care of your younger brother and sister when you mother was working?

RE: She did. She'd either take them with her as she was doing housework. Of course, she only had an eighth grade education. So did my father. Back in those days the eighth grade education wasn't too bad.

DB: It wasn't unusual.

RE: As a matter of fact, somebody who can do eighth grade arithmetic today is not too bad off math-wise. But anyway, when I got out of the CCC, I got a job in 1939.

DB: Where did you do your CCC work?

RE: Oh, up at Tofte. Camp 716. Thirty-six miles inland back in the Superior National Forest in Tofte.

DB: Doing logging?

RE: Yes. The first winter I worked on timber stand improvement. You cut down the poplars and the trees so the white pine, the Norway pine and the spruce could grow uninhibited. And then in the spring, you see, every three months some enlistments were up. I went in in January, and in the spring the new group came in, and the guys that had enlisted the previous October got out if they wanted to after six months. And one of my boyhood friends, Don Klein, his dad worked for Raymond Brothers. And he was getting fifty cents an hour and was on this Red Owl run. He would leave and go all the way up to Little Falls, Bemidji, Ada. Up to Thief River Falls, Ada, Menomen; and have to drive that whole thing all the way with no sleep, no anything.

DB: When you say Red Owl . . .

RE: Red Owl—delivered Red Owl groceries. So Don and I, he'd take one of us with him on weekends. Floyd Raymond never knew this, but I used to drive while he'd sleep. So he taught me how to drive and double clutch a semi-truck and so forth, and here I was about sixteen years old. Raymond Brothers bought a Goodyear Tire store in town and they were just starting up and Don Klein knew Floyd Raymond quite well and he said they needed more help. And he said, "I know a guy that's in the CCC that would make a good worker for us." They said, "Okay." They wrote me a letter. Said they had a job for me and I could get out even though I was in the middle of an enlistment. So I was in fifteen months. And when I came home I got this job with Raymond Tire Service. It was Goodyear. That's where I started my Goodyear career. In 1939.

DB: 1939. Okay.

RE: And my mother, bless her soul, all that money that I sent her, that twenty-five dollars a month, she saved me about twenty dollars in total. She put it away for me and I bought a new suit. First suit I ever had in my life. And it was two pair of pants, a coat and a vest for fifteen dollars. They gave you then a choice of a free tie or a belt to go with it. [Chuckles] So I bought that. Then I was getting twelve and a half dollars a week for fifty-four hours. Then an important thing happened to me. Business that fall was a little slow and I was working on the Raymond house, yard.

DB: What was your position in this tire company?

RE: All I did was changing and repair, and then I became a court salesman. Worked on the court filling gas. Gas was twenty cents a gallon for regular and my average sale was usually a dollar. Five gallons. Well, anyway, I went up to work on this Raymond house. To make a long story short, Mrs. Raymond gave me milk and cookies. One day she asked me, she said, "When did you graduate from high school, Bob?" And I told her, "Well, I never graduated." And she said, "Well, a smart young boy like you, you should have gone to high school." [I said], "Well, my father died. My mother needs my income. I'm paying five dollars a week room and board now." And she asked me why don't I go back. And I explained why it would be hard for me to go back.

And I don't know, a week or two later she said, "You know, I talked to . . ." She had a friend on the Board of Education or something. She said, "You could go back and graduate." And I said, "Well, what if I get laid off or something?" She said, "Well, I'll see that you work if you go back to high school." [Little chuckle] So then the word got around that I was kind of the boss's pet. I had a pretty good deal. But I worked my last year in high school. I went back at Thanksgiving. Or no—just before Thanksgiving. In October. And I worked fifty-four hours a week on the night shift. I went to work at one o'clock every day and worked until nine. And Saturdays I worked from one until ten, and then on Sundays I worked from, I think, ten to four or something like that. For fifty-four hours. Then I got a raise. I got up to thirteen dollars a week. They gave me a fifty-cent raise. I was getting thirteen dollars a week. And of course I only paid one, one percent Social Security. So I got by pretty good.

DB: Income tax at that time?

RE: No. No income tax.

DB: No state tax? Nothing?

RE: Nothing. No taxes at all. But I went to school under the George Barton Act; the first class in the morning would have been Problems in Democracy, my social science. And I took my English. Then I went to Employment Relations for an hour and then I got a credit, a full credit for working. So I only went to school three hours a day, and I graduated. And I wasn't an honor student or anything, but I did graduate.

DB: You graduated. That was a big deal under the circumstances.

RE: Yes, I graduated. Yes. Then I went back to work for Raymond.

DB: Let me just ask. Did they have a graduation ceremony?

RE: Oh, sure. I was in the graduation ceremony. I wasn't in the annual because I came back to school too late. But I had a cap and gown. I've still got the cards and stuff where the kids had all signed and so forth. I met a gal there that I started going steady with and I got engaged to her. And of course I had a little advantage. I was twenty years old. I was the oldest, I think the oldest one in the graduating class.

DB: You had some big experiences under your belt, too.

RE: Oh, yes. Yes. I'd been in the CCC. I had a good time in high school, really. I worked. But this friend Don Klein, by that time he was ahead of me. He was getting eighteen dollars a week and we bought a car together. So I had . . . I think it was a 1935 Ford we were making payments on. I didn't get to use it all the time, but I got it part of the time. We shared the car. Not too many people had cars. Today they have a parking problem in high schools for cars. Then it was bicycles. And I had a car. So I was a big man on campus.

DB: Your mother must have been very proud of you, too.

RE: Oh, yes.

DB: Graduating from high school and being successful in a job. Having a job in those days.

RE: Yes. Yes. My mother thought the sun rose and set with me and I was more or less like the father, you know, with the two younger siblings. So I got through all right. Well, then that summer, you see, the war clouds were raising in Europe.

DB: This is the summer of 1940 now?

RE: Yes, this is the summer of 1940.

DB: And did you pay attention to world affairs at this time?

RE: Oh, yes. A little bit. I remember . . . of course I remember . . . I was in a class in high school when the Italians invaded Ethiopia and, yes, we were thinking about that. The war. I wasn't, you know, vitally interested in it, but we were aware that things were going bad in the world.

DB: Paid attention. And so did you follow the Japanese in the Pacific?

RE: No, not really. I didn't know too much about that. I knew afterwards the reasons . . . now I know. But I didn't then.

DB: But more following certain events in Europe then and the rise of the Nazis.

RE: Yes. And then when they started the draft. And I registered for the first draft. I turned twenty-one October 13, 1940 and I had to register for the first draft and I got number thirty-five. And then they announced that they were going to mobilize the National Guard and Don Klein and Lloyd Peters and I were all friends. Said, "Oh my gosh, no use getting drafted." I don't know what their draft numbers were. Well, Don, he'd turned twenty-one in June so he was a little older than me. So we all joined the National Guard. To go in to get our year of service over with. So October 16, 1940, I joined the National Guard.

DB: Knowing that mobilization was pending.

RE: Oh. Just going to go in. We mobilized February 10th of 1941. Went into the service.

DB: And you enlisted directly into a unit?

RE: Oh, yes. In the A Battery, the 217th Coast Artillery Anti-aircraft. And St. Cloud had A Battery, the band and the medics for the 217th Regiment. And we were part of the 101st Coast Artillery Anti-aircraft Brigade. Then we went to Camp Haan, California.

DB: Before you went there you had some training in the unit. In those days you didn't go off to basic training somewhere?

RE: No.

DB: You just enlisted in the unit.

RE: When we were mobilized, I had nothing. I mean, they issued us . . . we had mostly World War I equipment. The campaign hats, but we didn't have leggings. We didn't have to wrap the leggings like they did in World War I. But most of the stuff was quite obsolete. We'd go drill all day in the army and they'd give us all . . . sign us up and all those things that they did. Then we had to sleep at home at night. But we had to be there for reveille at six o'clock in the morning.

DB: So it was like a job?

RE: Yes. It was just like a job.

DB: And how long did that go on?

RE: Oh, from the 10th . . . I think it was about ten days. A week or ten days. Well, until February 10th. We went in. Well, no, February 10th we were mobilized and I think it was the 20th or something like that we left St. Cloud.

RE: And what was your duty in the unit? Were you on one of the gun crews?

DB: I became a truck driver because of my truck driving experience in the CCC, so I drove a searchlight truck. See, A Battery was searchlights. We called it the Flashlight Battery. There were two battalions. So each battalion had a battalion headquarters and the rest were gun batteries. So I got to be driving a truck. So we went to Camp Haan, California.

DB: You took all your equipment with?

RE: Yes. We took the train. The day we left . . . I'll never forget that. We marched all the way from the armory, which is on about Fourth Avenue South or something. Something like that. Across that bridge and all the way over to the Depot in East St. Cloud, and it was thirty below zero. It was pretty cold the day we left. Got on the train. We went to Billings, Montana and then we got off the train and marched for training. But when we crossed the mountains the heating system went bad in the railcar. We darned near froze to death crossing the mountains because all they had was little thin blankets. We did have Pullmans. We were in Pullman cars. Then we got to Eugene, Oregon. Boy, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. I think it was in the high seventies or something like that. The sun was shining. We were in the dells. Oregon. Beautiful day.

DB: Now the train you went on, that was strictly a troop train, right?

RE: Oh, yes. Strictly. It was on the Northern Pacific then. Yes.

DB: And this was your first time out of Minnesota, probably? Besides when you were born?

RE: No. I went to Watertown, South Dakota once.

DB: So this was quite an adventure, too.

RE: Oh, yes.

DB: Not just for you but for most of the guys.

RE: Yes.

DB: People just didn't travel like they do nowadays.

RE: No. And riding Pullmans. They were pretty good cars. I mean we had good seats. They had mess in the mess car. They had a mess car and so forth. Then we got to Camp Haan. It was

raining. And it rained . . . they said it was an unusual winter. Didn't always rain that much. But it rained all winter out there that winter in Camp Haan. We were in tents. And then that fall the war broke out on December 7th.

DB: What did you do at Camp Haan? Did you do a lot of training or were you—?

RE: Oh, yes. Well, see, I drove the searchlight truck and I also . . . then they put me on what they called a 268 unit. We got the first radar in and that was *really* secret. They had a ring of guards around that and that's the first time that we had live ammunition. The guards in the radar had live ammunition. And when you come in, the inner guard had live ammunition. When somebody would come in they had to be escorted by the outside guard and if they weren't they had orders to shoot them. We got that from the English. The first radar we had. And I got to be the truck driver and I remember my mother was sure worried because the FBI talked to my mother and my neighbors.

DB: Security checks.

RE: I had a security check to be able to be on that 268 unit. And that . . . I got promoted to a first class private and a fifth class specialist. Which would be about the same as a T5 today, I guess. But anyway, I went home on a furlough. I hitchhiked home. I hitchhiked from Camp Haan. I took the bus. They had a free bus to Riverside. And I got a ride to San Bernardino.

DB: What time of year was this?

RE: This was in the first of November. Let me see. Yes. The first part of November.

DB: In 1941?

RE: In 1941. And then I got a ride to Victorville, California. Then I got a ride to Barstow. I said, "Holy cats, I'm never going to get home at this rate." And I was in the Richfield station and a car pulled in. It had white plates on it. And I walked up to the guy and I saw it was an out of state car.

DB: Were you in uniform then?

RE: Yes. Oh, yes. I was in uniform. And I said to the . . . Oklahoma car driver. I asked, "Could you take a passenger along? I'm going home on furlough." He says, "Can you drive?" I said, "Yes, I'm an army truck driver." "Oh, glad. I'm glad to have you. Yes." He filled it up with gas and he had pretty near a new Mercury. We drove 1,361 miles in twenty-four hours flat. I would only drive it around a hundred miles an hour. I mean that's as fast . . . well, no. The speedometer, I think, only went to ninety. But I would get up over ninety. A little over ninety is the most I would go. He would drive it half an inch past the speedometer.

DB: You don't even know how fast you were going?

RE: I didn't know how fast we were going. But it was Route 66. I took Route 66 all the way from there to Tulsa. The reason why he was in such a hurry to get home, he was working in the shipyards and he was an electrician and he worked at . . . Fort Sill was right near there. And he had been working at Fort Sill when he got a better job in the shipyards. But he wanted to go back to Fort Sill because he felt he could get a draft deferment then. Because they were drafting people. The war hadn't started, of course. So he was in a hurry to get home. Then I got a ride from Tulsa to Des Moines and then I got a ride from Des Moines to Minneapolis.

DB: And the whole trip took about four days?

RE: Oh, no. Two days to Minneapolis.

DB: Two days.

RE: Forty-eight hours.

DB: Wow.

RE: I made it home. Well, maybe a little bit over that. But anyway, I made it to Minneapolis. Then I took a bus. I took a bus to St. Cloud. I had enough money left to take a bus.

DB: And in 1940 in the United States, everywhere the road system was in place, the gasoline stations were in place, the infrastructure was in place.

RE: Yes.

DB: Because just twenty years before there was no infrastructure to support anything like that.

RE: That's right.

DB: So amazing developments in the highway system, and the infrastructure to support road travel like that.

RE: Oh, yes. There wasn't a lot of traffic coming across. We went through Amarillo, Texas all the way through the town. We had to go through all those towns and still drove . . . he drove over the speed limit in towns but not that far over. I mean he just drove . . . he was a good driver. So that was quite a trip. Then I came back. I hitchhiked back.

DB: How many days did you have at home?

RE: Oh, about four days, I guess. Something like that. Then I got back. I came back to Omaha and I got a ride. The guy picked me up and I went about ten miles out of town and he says, "Here's where I leave the road." And he left me out in the middle of nowhere west of Omaha. A car came along and it was a man and his wife. And they picked me up and we went all the way to the western part . . . a long way across Nebraska. Then it forks off to go to Denver and so they—it was night by that time, and they took me to their house and I slept in their son's room. They

gave me dinner. Slept in their son's room. Gave me breakfast the next morning and then they packed me a lunch. Their son was in the Navy. They took me back to the highway where I could get a ride again. Just wonderful people. I can't even remember their name but they were just wonderful. Of course, I was in uniform, you know.

So then I got a ride to Denver and then I got a ride to Pueblo, Colorado. By that time it was night again and I had just a little money. I remember I went to a hotel and [it was] the first time I'd ever been in a house of ill fame. I didn't realize what it was. I went in and it was a dollar for the room. Paid a dollar and went to bed. And a little after I was in bed a little bit, a knock on the door and I said, "Come in." There was a gal. She had a kimono on. She said, "Would you like a little entertainment?" And I said, "No. I'm just going back to my army camp and I haven't got any money." She says, "How much you got?" I said, "I've only got about a dollar and a half left." "Well," she said, "We could fix it up for less than that." And I said, "No. I'm not interested." [Laughing] Think about it, you know.

So then I got up the next day and I got a ride. There was a truck coming and there was a gal in it. The guy was driving the truck and the gal, she had him stop for me. So he stopped for me and she'd been hitchhiking. So we stopped in Santa Fe, New Mexico and he took her in to eat because he told the people in there she was a waitress he was taking to the next other . . . he was hauling food for the restaurants. So he took her in to eat and then they took a doggie bag out for me out in the truck. I had to wait out in the truck. Then we got to Albuquerque. It was night again. "What are we going to do?" "Well," she said, "Would you share a room?" "Yes, I'll share a room." Okay. So we shared the room and I had a dollar left. So I paid a dollar and I don't know what it was. It was maybe more than a dollar. All we did is go to bed, I mean.

So we slept and got up the next morning and then a car stopped with a guy and his wife. He said, "We're going to San Bernardino, but," he says, "I can't take both of you but I need somebody to help drive." She said, "Well, you go ahead and get in the car. I'll have no trouble getting a ride." So I rode with them all the way to San Bernardino and then I took a . . . I think I had enough money left for the streetcar or whatever it was, local bus, to get to Camp Haan. To get to Riverside. Then you could take the bus the military used back and forth. So that was quite a trip.

DB: Quite an adventure.

RE: Yes.

DB: And you got back on time?

RE: Yes.

DB: That was amazing.

RE: Yes.

DB: There were all the things that could have gone wrong. You could have gotten stuck.

RE: Then it was shortly after that they moved us up to San Francisco. San Francisco harbor defense. See, everybody knew that the war was coming except the people in Pearl Harbor. And I was in Oakland, California the night the war broke out.

DB: So that's where you were when December 7th happened?

RE: December 7th.

DB: And do you remember how you heard about it? What you were doing? Sunday afternoon.

RE: Yes.

DB: Right around noon, I suppose, in San Francisco.

RE: Geez, I really don't remember when it happened. But I remember that night. They issued us live ammunition. God! Guys got shot.

DB: Through incompetence?

RE: Yes, incompetence. I mean just didn't know what to do. All we had was those little blue drive lights for night. And we had to go around and try to get people to shut off lights.

DB: Blackout lights.

RE: Blackout. They blacked out the whole Bay Area. They figured the Japanese were on their way there, you know. But I'll tell you, while we were in there, before the war broke out, you had to have civilian clothes to go out. A decent girl wouldn't go out with a guy in uniform. I mean a lot of the people in uniform were . . . they were not that bad or anything.

DB: Reputation?

RE: Reputation, yes. And by that . . . the war broke out. Of course, then the 4th Army had a regulation for the Army that you couldn't buy anything but beer to drink before six and after ten. The Marines and the sailors could but we couldn't. So we drank this green death. It was Rainier's Ale. But you would go in a bar, you couldn't buy a drink. I mean, oh man, they really appreciated us for a change.

[Tape interruption]

RE: One of the reasons there was so much trouble with guns and ammunition and so forth was we had went out to the anti-aircraft firing range at Barstow and we each one of us fired the old . . . not the M-1, the 03 Springfield. Had a clip. You had five rounds. Each one of us fired five rounds prone at a target a couple hundred yards away. So I'd only fired five rounds on an Army rifle before the war broke out.

DB: And that was an 03 Springfield, probably?

RE: Yes. And right after the war broke out, then they went through my file. You know, they had a file back in those days. Punch a needle through it and punch it up, and found out I worked for Goodyear. So they called me over to the Presidio, which was the headquarters of the 4th Army in San Francisco. And because I knew how to vulcanize and knew how to work with tires and so forth, they said, "Well, we will send it back and recommend that you go into the Headquarters Battery." See, we were a motorized coast artillery regiment and be in charge of the tires and so forth. And so that was a staff sergeant position. I was only first and fifth, you know. I said, "Boy, oh, boy!" I damn near bought staff sergeant stripes. So they transferred me.

DB: The position was for a staff sergeant.

RE: Yes, Yes. So they transferred me over there from A Battery to Headquarters Battery. Which came from Sauk Centre. Lt. Colonel Scott was the executive officer of the regiment and his son was a staff sergeant. He was regimental color sergeant. Well, what they did is eliminated the color sergeant and transferred him to the motorpool. And he was my boss and he didn't know . . . I won't tell you what we thought he knew about tires. But it wasn't very much.

DB: But that was your position.

RE: Yes.

DB: You didn't make staff sergeant?

RE: I was the one who knew anything about tires. But anyway, then they put up a notice on the bulletin board. They're accepting volunteers for the paratroops. And this was right in January.

DB: 1942. January of 1942.

RE: Yes. January of 1942. I'm going to get out of this chicken outfit. Because [it was] nothing but hometown politics. I mean . . . well, you see, the mess sergeant of Headquarters Battery, his dad was postmaster in Sauk Centre. And Lt. Colonel Scott, the executive officer of the regiment, was a mail carrier. [Chuckles] So it was just that we were only going to be in there for a year to start with, you know, and then go back to civilian life. So I joined the paratroops and it was about, oh, let me see, first part of June. Yes. Or the last part of May, they called me.

DB: And it was just a notice that you saw on the bulletin board?

RE: Yes. Yes. That's all. The only thing . . . and I didn't even know it was fifty dollars extra. Well, I guess I knew because . . . I don't even remember.

DB: How did you actually sign up then? You just went to the orderly room?

RE: Yes. Just lined up and said, "Put my name down."

DB: Were there many other guys who did it out of your unit?

RE: Yes. There was a guy named Schrifels, and he and I were the only two from A Battery that signed up. Well, we were the only two at that time. But anyway, then I said I want to go back to A Battery. So they transferred me back to A Battery. Then I was driving truck again in the motorpool. I don't know what all I did. Don Klein, this good friend of mine, was motor sergeant. Then I met this gal that worked for the telephone company. I met her at these dances they put on at the armory and so forth. I met her in San Francisco. Over there at the veteran's building or whatever it was. And this Sergeant Klein and a guy named Rosenberger was a sergeant. So I asked her if she'd fix them up with dates that worked in the telephone company. And she had a car. Her brother was manager of all the Loews Theaters in the Bay Area. So I could go to movies with her any time I wanted to for nothing. And I used to sneak out to go. I wasn't supposed to, but we would go without a pass. And Klein, my buddy, he didn't ever turn me in. And of course when I would go to get a pass, they wouldn't give me a pass unless I went with her. So they could get their girlfriends. And she had the car. So we had a pretty good deal there for a while. And then I got called into the paratroops.

DB: Now before that. How much money were you making a month in the National Guard when you were on active duty?

RE: Well, you see, I went in . . . we got twenty-one dollars a month. But I got a break . . .

DB: But you weren't on active duty?

RE: Well, yes, but you see, because I had joined in October, that counted towards the four months. You see, there used to be an old saying. What is it? The Navy gets the pay, the Marines get the glory and the Army does the work. Well, back pre-war, a soldier got twenty-one dollars a month and they stayed that way. I mean he had to re-enlist to get PFC, which paid thirty. But in the Navy—I don't know about the Marine Corps—but the Navy, after you got through boot camp you immediately went to seaman second at thirty dollars. So that wasn't fair. And they finally changed that so you got twenty-one dollars a month for four months in the Army and then you got thirty. So part of my time I wasn't even in the Army on active duty. Counted toward my four months. So I only had about three weeks at twenty-one. Something like that. Two or three weeks at twenty-one dollars a month. I remember my first paycheck was only about nine dollars or something like that. But anyway, so then when I got to be a first class private I got thirty-six and then I got a fifth class specialist pay. So I got forty-two dollars a month as a first class private and a fifth class specialist. And of course when I went in the paratroops I went back to thirty. And my first month in the paratroops I got thirty dollars base pay and fifty dollars jump pay, so I got eighty dollars.

DB: A big fortune.

RE: Yes. Oh, big money. Then a month later I got—June 1st of 1942, they raised the base to fifty.

DB: Now were you still sending money back to your mother at this time?

RE: Oh, yes. I sent ten, fifteen dollars a month. Then they changed this . . . the war . . . where you could get an allotment. So they took twenty-two dollars a month out of my pay and sent her fifty, you see. A married guy got the same thing. So did I, because she was a dependent. They had to check it out, but they did that for me. So anyway, then I got a hundred dollars a month. And then when I got through jump school July 4, 1942—I went through jump training all through June—then they put me in B Company 504th Parachute Infantry, which is the second regiment they had formed.

DB: Let's go back to jump school for just a second.

RE: Okay.

DB: How was jump training?

RE: Oh! That was tough on me because I wasn't that athletic. I was good enough. I mean I passed.

DB: Was there any preparatory training or did you just jump right into it?

RE: Oh, no, no, no. They started out, you double timed every place you went.

DB: But I mean did jump school start immediately or was there a physical conditioning? I know it was four weeks of jump school. But did you have a preparatory phase before that to get you in shape?

RE: No, no, no. You just went. Started right in on . . . there was A, B, C and D stage.

DB: Right.

RE: A stage was all physical. You went on what they called a plumber's nightmare. This deal that we went through that, plus all the calisthenics.

DB: Obstacle course.

RE: Obstacle courses. All, all . . . they were testing you out physically if you were able to do this or not, you see. And then you went into jumping out of mock doors and all that sort of stuff. And then they took you up on those towers and they dropped. They'd bring you up about 150 feet off the ground and you had to pull the ripcord and drop 15 feet. Some of the guys failed at that. They just couldn't do it. And then that tower that had been used at the New York's Worlds Fair, you know. Those big towers, 250 feet high.

DB: The big towers.

RE: The big jump towers. And then you went into packing. Then you had to learn . . . my first five jumps I packed my chute every time. They taught you how to pack your parachute. After that I never packed my chute again. You made your five jumps, and if you made your fifth jump

you were then a qualified parachutist. And if you refused to jump, then you were violating a direct order. That was your job, your duty, and you were qualified for it and you were being paid for it and if you didn't do it, then they'd bust you right away and you'd go to a leg outfit in the infantry.

DB: And your jump school was at Fort Benning, Georgia?

RE: Fort Benning, Georgia. Right.

DB: And what was your first jump experience? Do you remember your first jump?

RE: Yes! But I was excited about it. I'd been training for it and so forth. I mean everybody said, "Wasn't that first jump—?" Nah. The longer you jumped the worse it got.

DB: You knew what you were in for.

RE: Yes. You knew what you were in for. Yes.

DB: Ignorance is bliss.

RE: I never really sweat out my jumps at all until we made a jump one time. I don't remember when it was. But I was the first man out. They had a jumpmaster there but I would be in the door, the first man out. That time I was a sergeant. Wait a minute. I was the sergeant. I was the last man out and a guy named Cope was about the second or third man. And when my chute opened I was right alongside of him. So I had had a streamer and didn't even know it. And you know you're supposed to call out on one thousand, two thousand, three thousand. If your chute isn't open, pull your reserve. I would have never had time. Then I started to think about that thing. Again, I didn't realize that I'd fallen that far. And I must have . . . .we must have been maybe a hundred feet off the ground when my chute opened. So I landed all right. I mean it didn't bother me any. But I fell. So I was one of the first men on the ground and the last man out and I shouldn't have been. But from then on I became more conscious of what I was doing.

DB: Eye opening experience.

RE: Eye opening experience. And I was lucky I lived through it. But there wasn't high casualty rates. I only saw one accident and I wasn't right there. It was all the way across Lawson Field and we saw this guy, saw him jumping, and we saw a streamer in the sky all the way down to the ground. That's the only one I ever saw of the chutes that didn't work of the thousands of jumps I've seen.

DB: I never saw one either, in my jumps. Pretty rare. But still, the thought's always in your mind.

RE: Oh, yes.

DB: Okay. So you finished jump school.

RE: Yes. And then, right away on July 4th, they took me over to B Company 504th.

DB: Which was at Fort Benning at that time?

RE: Yes, but we were in the Alabama area of Fort Benning, across the Chattahoochee. And all they had was a ferry then.

DB: Phoenix City over there?

RE: No. It wasn't at Phoenix City. It was in the Alabama area of Fort Benning, Georgia. But it was in Alabama. And so they put me in there because I had fifteen months of active duty. And so they made me a squad sergeant. Just, bang! Right off the bat. Everybody else was draftees, practically. And a friend of mine, Schrifles, he went to the 503. The 1st Battalion 503 and he got a field commission when they jumped into Corregidor because he was a platoon sergeant then. You know, you never talk to anybody from the 503 that didn't jump at Corregidor. Only one battalion jumped. The other two came in on landing craft. They all jumped there. Like almost every Marine you talk to was in the first wave at Guadalcanal.

DB: Right.

RE: But anyway, so I became a squad sergeant because of fifteen months of active duty. Well, maybe sixty days later put me on cadre to 507. That was partly due because I had fifteen months of previous military training, which wasn't that much for the infantry but I had gotten 143 in Army General Classification Test, which is, you know, pretty good. You had to have 110 to go to OCS. So I made platoon sergeant in the 507th.

DB: Now wait just a second. You brought up something. You'd been a truck driver in the anti-aircraft artillery and you'd repaired tires and then you went to parachute school.

RE: Yes.

DB: And now all of a sudden you're in the parachute infantry.

RE: Yes.

DB: You'd never received any infantry training.

RE: Never really had the basics. And that was a hampering to me as a platoon sergeant.

DB: Had you ever fired—by the time you finished jump school you'd still only fired the five rounds with your Springfield rifle?

RE: Five rounds with an 03 Springfield. Yes.

DB: And now you're in the paratroopers. You've got probably an M-1?

RE: No. I had a Tommy gun.

DB: But no real training on any of this stuff.

RE: No. No.

DB: You were starting to get it now. Just on the job training.

RE: On the job training. Right. Right. That's how short they were of people. Because you realize there was only about four battalions of paratroops until they formed the 503 and then the 504 and then the 505. They got started getting regiments. At the end of the war there were five divisions. So, you know, the opportunities for advancement were tremendous.

DB: So you'd gone to the 507th now as they were forming and you part of the cadre for that.

RE: I was in the cadre that formed the 507th at Fort Benning. And I was with them and we went to maneuvers in Louisiana and there I made two flights in a B-26. There was a B-26 base where they put the crews together to go overseas, and one of our guys in our outfit had a brother in the squadron there. So I went on a navigational hop out and gunnery practice sort of thing. I'll tell you, those twin fifties firing really shake you, shake the airplane. And that was a hot airplane. It redlined, what is it? Three sixty or something like that. For a medium bomber was very fast.

DB: So it was a pretty exciting adventure for you?

RE: Yes. They called them the flying prostitutes. No visible means of support. [Chuckles] But anyway, that was interesting. We had maneuvers there. Then we went out to Alliance, Nebraska and we trained out there. And then I was put in a cadre and I went to the 515th. Then I made first sergeant.

DB: And how did your transfer come? Why did you leave? You were just designated as a good cadre person so they sent you to the 515th? Or did you volunteer?

RE: Well, there again, partly, I probably wasn't the best platoon sergeant in the world. Let's put it that way. Off the record. I never told this to anybody in my life. But I mean, I think that's one of the reasons they transferred me to 515th. Because a first sergeant, you're administrative NCO for a company. But all tactical situations are handled by the officers. I mean the company commander, the executive officer. And in a platoon, the platoon leader is the executive. But their casualty rate is so high that a platoon sergeant had to be tactically a pretty good man. And so that was sort of my feeling a little bit.

DB: But you'd never had any training.

RE: No.

DB: Never been prepared for the job.

RE: Never been prepared for it. But because, like I say, because of my pretty good IQ and previous experience, they figured I'd do all right, you know. But then I got married. Because I was a first sergeant, I suppose.

DB: You went to the 515th?

RE: Yes.

DB: And where were they?

RE: They were back at Benning again.

DB: Okay. You went to Benning. You made first sergeant.

RE: Yes.

DB: And then you got married?

RE: Yes.

DB: And where did you get married?

RE: I got a furlough and went back to St. Cloud.

DB: Was this the girl you knew in high school?

RE: No. No. I got a Dear John letter from her. The gal I was going with in high school was named Helen. And then the girl that I married was named Helen, too. Then when we got divorced the gal that I'm married to now is named Helen. So I can talk in my sleep and not get in any trouble. [Chuckles]

DB: So where did you meet this girl then? How did that come about? You met her before you went in the service?

RE: Well, no. From Alliance, Nebraska I went home on a furlough. See, I kept getting more furloughs than the average, because every time I would go in a cadre and so forth, the regiment got furloughs. This friend of mine, his sister and brother-in-law owned Bennies Lunch in East St. Cloud and my wife, the gal I married, I met her there. It was his younger sister. She was a waitress and her mother had her work in the restaurant. She went to work in her sister's restaurant at fourteen. She didn't graduate from high school either but her mother thought . . . the old country lady, you know, that figured the only place for a woman was the bedroom or the kitchen. What do you need an education for? And she was smart. Plenty smart gal. But so then I met her and went to a movie or something, and then when I came back home on furlough again we got married. I was writing to her while I was in the service. And she came down to Fort Benning and we lived in Fort Benning for a short while. Then we went to Camp McCall, North Carolina.

DB: And how were the facilities at Fort Benning for a young soldier with a young bride?

RE: Oh, terrible to find a place to live. I mean it was very crowded.

DB: So you're out in the civilian economy?

RE: Yes.

DB: There was nothing on the post?

RE: No. You see, there were . . . I think before the war Columbus, Georgia was about 25,000 and there were 75,000 soldiers at Fort Benning. And Phoenix City across the river was considered the worst hellhole in the United States for military to go to. I know when I was in the 507 I think we had five guys killed over there. I mean they probably caught the guy cheating at gambling. There was gambling and houses of ill fame and it was a wild, wild town. Some guy was cheating or something and they called him and he wound up in the Chattahoochee River. But anyway, so we moved . . . we had a nice place in Camp McCall. It had been the service quarters for a mansion. And this Sergeant Shepler and I . . . he and his wife had a kitchenette and a bedroom and we had a kitchenette and a bedroom and a living room. So did they. And we shared a bathroom.

DB: So there was married housing at Camp McCall?

RE: No. Not on the base. This was in town.

DB: In Southern Pines or—?

RE: In Rockingham.

DB: Oh. Rockingham.

RE: Yes. Then I don't know what happened. They asked for volunteers because of the casualties . . . well, the 509 made . . . they actually made three jumps in Africa. A lot of people don't know that. But they did. They made the original one then two others to secure air bases. They were small jumps, but valuable.

DB: Now this is 1944 now?

RE: Yes.

DB: You got married in 1944?

RE: Yes. So then the notice . . . they wanted replacements. They were just bleeding for them. I mean between North Africa, Sicily, Salerno, Avelino, Anzio . . .

DB: They were specifically looking for people for the 509th?

RE: No.

DB: Just airborne replacements.

RE: Airborne replacements for the 504, 517 and 509. See, the 504 got shot up so bad on Anzio they didn't even jump in Normandy with the 82nd. So Shepler, a platoon sergeant, and I were having a few beers one night and he said, "God, you know, we're never going to get in this damn war if this keeps on." So we just volunteered to go overseas.

DB: He's the guy that went to the 503? Shepler?

RE: No. Shepler, he went with me.

DB: Okay.

RE: He went along with me. He got shot in the head. He was doomed to get it in the head. In southern France he came around a corner and there was a German with a Schmeisser and he opened up on him and he got three rounds, three dents in his helmet and one went . . . one round was in his helmet. That leather inside of your helmet.

DB: The headband.

RE: The headband. He's still got that slug at home in Chewelah, Washington. He's probably dead now. But anyway, in the Bulge then he got shot. Went through his nose and lost his eye. He But anyway, he stayed there. And he stayed as a staff sergeant. They didn't have any trouble with him. He wound up in S-2 as a sergeant.

DB: At Camp McCall?

RE: No. At the 509.

DB: Now what was the process of leaving Camp McCall and going overseas for the two of you as replacements? Everywhere you went you picked up more people and the group got bigger.

RE: Oh, yes. We went to Fort Meade, Maryland and I got a pass there and went three days into New York. For somebody who had never been in New York . . . and I shook hands with Jack Dempsey at Jack Dempsey's place!

DB: And your wife went back to Minnesota?

RE: Yes. She went back to Minnesota. And then we went to Hampton Roads, Virginia and we went on a Liberty ship. It was nineteen days to Oran, Africa and there was about, I think, five hundred of us on the Liberty ship.

DB: In a big convoy?

RE: A big convoy. We zigzagged at eight knots. You could see those Corvettes and destroyers steaming around us, you know. We were going eight knots. But I'll tell you, it was the wintertime, and it was in probably February or maybe the first part of March of 1944 . . . and the sea was like glass all the way over.

DB: So you had a nice voyage.

RE: A nice voyage. And then we went through the Straits of Gibraltar into Oran and we were there about three days, I guess. And then we got on the HMS Ascania, which is a British troop ship, and went from there to Naples. And I remember I was bringing the morning report . . . then I was first sergeant of this group that went. That was over there. All the airborne group. There must have been a couple hundred of airborne guys. They were formed in a contingent sort of a company and they had a first lieutenant.

So I was his first sergeant and I was bringing the morning report up to him and he was sitting with an English captain. And he introduced me to him and the English captain says, "How do you like our ship, sergeant?" I says, "Well, can I speak plainly, Sir?" And he says, "Why, certainly." I said, "Boy, I'll tell you, that mess deck down there is . . . cold mutton stew is not my idea of a good meal." He says to my commanding officer, "Is he your senior noncom in your company?" He says, "Yes." "Why, he's the same rank as a sergeant major. He don't deserve to be down there." He called his orderly. He said, "Go down and get his stuff and take it up to . . ." So they took me up and I shared a room with three British sergeant majors. Geez, we had bacon and eggs for breakfast and hah! We had a ration of gin. Man! And on the deck above us was the officers. And all the Red Cross girls. They were all up there with the officers, of course.

DB: In sight but out of touch.

RE: Yes. I got to Naples and they took us all the way down to Sicily. And then we went all the way back up to a repo camp in Naples. We went overseas as replacements and when we got there, I don't know why, but we went all the way by forty and eight to Sicily and back to Naples.

DB: Now who's we? Were you a group of airborne guys?

RE: About two hundred guys. Yes. All airborne. We all went to Sicily. Then we went back to Naples. We stayed down there . . . I don't know. A week or two, I don't know.

DB: Training, processing, just waiting. What were you doing?

RE: Just waiting. We were in tents. Pup tents. We slept in pup tents. Then we got back. No passes to anything. We just . . . oh, it wouldn't have been very long. I don't know why in the heck they took us all the way down there and back. I could never understand that. But anyway. Then I went to the . . . they called it the Racetrack in Naples. Repo depot. I was there just a short while and they called me up and sent me to Marzigliano airfield which was north of Rome about, I don't know, ten, fifteen miles. And that was where the Pathfinders were training for the invasion of southern France and I was . . . then become first sergeant of the Pathfinder Company and they had a buck sergeant there with me who had . . . he had come from the 504 and he had

been wounded on Anzio and he had just got out of the hospital. So they sent him up there too. And then they had a . . .

DB: This is in the 1st Airborne Task Force. This is not . . .

RE: This is for the 1st Airborne Task Force. And the 509 was there and the 551 was there and 517 was there and the . . . the British were there too. Because there was a Horsa . . . a glider there. Because I made two rides in a Waco glider and one ride in a Horsa glider just because I had nothing else to do all day. Really. I had a . . . good deal. There was a Jeep there at my disposal and, you know, I'd go into Rome.

DB: Were you the first sergeant of the Pathfinder unit then?

RE: Yes. But it was just for training only.

DB: So how many people were in the unit? Not very many?

RE: Well, yes, probably a squad from each one of them at least.

DB: But as first sergeant, because it was a training unit, you didn't have to do much.

RE: No. They were all training for the Pathfinder business and I was just there as an administrative NCO. I had this buck sergeant. He was supposedly mess sergeant. We fed them. I had to make out the morning report every day and I don't even know where the hell I sent it. But I did it. And then I had a yard bird there. I don't know what he was. A private or a PFC. So we had three of us to do all the work. I can't remember now all we had to do, but it wasn't much. But that's why I took these rides in these gliders and stuff and went to Rome and so forth. So I didn't have too bad a deal. And then my lieutenant come to me just, oh, maybe two days before the 15th. The 12th or 13th of August. He said, "Sergeant, I'm going to jump with the Pathfinders in southern France." I said, "You're not going to leave me here with all this mess and everything are you?" "Well, yes." I said, "How about me going?" He said, "I don't care." [Chuckles] He was only a second lieutenant, I think.

DB: But neither of you were supposed to.

RE: No. No. Neither one. He was just there in charge of it, too. And so we went up to . . . this guy, his name was Dan DiLeo, from the 509. They called him Dangerous Dan DiLeo. So I jumped with the 509.

DB: With their Pathfinders?

RE: With their Pathfinders. I said to Dan Dileo, "Say listen, my lieutenant is going to jump in this thing and all we have here is just a few tents and stuff. And I got a buck sergeant that can handle all that." I said, "How about me going along, too?" He said, "I don't give a shit what you want to do." He says, "What the hell. The more the merrier." I got a chute and a Tommy gun and

ammunition and all the stuff that they had for everybody. I don't know why they had extras. I don't know how I got them or anything. But I got them all. Got it all. So we all took off.

DB: Now with the Pathfinders . . .

RE: The Pathfinders.

DB: You went ahead of everybody else then?

RE: Oh, yes. We jumped . . . [sighs] oh, I don't know. I think it was about four o'clock in the morning.

DB: Your plane was by itself?

RE: There was three planeloads that I know of. There was about twenty in each plane, so there was only about sixty guys. There was maybe fifty-five. The high fifties or low sixties.

DB: Pathfinders.

RE: Because I was the last man out of my plane. I was hooked up but I was standing in the doorway that goes to the pilots. I was the last man out. And I know when my chute opened it just popped, and you know you feel it when it hits you. It popped and I was in the trees already. They said we were going to jump at about four hundred feet. So we went in at four hundred feet, I guess, and I probably was maybe a hundred feet off the ground when my chute opened. So . . . but I went right through the trees and down into the ground. I didn't get hurt or anything.

DB: Did you have any kind of mission briefing or preparation for this?

RE: No. No. Nothing.

DB: You were just a strap hanger. Just hanging on.

RE: Just hanging on.

[Tape interruption]

DB: Okay. You just made the jump into southern France. But one question I've got. Before you get back to the guy with the signal lights, how long did it take you to find out that you were off target?

RE: Well, I really don't know. But he was looking at his compass and something under this light. He was using a little light under cover so he could see it. And it was dawn, I think, before we realized that we were going to be alone. They were supposed to jump just at daylight. And we had to find the bundles with the strips, you know, to lay out and all that stuff.

DB: Marking panels.

RE: Marking panels. And we had a PPI and a radio compass to set up.

DB: And the PPI is—?

RE: Is a radar to use when they're fifteen miles away.

DB: Sends a signal out.

RE: Signal deal that they can tune in on and come right in. I knew something about it having been around them. I think it was daylight. Starting to get daylight before we recognized where we were.

DB: But you jumped thirty miles off your target?

RE: We didn't know it at that time that we were thirty miles. We just knew we were not on the target.

DB: But you were even way off of your map sheets?

RE: Oh, yes.

DB: You couldn't even check maps or anything.

RE: No. I don't know what they all checked. Then we got together and we started to move. The guy had a compass.

DB: So eventually somebody figured out that you were that far off target.

RE: Yes. I do know I found that out later. It was thirty miles. But at the time I don't think I knew that. But I can remember we got going and we heard trucks and I was laying in sort of a swamp. It was a little wet there. It was sort of a slough and a German convoy went by and it couldn't have been, oh, fifty yards away. Forty yards away. Not very far. And I was laying there in the weeds and I remember I was thirsty and I had drank all of my water already. So I took some of that slough water and I dropped pills in it.

DB: Iodine tablets.

RE: Iodine tablets to kill the bacteria. So I took a swallow and I watched them. Now I didn't worry about shooting at them or anything. I don't know how many of those truckloads there were. I mean it was truckload after truckload after truckload. It was probably ten, fifteen truckloads went by us. So they went by and we just walked around. I don't know. I can't remember exactly what we did. But that night we were in a meadow and there was a thing where they fed their cattle and there was hay. We slept in some hay. And the next morning we saw . . . I can't remember if we saw a group coming, coming up a valley. I had binoculars and I remember looking and you could see the red underneath it. I knew it was British airborne.

DB: The berets. You could see their berets.

RE: The red berets. They had the red berets underneath their helmets. But anyway, we were going to try to ambush them. We thought it was Germans and we were going to try to ambush them. And I think there were only six of us. So all that got together. We didn't get the whole group. Our whole planeload. Only six of us. So it was British. We thought . . . there was a British sergeant with them. And he was really PO'd at the Air Force. They gave him the green light and . . . when they hadn't even slowed down much and they blew panels out of their chutes. And they were *way* off. They were Pathfinders. They were British Pathfinders. So anyway, we got together and then we bumped into a bunch of FFE, Free French of the Interior and . . .

DB: Resistance fighters.

RE: Resistance fighters. I don't know how in the heck we met them but we met them. I remember. And we were on a road and went to this farmhouse and we had cantaloupe and grapes and boy, really it was good. And the British sergeant could speak French pretty good. Our new officer wasn't with us. We didn't have any officers. I was the sergeant in the Americans and he was the English sergeant. And asked if any Germans were around here. And they said, "Well, a German patrol comes down the road every day." Okay. So then a guy comes tearing up on a bicycle. He says, "There's a bunch of Germans coming." We figured they were after us. So we got . . . I don't know how. I can't even remember now how we did it. We got up and we set up an ambush for them and we opened up on them when they got fairly close. I think one of the FFE opened up too soon.

But anyway, they all had these British Sten guns. There was a firefight and that's when these three Germans got up . . . oh, maybe a couple yards away from me, in front of me. I was behind a rock. And I had my Tommy gun and I opened up and they go right up when you fire on full automatic. So I was just going to give . . . you know. They'd have been deader than could be if my gun . . . but I pulled on the trigger and only one shot went off. Geez! And I'm . . . I mean I'm sweating like a horse. This is August, you know. I had my jumpsuit on and it was hot. And this was probably the middle of the day. I looked at the gun and I looked at them and they dropped back in a hole. I thought there was no way out if they threw a grenade in there. No. I've got a grenade. So I pulled out a grenade and I popped it and counted one thousand, two thousand and tossed it over. It went off and I heard a scream. What it turned out to be was a shell fragment. One of the fragments hit one of the Germans in the leg. They got up out of the ditch and somebody behind me shot one of them right . . . Geez . . . right between the eyes it hit him. And the other guy, they didn't shoot at him. So they got him.

We got all the prisoners together and they had . . . I think it was 2,570,000 francs one of them had and they were French bank notes! They were about a foot long and maybe six inches wide. They were five thousand francs apiece which made them worth $100 at two cents a franc when we were in Africa and in Italy the only francs that were any good were Bank of Algiers and Bank of Morocco. And these were all Bank of France. They were Bank of France notes. Somebody got them off of a German prisoner. They were worthless in Italy. So we figured these were worthless. So we each took a bundle as souvenirs, and we later found out they were worth two cents a franc in France. There was twenty-nine thousand dollars left in a bag. I had that in my

musette bag. And it turned out they were good. So we went later on and bought champagne and oh, man, we really had a great time with it. But anyway, so then we slept that night in this barn. It was the Free French of the Interior and there was an officer there that was British. The British officer talked to our sergeant as he was British . . . what do we call our men that went into the OCS?

DB: OSS.

RE: He was a British officer.

DB: Special Air Service.

RE: Yes. He was in charge of all the FFE in that area. So they took the prisoners and we slept that night. The next morning we got up and we walked down the road towards . . . I guess it was towards the beach. And then we were sitting on this rock ledge next to this little bridge over a dry creek, and the 36th Infantry Division was coming up the road. So we signaled to them and asked them where they'd been and so forth. So I went back in to the Division Headquarters of the 36th Division and I gave them that money and that's when I was interviewed by a Chicago newspaper.

DB: How much money did you give them?

RE: Well, $29,000.

DB: You gave them the twenty-nine. Okay.

RE: We gave them the twenty-nine.

DB: But you still all had a packet of—?

RE: We all had a packet, which was ten of them. A thousand dollars apiece, you see. So we had about $54,000, we estimated originally.

DB: Dollars or francs?

RE: Dollars. Worth $54,000.

DB: Wow.

RE: So between all the British . . . there was eleven of us. Well, maybe some of them took two packs. I don't know. But we estimated there was $54,000 in there when we got it. So I don't know whether they got it out of a bank or something. I mean I don't know how in the heck they had notes of that denomination. But we had them. I got a write up in whatever paper is in Chicago, and they forwarded that from the Associated Press and it was in my hometown newspaper. Had an article about it. So anyway, then I went back to Nice and I remember I reported in to somebody. I don't know who it was. And this lieutenant, oh, man, did he read the

riot act to me. He said I could be court-martialed. I don't know what they were going to do with me. So then they put me in the 509 and didn't bust me then. But they put me in the 509 and they didn't know what the heck to do with me either.

So I was in S-2. We made several patrols with them and I made one . . . because I'd been a truck driver at one time we borrowed—we really stole it from the armored, but we called it borrowing it. We had the lieutenant. I think it was Lieutenant Riffaleer who spoke French fluently. And back in those days all the officers who graduated from West Point had French. I mean like they had to take French. That was when it was a standard language. So he was there and it was either him or Pritchard. I don't know which one it was. One of those two. Both West Point officers. Maybe it was Pritchard because he later became S-2 officer. Or he was S-2. I don't know what it was. This Sergeant Shepler that got shot in the Bulge, he was S-2 officer then.

But anyway, we were up in the mountain, Maritime Alps, and I had myself as a driver and a guy alongside of me and then there was the lieutenant and another guy. So I think it was four of us in the thing. We come around a corner and holy cats! Gunfire opened up and I had my flap open and a round of a burst of machine gun fire hit the top of that just that high above it but I got splattered. I got . . . what do you call it? Paint chips in my eyes. I mean from the bullets hitting the car and coming in. If that had been an inch lower, God, all that whole burst would have been inside the cab and we'd have all got killed! So I slammed on the brakes and backed up around the curve. Then of course I buttoned up and then all I had was a little slit to see through.

And Lieutenant Riffaleer then . . . I think . . . I'm pretty sure it was Riffaleer, he got the thirty-seven millimeter. Here he is a West Point officer and he grabs armor piercing, the black tipped thirty-seven millimeter shells, and he shouldn't. There were yellow ones there and they're HE [high explosives], you know. So we come around the corner. He was firing that thing and then the other guy was up on the top. He had a fifty caliber machine gun. And then the guy alongside of me had a thirty caliber. So we come around there with all those things blazing and we've got to run this roadblock. The car had a four-speed transmission. So I put it in second gear and gunned the engine and dropped the clutch and I heard the squeal and boy, oh boy! We came around the corner and I went through the roadblock. Things were flying all over everyplace. And there was a rock wall maybe thirty inches high. About a little over two feet high. And I ricocheted off of that coming around that thing going as fast . . . I don't know how fast I was going, but I was going as fast as that thing would go in gear. And you look down and I saw probably four or five hundred feet down the valley. We could have went over that thing.

And then I had a rear-view mirror and I opened up and I looked in the mirror and I could see . . . No. It wasn't a rear-view mirror. But I could see tracers going down the road and they were red. The Krauts use white tracers, you know. Yes. What the hell is wrong here? So we got down and I remember we got back to the camp and somebody . . . they sent a guy, a runner down the hill and here these guys had been at Anzio and Avelino and Africa. A lot of them. And they came out and said a German tank broke through our roadblock. Hell, they didn't even know what an M-8 armored car was. So anyway, that was quite a firefight. And I've talked to the guys . . . I talked to two of the guys that were up on the roadblock after the war at reunions. And this one guy had a bazooka and he crawled up around on top of us. And, you know, an M-8 armored car had a big

opening in the top. And he was up there. Aimed his bazooka right at that hole and the damn thing misfired. The batteries got wet or something.

DB: Couldn't figure out it was an American armored car.

RE: No. He didn't know it was an American armored car either.

DB: White stars on it and everything.

RE: Yes, I think so.

DB: They weren't looking.

RE: I don't know if there was stars. On the side of it, I suppose. But anyway, one of the guys got wounded and got a Purple Heart for it. A shell went up his arm and went in, you know. Fairly deep. But it was armor piercing so it just grazed him. Where if that had been HE, he'd have been blown up. So the whole thing was a fiasco. And that's when I say they talk about friendly fire, you know. I mean, when you're in situations like that it's hard to be rational and calm like a guy sitting behind a desk would be.

DB: You don't have time to think and reflect on the situation. You have to react.

RE: I went back and they put me in charge of sort of their stockade that they had for guys that had done things that were wrong. It was where S-2 was and I was with S-2 yet. But we had guys in there that were prisoners for some reason or other.

DB: Americans.

RE: Americans. Yes.

DB: Misbehaving Americans.

RE: Misbehaving Americans. Yes. They had done something. So then one night there was a bar upstairs and I got drunk and so they busted me. They were looking for a reason. They weren't happy with me at all. My whole deal . . . you see, being promoted too fast and all that thing because of my inexperience and the sergeant in B Company could be promoted to first sergeant. This was the real reason.

DB: So they busted you. Essentially you got drunk and that was the pretext, finally.

RE: Sure.

DB: Busting you because they were mad still over the situation when you jumped in . . .

RE: Yes. Then they could promote the guy in B Company to first sergeant.

DB: Okay.

RE: Which is the . . . I'm sure was the thinking behind it.

DB: Because there was a man down there. You were the new guy in this unit.

RE: Yes. Oh, sure. And there was a guy there who had been through Anzio and was a platoon sergeant. He'd been a squad leader and a platoon sergeant.

DB: And they wanted to promote him into the first sergeant position but you were holding the slot?

RE: Right.

DB: Plus they didn't like you because you'd made the jump against orders into southern France.

RE: Well, I don't think that bothered them too much.

DB: But in any case you got drunk and . . .

RE: If I'd have been a private it would have been no problem.

DB: Yes. But, in any case, you got drunk and that was the pretext.

RE: Yes.

RE: When I got into B Company and been through southern France, we went up to this little town and as I was in sleeping in a hotel . . . another guy and I were in bed together and we all had our clothes on and a shell hit . . . out in the street someplace.

DB: Is this after you got busted?

RE: Oh, yes. I was just ammunition bearer for a light machine gun. Or a rifleman, you know, more or less.

DB: So then they they got rid of you and opened up the slot for the other guy and you became an ammo bearer then.

RE: Yes. So, like I told you, then a shell hit. The guy said, "I'm getting out of here!" So he went outside. Then a shell hit the roof and boy, I got out of there in a hurry. One of the things I remember is being on guard duty in the blackest night I can ever remember. And you'd hear sounds out there and so forth, you know. You were sure it was somebody coming. I would take the safety off my rifle, and be all ready to open up, and nothing . . . usually. You hear . . . I don't know if it was an owl screech or a squirrel in the something or other, you know. You're just nervous as hell. I mean really. But we stayed there and then we got out. When the 14th Armored

relieved us we walked twenty-five miles down to Nice and then we rode forty and eight cars all the way up to our base near Paris.

DB: But what happened to you? You got relieved. That position where you were guarding by the hotel there. You got relieved and you walked out. The 14th Armored came in and what happened?

RE: Oh, that night. The Germans attacked and I think there was two or three killed and several wounded. I mean they knew there are new troops in there. These guys had never heard a shot fired in anger. Just come from the States. They landed at Marseilles and come up the coast and brought them up there. I don't know why they put an armored division in the Maritime Alps but they actually were in combat again in the Bulge. Because they went up into the 7th Army. They had some tough going there. You know, in southern . . . not southern France, but I mean near Austria.

DB: The Vosges Mountains.

RE: Yes. Oh, yes. That was tough going, too. Anyway, so we got up there and I was in Paris on leave. We went up and we got passes. So this was just before the Bulge and I was in Paris on leave and I didn't even get to spend a night out on leave. I had a three-day pass. The MPs picked us up. Put us in the Red Cross and then a truck hauled us out to what had been a German Luftwaffe base. Then we got in just like cattle trucks. We had to stand up. We didn't even have sitting room or anything. They were semi-trucks.

DB: This is with the 509 Company?

RE: Yes.

DB: So your leaves were cancelled, essentially. They picked everybody up.

RE: Yes. We only had three days. I had that morning, noon and evening, early evening. I paid forty dollars for a steak dinner and I went to the Folies-Bergère and I'd never seen so many topless women in my life. I mean, as a matter of fact, I hadn't seen very many topless women, you know. [Laughing] It's nothing, you know, in Europe. But they gave us a forty dollar partial pay. And I paid the whole forty bucks for a steak dinner with champagne. A little filet. But I had borrowed some money. We borrowed money back and forth. I had guys owed me money. Any time any guy went on leave, everybody would loan him all the money, French francs, they had.

DB: You still have some of your stash from the German paymasters?

RE: No. I didn't have any of that. I spent that.

DB: It was all gone already.

RE: Oh, yes. But anyway, after that, I remember we stopped in Liege. They were buzz bombing Liege and I heard a buzz bomb go off. I don't know. A mile or two away or whatever it was. You could feel the concussion.

DB: This is on the way up to the Bulge?

RE: On the way to the Bulge. And then the quartermaster officer got in an argument with our officer. I don't know who he was now. But the quartermaster regulations, their trucks are supposed to be one terrain feature between them and the enemy and he wouldn't go any farther. And so we got off the trucks. And just a few minutes after we got out of the trucks we could hear machine gun fire. So we got up there and we got involved. I don't know. I can't hardly remember all that we did. But I remember laying there in the cold ground.

DB: This was on the northern flank of the Bulge?

RE: Yes.

DB: And by the time you got up there, there was snow all over, too.

RE: Oh, yes. Yes. I was in the snow. A lot of snow. I don't know the temperature . . . ten above zero or so farenheit. Temperatures like that. It was cold. And I remember my feet being cold because all I had was my jump boots on and regular Army socks, you know.

DB: You were attached to the 82nd. The 509th was—?

RE: I think we were. I'm not sure. I really don't know. But . . . well, I don't know. Because . . . I don't know whether it was the next day or whenever it was. But they sent me on guard duty to battalion headquarters. I don't know why. I was right outside of battalion headquarters and the 75th Infantry Division moved in. And they had never been in combat. And our major, the guy . . . our battalion commander at that time was only a major. And because the lieutenant colonel . . . oh, what's his name? He became a lieutenant general. Had been our battalion commander in southern France. He designed the wings and the jump uniform of the paratroops.

DB: Oh. Yarborough. Colonel Yarborough.

RE: And . . . I can't think of his name now. Was the executive officer and he was still a major in the Bulge. So he was advising this brigadier general or maybe he was just a colonel in charge of this regiment. Whoever it was. What to do. I mean they didn't know what to do and according to that book I read, some of the officers still had their pinks on, you know. I mean they were really greener than could be. But we were put in there and we got a Presidential Unit Citation at Sadzot. We called it Sad Sack. We got a unit citation for stopping the 25th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment. We helped materially to stop the breakthrough. They were trying to get across this road to get to Liege and then get to Antwerp to divide us and the English. You know the whole history about that. But I visited there with my wife after the war and I talked to a schoolteacher. The lady that was in this . . . in her room where the sergeant was that jumped through the

window when the Germans came in the front door. She said, "You guys did a heck of job." She said, "There was over four hundred of those dead bastards there the next morning."

DB: What was this situation?

RE: Sadzot. What was there was a four point two chemical mortar . . .

DB: The story of the sergeant going through the window. I don't understand.

RE: Well, he was with the mortar company that was billeted in this little town. And the Germans attacked them.

DB: Oh.

RE: This was before we got there.

DB: Okay.

RE: This four point two chemical mortar unit . . . he was a platoon sergeant in the four point two chemical mortar outfit. And he jumped through the window. And there's a big picture window there now where they put a new window in and I got pictures of that. Of the new window that they put in. She could speak fluent English because she was a schoolteacher. And so my wife and I headed there and we went through the whole town. I was quite a hero there going back. Having been there that night. And we did a good job in the Bulge. I mean we got a unit citation and the 509, you know, has got the first Congressional Medal of Honor in the Airborne since Anzio. So they had a very prestigious outfit. They were seven hundred percent replacements in the outfit. And then I remember going up to Spa, Belgium. I got run over by the tank on the 20th of January. So that had to be about the 18th of January and I had gone in to the Bulge just about a month before. So I hadn't had my clothes off for a month. We got into Spa, those hot springs and everything. And we were supposed to go on the attack the next morning and they called it off. So we spent another whole day there, I remember.

DB: You got everything all cleaned up.

RE: Yes. Sidney Kasidlow from Detroit and I won the five hundred championship of the company. Playing five hundred. And so that was a break. Then on the 20th of January they attached us to the 7th Armored Division and I rode on the top of a tank. I don't know how far but we rode quite a ways. I remember we came through a woods and we got off the tanks and we started on the attack and they went ahead of us. The tanks. We were with a tank company. Four tanks. And we were crossing this long field coming into a little town called Borne. And I've got pictures of the exact spot where I got run over by the tank. You could see the village ahead of us down a long hill and there was snow about knee deep. I was following along behind the left tank. There were four tanks in a row.

DB: The tanks were in line?

RE: Front of the line. They were abreast.

DB: Abreast.

RE: Yes, yes. Attacking. And they said the tanks were in a column. That's not right. Because I was there. This guy wrote it afterwards. They usually went in in a column. All of a sudden the eighty-eights opened up and wham! Wham! Wham! They knocked out the three tanks, and in the process of doing that, the one in front of me stopped and backed over me. He backed over both my legs. There must have been a crevasse in the ground or little higher spots before. But I can still feel those pads going over my legs. Every time I think of it . . . it gives me the shivers even right now. He got over me and got about, oh, six or seven, eight yards behind me and they hit it again. They hit it and knocked a track off and our executive officer, Captain Holland, was alongside of the tank and it killed him. Then they hit it again and it went up in flames.

DB: Didn't the rounds actually go right over your head where you were laying there?

RE: Oh, yes, yes, yes. Right over the top. You heard the crack of a rifle bullet. You know all these war movies you see? All you hear is ricochets, you know. Gee! When you hear that snap! That's when they're close. [Chuckles] You know, a rifle bullet makes a snap when it goes by you. But the sonic boom is actually . . . it's a small sonic boom. An eighty-eight going over the top of me. Two eighty-eight rounds went over the top of me maybe three feet above me or two feet above me or whatever it was. Whomp! Boy! You could just hear it. Boy! Like a cherry bomb going off when they hit that thing. So I sort of crawled and hobbled a little bit. They said I walked back to the aid station. I didn't. I hobbled and I don't know how . . . how they picked me up, but I wound up in the aid station and they sent me to Liege, the general hospital. And I was in the general hospital for . . . I was only there for about ten days, two weeks maybe.

DB: Mostly it was just bruises, wasn't it?

RE: Bruises. Bruising. I had contusions. They cut my pants off me and stuff. I had contusions they said . . . they called it. In my leg. But I was up walking around and so forth. And one night there was an experience that I'll never forget. No. No, wait a minute. Yes. I was laying there in bed and the nurse was coming around giving shots and this one guy had to get it in the butt. I guess your arms get sore if you get them in the arms all the time. He was getting it in the butt. And this nurse pulls back the sheet and pulls down his gown or whatever he had and she takes that needle. I can remember her pushing a little bit so a drop comes out the top. She was standing there and when you heard the buzz bombs coming it was brrrrrrrr. Hear it going, you know. And then it stops. When that motor stops it's on it's way down. She stood there and the whole ward, all of us, just laid there. We didn't know where that thing was going to hit. And then, whoom! We heard it go off. It rattled the windows. It didn't hurt anything in the building. Then she sticks him and goes to the next one.

DB: Back to business.

RE: Back to business. Standing there. Oh, it must have been ten, fifteen, twenty seconds. I don't know how long it was. It seemed like an eternity. But she's standing there like that looking up

the needle and waiting for that buzz bomb to blow. It could have been . . . You would have thought you would have dove under the bed or something. It could have hit the building or right next to it. But that was sure kind of a funny happening.

[Tape interruption]

RE: I heard this lieutenant or sergeant or somebody talking to a guy. He said, "You pull one more stunt like that and I'm going to throw your ass in the infantry."

DB: Talking about the tank?

RE: No. No. This is when we were in the repo depot in Liege, I think it was or wherever it was. When I got out of the hospital I went to the repo depot. You see, the 509 after—about two days after I got run over they got disbanded. There was only forty-six effectives left in the battalion. Now our battalion wasn't full strength. The battalion full strength is maybe five hundred and some men. They were probably maybe only three hundred. I don't know. Somewheres around there. We weren't anywhere near full strength. So. But there was only forty-six left after the Battle of the Bulge. Now they weren't all killed or wounded.

DB: Some were sick, on leave.

RE: Well, there was frozen feet. Trench foot, pneumonia . . . I mean it's tough laying out there in the wet, cold all the time, you know. Get up maybe ten above at night. I don't know how cold it got. But anyway, so us guys sitting there in the infantry. What in the hell did we do to get in the infantry? I mean, these guys for being bad . . . I remember we were supposed to get five packages of cigarettes in a week for ration. But we never got cigarettes because the quartermaster was stealing them and selling them. They were worth forty dollars a carton on the Black Market. So they were stealing them. And, you know, when they were all going to go to jail, they had the choice. Don't go to jail; go to the infantry. It would seem like a heck of a problem.

DB: Yes.

RE: You know, in the Battle of the Bulge seventy percent of the casualties were in the infantry. But anyway, so I went back up. I got out of the hospital and I remember it was cold and snowy when I got off the truck and they put me in the 505 Parachute Infantry and I was in G Company.

DB: This was probably early February now?

RE: Yes, yes. Early February. So then I went to the 505th. We went up and when I joined them we went up into the Hertgen Forest. We got into the Hertgen Forest. I don't know what all we did. I can't . . . it's hard for me to remember. But we went into the Hertgen Forest and then they pulled us out and sent us to Camp Suippes, France.

DB: By Reims, isn't it?

RE: Reims, yes. And that's where they made a big mistake. The whole 82nd was at Camp Suippes and the 101st was south of Reims and they let us . . . gave us all passes. Not the whole division. But I mean we got passes from the 82nd and the 101st into town the same night. What a night. Holy cats! You'd have though we were fighting the war or something, you know. They never did that again. It was every other night. But anyway, so we were there and then they had a Pathfinder school. I saw the notice. Somebody said they were going to have Pathfinder school again. So I went to the first sergeant and I said, "Say, I was jumped to the Pathfinders in southern France. I'd kind of like to go to that Pathfinder school." He said, "Sure. Glad to have you go."

So I went there and that's where I met this guy Raleigh . . . I can't think of his name . . . with the 507 who made the Pathfinder jump in Normandy. And he and I compared notes a little bit. I made four more jumps there practicing for the Pathfinders. By that time I was a qualified Pathfinder if I'd have done that in southern France. [Chuckles] But anyway, then I come back to the outfit they move us on the Rhine and I was on the Rhine the day that President Roosevelt died. I remember a guy coming down the line. He said, "Did you hear that Roosevelt died and Truman's the new president?" I'll be darned. That was cushy deal because the Remagen Bridgehead where they cut across that bridge that the Germans didn't get blown and the 17th Airborne jumped south of there. So they called it the Rose Pocket. This General Rose was killed there. He was a division commander.

DB: Yes. Rose was killed on the north flank of it there. I think the 11th Armored Division. It was the Ruhr Pocket, actually.

RE: Ruhr Pocket. We were to keep the Germans from coming back across the Rhine. But they never tried or anything. So we didn't have any problems there at all. We went through Cologne on the way up there and boy, that town was just flat, except for the cathedral. And on one side of it a shell had come near. Shattered some of it. Basically, it was intact yet. But the whole town was just flat. And the bulldozers cleared the streets so you could drive down them. But the whole town was just flat. I remember I was billeted in a German professor's house. We were not too far from Cologne when we were on the Rhine. I remember the guy . . . his classical musical records. We took and we skipped them out. Skipped them out over the Rhine. [Chuckles] And the guys stuck bayonets in his hardwood floors. And I can remember . . . sitting and talk about it. You know, combat soldiers are not very kind people. I remember . . . this sounds cruel, but some guys took a cigarette. Tied a fish line to it. A little thin fish line and laid it out on the street and be sitting there on the bench. And the German would walk by and would stoop over to pick up the cigarette and they'd pull it away. Kind of cruel to do things like that.

DB: Messing with them.

RE: Yes.

DB: Just in general, you've been fighting these people and even though the war is still on you're occupying part of their homeland.

RE: Yes.

DB: And beyond what you just told me, how were relations with them when you actually dealt with them face to face? How did the Germans act?

RE: Oh, some of them . . . well they apologized, none of them knew anything about the fact what Hitler had done all he had done and so forth and so forth. And I couldn't speak any German or anything. I didn't get in too much contact with them. But I mean we didn't have too much to do with them. But I mean the guys didn't . . . you know, as far as I was concerned, those dirty Nazis . . . .I won't use the terms we used. But they were Krauts as far as we were concerned. We had no love for *any* of them. I mean these guys tried to kill you and the misery that you went through and everything else. How could you feel pleasantly toward them? And really . . . of course, the German people . . . I understood later on. The Versailles Treaty really was one of the main causes of World War II. The reparations that the Germans had to pay was what the French had lost in World War I and broke them. Their inflation compared to the little inflation we've had was nothing compared to what they had. And when Hitler came along he gave them jobs and food, you know. You can understand what happened in a way.

But anyway. So we then left there and we went on up on the Elbe. I found out later, I didn't know this at the time, but they wanted us to get up there and cut off Denmark so that the Russians didn't get into Denmark. The first and second battalion of the 505 went across the Elbe river in the morning. Real early in the morning on attack. The night before, all the artillery fire. We fired at all their positions and the day before that they skip bombed their positions and so forth. But I heard that they had moved their guns out of position and they moved them back in. So the first and second battalion though had no . . . I think they had one casualty crossing the Elbe. But we in the third battalion crossed about nine o'clock in the morning and by that time the 307th engineers had had a couple of pontoons in already for the bridge. They were starting to put the pontoon bridges across and the Germans started to shell us. And I can remember crossing. The water geysers coming in the boat from shells hitting the water.

And I remember when I got off the boat, it was a rowboat, sort of, with a twenty-two horsepower Johnson [engine] on the back of it and a shell come in and hit into the ground. We were in the flood plain and hit it . . . it wasn't muddy, but it was soft, real soft earth. Plop! A hole about that big, you know. I think it was a seventy-seven millimeter. It was a dud. Either the slave labor that had been working on it hadn't cut the fuse or it was defective ammunition. Whatever it was. But I wouldn't be here today if that would have went off. So we went up and I remember we went across and there was a dike there and there was a foxhole there. So I got in the foxhole and I was laying there. And oh, it couldn't have been ten, fifteen, twenty minutes later General Gavin came by with his aide. He always carried an M-1. And, you know, talk about being in combat. He jumped in Normandy. And so he was a combat general. Gavin. He was well liked. Slim Jim Gavin.

So anyway, then we went on the attack and I can remember . . . the Germans were firing at us quite a bit because I could hear that snap going by and a couple of our guys got hit. Then we came up to a fence and a guy named Lazare . . . he'd married an English girl and he was a BAR man. He held the fence and I crawled under the fence and I was standing there holding the fence for him to crawl under and wham! I got shot right through the chest. I dropped and he hollered, "Medic! Medic!" And then, of course, they go on the attack. They can't wait. And I said, "I'll be

all right." But then I started to blow blood bubbles out of my mouth. So when the medic got up to me he took my pack. He moved it back up under so it was underneath my head and he took my shirt down like this and he gave me a shot of morphine. He couldn't get it through with anything else. I wasn't in horrendous pain but I was in shock. I'll never forget. I remembered the cowboy movies. The bad guy or whoever it was would get shot. Blood would drip down from the mouth and the guys would croak. I went like this and my hand was all bright red blood, you know. So I was bleeding through the lungs. So I thought sure I was dying. I mean I knew I was going to die. I mean really.

I don't know what all he did. But he put some compresses on there. We all had a shot, styrette of morphine in that little first aid kit. They don't do it anymore. But anyway, they made a stretcher, took a couple of prisoners back and they took their coats and turned them inside out and a couple saplings there. One of the guys used . . . I don't know what it was, but they made a stretcher out of it. Took the sapling and were going to carry me back and then a Jeep come up. It had four stretchers on it and they put me on that stretcher and they took me back to the battalion aid station and they cut my top off me. And he asked me, "How you feeling?" I said, "I'm all right." He said, "You need any more morphine?" I said, "No. I think I'm all right." That was where I made a mistake. I should have taken some more morphine. But I said, "Am I going to make it?" And he said, "Oh, hell, yes." He says, "The war's over for you."

DB: You weren't shot through. It was only an entry wound, right?

RE: Oh, no. It went between my ribs in front and tore out a rib in back. Oh, I have one lobe gone off my left lung. So then they put me on one of these British alligators . . . I don't know what it was. Crossed the Elbe and got in an ambulance and then this morphine wore off. Holy cripe! Was I starting to hurt! Oh! Geez! I said to the driver, "Do you have any morphine?" I was laying on the bottom. I think they put four stretchers in an ambulance. Dodge ambulance. And he says, "No, I'm just the driver. I haven't got anything." So then I started to pass out and come to and pass out and come to. The next time I woke up I was on a long table and there must have been two or three other guys on the tables there. I was lying there and this doctor came out. This doctor pulled my dogtags. "Erikson. You wouldn't be from Minnesota would you?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "I'm Dr. Johnson from the Mayo Clinic." [Laughs] So they fixed me up and the next time I woke up I had a tube through my nose and so forth and I was lying in a bed in the hospital.

DB: You were able to breathe okay though?

RE: Oh, yes. They gave me oxygen through my nose. But there was a guy next to me from a slave labor camp that they had liberated, and he . . . oh, God! His arms looked like a knot in a rope. A rope with a knot in it for his elbow. And you could see all the cracks in his skull. And he died about a day after I was there. But an interesting thing. There was . . . right across . . . it was in a big tent. The beds were this way and then they had them lined up this way on the other side of the tent. There wasn't enough room to put them both. And this . . . I don't know . . . this guy was in the SS . . . I don't know if he was an officer or a noncom or what. But this nurse was trying to take his temperature and he bit off the end of the thermometer and spit it in her face. They just let him die. He died there. I don't know. A few hours later, I guess, or the next day. I

don't know when he died. But he died. Then they took me from there . . . oh, while I was there the war was over. I remember the war was over. For twenty-four hours a column of four abreast German prisoners walked by the tent. I could hear the tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp going by me. So that's a lot of people. Four abreast going by. All the Germans surrendered. So then they air evaced me to England and that was an interesting deal. I was on a hospital plane.

DB: C-46, C-47?

RE: C-47, I think. And I was by a window, and when we got over London the pilot banked it this way and then banked it that way so we could all see London. And then we landed and we went down to Lands End to a general hospital there. And I was there for . . . I don't know how long. I was there for a while. Then I took a hospital train to Southampton and a hospital ship to Halloran General Hospital, Staten Island, New York. Never got to see the Statue of Liberty, because you don't come in that way . . . but I'll never forget the first dinner. We had a steak. Huge steak. It must have been an inch thick. Big t-bone steak.

DB: Now you were strictly on a stretcher at this time?

RE: Oh, yes. They took me on a stretcher and so forth. Although I could get up and walk around a little bit. But if I had to go very far it was on a stretcher. And then they had broccoli with cheddar cheese on it. I'd never eaten broccoli before in my life. And a quart of milk. And fresh bread, you know. Oh, man, it was a good meal. Then they took me air evac to Fitzsimmons General Hospital in Denver and I was there for two or three weeks or something like that. Then I got a thirty-day convalescent leave. By that time I was getting to walk around and went back to Minneapolis.

DB: Your wife was in Minneapolis now?

RE: No. I went back to St. Cloud and she met me in St. Paul. We stayed at the Radisson Hotel for a week. I think I spent seven hundred bucks that first week. Boy, we had a good time. That was a lot of money back then in those days. We stayed in the Radisson, which is a first class hotel. And ate in the restaurants and went to nightclubs every night. Then we went back to St. Cloud. Then I went back to Fitzsimmons General Hospital. And I flew . . . I got an air transport plane to Chicago and I took . . . I don't know, it was the Hiawatha or something back to Minneapolis. I don't know. I got to St. Cloud anyway. The war was over for me. So I looked around and my old manager of the Raymond Tire Service that I had worked for to look for a job.

DB: Had you been discharged now?

RE: Yes. Well, I went to Camp McCoy from Fitzsimmons General Hospital. They sent me to Camp McCoy and I got discharged. And I was smart enough . . . because a lot of guys, "Oh, let me out, let me out, let me out." And they said, "Have you had any medical problems while you were in the service?" I said, "Well, I had a few." They said, "Well, why don't you go down and give it all to them?"

DB: To the VA [Veteran's Administration] rep.

RE: And I did. I had a friend of mine that never . . . said, "No, no. I don't want nothing. Let me out of this." And he never drew a penny from the government for years and he had things wrong with him. He should have got disability, you know. Just nothing on his records. He didn't do anything. Where I went in and told them what was wrong with me and so forth and when I got out then, when they discharged me, I got fifty percent disability. A couple years later or something they raised it to sixty percent. They reevaluated things and raised me to sixty percent. And now I've been . . . some of these guys, you know, they say . . . .a lot of guys are getting a hundred percent today because they ain't able to work today. Well, hell, if nothing ever happened, if you hadn't been in the service, you wouldn't have been able to. I really . . . I like to see guys get what they got coming and I was very pleased with what they did for me. So I wasn't . . . I am not complaining.

DB: Most of yours came as a result of your being shot in the chest.

RE: Yes. And then . . . the doctor was impressed when he looked at me and he says, "Run over by a tank?!" He'd never been near a shot fired in his life, you know, and so forth. So I guess they sort of figured that I had it coming. I mean . . . and people are always quite impressed about that tank deal. More so than the gunshot.

DB: You're amazing to be alive.

RE: Yes. Thirty-six ton. But anyway, so I got out of the service and this fellow, Frank Murphy, was the manager of the Coca Cola Company and he was married to a Grennan. Grennan cakes were delivered by Tasty. So that was a pretty good job. So he got me a job with Tasty. I worked for Tasty Bread for about three months. I had to get up about four o'clock in the morning and load my truck. I was relief driver for the northern division. I got thirty-five dollars a week. And I can remember my expenses. They would pay bus fare like to go up to Little Falls. And I think they paid something like two or three dollars a night for a room.

DB: Now this is only a couple months after you got shot in the chest?

RE: Well, let's see. I got discharged in September. Late in September.

DB: And you were shot in early May.

RE: I was shot April 30th.

DB: So you got about four and a half months to heal and you were doing okay.

RE: So I was going to work for Tasty. Then I got laid off because there was a flour shortage; it was a union job. I belonged to the Teamsters Union. And so then my first baby was born. My oldest daughter was born and a gal named . . . oh, I can't think of her name now. She was in the hospital room with my wife and I went through high school with her. Lawrence. Her name was Evelyn Lawrence, I think. Yes. Evelyn Lawrence. That was the day that I got laid off from Tasty, so I was out of work. See, a lot of guys drew this . . . what is it? Fifty-two/twenty? You could draw twenty bucks a week for fifty-two weeks. I drew it for about two or three weeks is all. I

mean, I wasn't interested in twenty dollars a week. Anyway, she said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, I just got laid off from Tasty Bread." She said, "Well, why don't you go to school? Go to college." I thought . . . of course, she graduated in 1937. I didn't graduate until 1940. But anyway, I never thought about it. You really need to do that. Then her husband came in and he was going to college. He was a veteran.

DB: The GI Bill.

RE: The GI Bill. I went down . . . well, maybe I should go look at it. So I went down to County Service Officer and so forth. "Oh, listen, you're drawing disability. You're a disabled veteran." He says, "You go under Public Law 16, which is a wounded veteran." To rehabilitate me. So I got, I think, $202 a month. That was a lot more than the GI Bill. And I remember when I went down and registered at St. Cloud State College . . . it was a state college then. It wasn't a university. They took my transcript from high school and so forth and they put me on probation the first quarter. My high school grades were so bad. The last year in high school I got all Cs and Ds. Because I didn't work at it very hard. Because I was sleepy. I slept through most of the classes.

I made some mistakes my first quarter. I lowered my grade average a little bit because I didn't know how to go to college. It took me a while to catch on, and this gal that had her baby the same day as my wife did was an English teacher, and the only thing I cheated on . . . I didn't really cheat. But my term themes and stuff like that that you had to write, I wrote them. It was my idea and I wrote it and everything. But she would correct my grammar and English. [Chuckles] So I got a C in English. But then I got some GED credits from my service records and so forth. I finally wound up graduating with honors. I had about a 3.3 grade point average. Because I was business education major I had to take shorthand and typing and I got three Cs in shorthand and three Cs in typing. Oh, I got one B in shorthand. That is when I taught it. Ha, ha. That was ridiculous. One of the gals was a straight A student. She got a C for teaching it. But they gave *me* the people that were just taking their first six weeks or second six weeks of shorthand and she had to teach seniors.

Now I got an A teaching bookkeeping because I was straight A in most of my business major. I got an A in that and I could teach bookkeeping, easy. I'd never have made a good bookkeeper though, because I transpose figures. I know the theory well but as far as being a bookkeeper, I would never have made a bookkeeper. But I think that the two things that did the most for me in life going to college was two courses that I took: accounting and music appreciation. Old Harvey Waugh taught me how to appreciate pretty classical music, you know, and I have enjoyed it my whole life where before that, "Poo! Classical!" I wouldn't even think about it.

DB: Now what was your living situation at this time? It's right after the war. And where were you going to school?

RE: St. Cloud.

DB: You've got a new wife. You've been married for a couple years, but you're just really getting to know her.

RE: Yes.

DB: And you've got your first child and you're going to school on the GI Bill. And how was your life?

RE: I was going under Public Law 16. It wasn't GI Bill.

DB: But that was—?

RE: Yes, oh, yes. That was $202 a month. Then I worked thirty hours a week at Goodyear at seventy-five cents an hour. See, before that I was living off of $35 a week working for Tasty. Listen, I went to work for Goodyear after I graduated. As a matter of fact, I went to graduate school for a quarter and was going to be a teacher. College professor. I was being interviewed for the junior college in Joplin, Missouri and I was going to be a coordinator under the George Barton Act through which I had graduated from high school, and I thought it was a great deal for the working class. I was writing my thesis on job analysis and I was getting all my material from Goodyear and Miss Eagen, the boss's secretary.

He came in one day and she introduced me to him and he says, "Don't I know you?" And I said, "Yes. At a sales meeting you had up at Raymond Tire Service." "Oh, yes. I remember you now. What are you going to do?" And I told him. And he said, "How much do you think you're going to make when you get out of school?" I said, "Well, the starting salary would be $2,700 a year." [Chuckles] "And," he says, "I just had an opening for a sales trainee. And I can start you at $250 a month with an expense account and a car." I thought about it. A car. See, I got my bachelors degree in twenty-seven months. I went summer and winter and I took eighteen credits a lot of quarters. And I got the GEDs and everything. And this was . . . this would be thirty months in school. Summer and winter and year around. So I got to thinking about it. My dad was a salesman and so forth. Pretty good way to make a living, I guess. So I went to work for Goodyear. But I took a cut in pay going to work for them.

DB: But housing was available?

RE: Oh, no. We moved into this apartment in Sauk Rapids that had been bedrooms and they made it into an apartment. The heat was not very good and it was cold. I forget what we were paying for rent but it wasn't much. Then when I went to work for Goodyear I got the sales training. I called on all the Shell stations in the Twin Cities and then they gave me that Willmar territory and I couldn't find a place to live. And I ran an ad in the paper. Twenty-five dollar reward for an apartment. The next day I got a call. She said, "My son-in-law (or whoever it was) is moving next week." She says, "I think you can get the apartment." So I went out and I got it and I gave her twenty-five bucks.

DB: And where was this?

RE: Willmar.

DB: In Willmar.

RE: So I was there about fifteen months. And then I bought a house there. Never got a chance to live in it because they transferred me to Eau Claire. My whole life I've been unlucky some people would say and so forth. But also I'm lucky. My rise with Goodyear was . . . not only I did a good job but I was lucky. I took over a territory from a guy that was fired. And of course that gives you a little quota. And sales results are always on percent of quota and in Goodyear your quota was based fifty percent on potential and fifty percent on previous experience. So if your previous experience is terrible you've got a low quota. So it wasn't long, I was in first place among the salesmen. Then I got promoted to Eau Claire. That territory, the guy had been on it for twenty-five years and he never got off the main highway. So there I stayed at number one. And as a matter of fact, at the national sales contest, they used my sales report as the example of how a salesman should run a territory. There were only two towns in eleven counties that I hadn't done business.

When we went to this national sales meeting, I had lunch with the vice president and so forth. They were interviewing me to get ahead in the company. And I was the north central division's nominee for the Litchfield Award, which would be the number one salesman in the country. Well, I wasn't first but I was either second, third or fourth because there were four regions. And then they made me city salesman in Minneapolis. Just Hennepin County, which is the biggest territory in the district. And I was on that about a year and then they said, "Well, in order to get ahead in the world you have to have retail experience." So they made me assistant manager of the Minneapolis store and then I spent three months as assistant manager of the Grand Rapids, Michigan store because this guy had been a big winner and so forth. They wanted me to emulate these guys that know what to do. The Minneapolis thing was only for three or four weeks until they found a place for me. Then I came back as store manager of the St. Paul store and there the guy had gotten fired for not doing the job.

[Tape interruption]

DB: Okay. So this was about 1950.

RE: Yes. I think that's pretty close.

DB: And so really, you came home, went to school, did well, had some luck, got a job that really suited your personality, did very well and found a lot of success.

RE: Yes. And then they gave you the biggest store in the region, which is Des Moines store. I was only there about ninety days and they made me store supervisor. Then they changed the title of that to assistant district manager retail. The district manager had three assistants, two for retail and one for wholesale. The wholesale guy had twelve men and I had fifteen stores. There were two store supervisors or ADMRs as we called them. We each had fifteen stores. There again, I started to run into the Peter Principle. I was a better salesman than I was an administrator. I started off trying to treat my store managers like I would my dealers when I was a salesman. You can't do that. But I finally got things organized. I was on the job five years. And it's not a job that you can stay on as an assistant . . . I mean you either go up or down and I was afraid that if I didn't make it I'd wind up with some store in the middle of Iowa somewhere.

So I wrote a letter to my boss and said, "There are twelve store districts in the region and I'm in third place, which is I think pretty good." I don't know if I said that or not, but I was thinking I was pretty good. And I said, "You know the rating system they have for Goodyear . . . an A means you're to be promoted immediately. A- means you're ready in six months and B+ means you're doing great in your job and just fine. So," I said, "I would like to be sure that you consider giving me an A- rating on my efficiency report and I also think that I should have a ten percent raise. I know my salary is within the range yet where you can give me a ten percent raise." My salary was just a little under a thousand dollars a month. It was nine hundred something. And I knew from other guys that were district managers that I had been assistants with, so I knew what my ceiling was. It was eleven hundred dollars. And I knew they'd give me a ninety-dollar raise, let's say, and not be over the ceiling. You can't go more than ten percent when you're above the middle of the range. And what do they do? He did give me an A- rating. I don't know what the region did. But they gave me a thirty-five dollar raise. [Chuckles] So. Wonderful training though. I mean I learned more in those five years in middle management than you can learn in four years in college or ten years in college.

DB: So most of the people that you were working with, were most of them returning veterans, too?

RE: Oh, a fair share of them. Yes. A good share. And I feel good. When I finally learned how to be store supervisor . . . it was people. I'd get a good store manager in a store and my problems were over. And I know that three of my store managers that I had hired and promoted to store manager became district managers. So I was hiring good people. When you get good people working for you it makes your job easy. So then a friend of mine had made $18,000 that year and I thought, "God!" He went to Florida in the winter for two or three weeks in the wintertime and . . . and I had four kids at that time, so I couldn't afford anything like that.

DB: That's huge money in the early 1950s.

RE: Pretty good money. And I was making about $12,000, you know, or $15,000 with my bonus. With four kids, of course, my wife a stay-at-home mom. I wasn't able to do much. So I went in business as a manufacturer's rep and almost starved to death the first couple of years.

DB: For Goodyear?

RE: No. Just selling. That's kind of a long story, too. When I was store manager in St. Paul, the vice president of the St. Paul Fire and Marine, which is St. Paul Companies now, they were right near us and I set up a deal where I gave them fleet courtesy cards and we handled gasoline, so I gave them two cents off on gas and gave them a discount on tires and so forth. And he and I became good friends. As a matter of fact, he invited my wife and kids and I out to his summer home and so forth. His job was to sell Fidelity insurance to banks. And the guy that owned this company, Kitchen Kompact, that I went to visit, his dad was state banking commissioner at one time in Kentucky. So this Len Moeller knew him real well.

And the guy that owned Kitchen Kompact was a P-38 pilot in the Pacific and he came back and started a diaper wash deal. Got a GI loan. He sold that for $50,000 and he borrowed $50,000. So

he had $100,000 and he bought this Kitchen Kompact that was in Chapter 11. Kitchen Kompact manufactured kitchen cabinets. And then he bought the quartermaster depot. In World War I they built two huge buildings. 400 by 800 feet, I guess. He bought them and he bid on them to move his plant into there and he was the only bidder so he got them. Later on he sold one of the buildings for twice as much as he paid for both of them. So he was a real genius, I'll tell you.

But anyway, Len Moeller was in there talking to the guy, saying Kitchen Kompact was going to expand out into the Midwest. "Do you know anybody up there?" He said, "I know just the guy for you. This Bob Erikson. He's probably vice president of Goodyear by now. I don't know if you can get him or not." Actually, I was an assistant district manager retail. But it kind of intrigued me. So I flew into Louisville and I looked that all over and so forth and I said, "Well . . ." I had some money in the bank. I had, oh, maybe, I think it was five, six, seven thousand in the bank. Then I sold my house down in Des Moines. So I signed on with him and left and gave Goodyear the notice.

DB: So where were you living at this time then?

RE: Des Moines. The region office was in Des Moines. And the region manager asked my wife to come down and visit him and took her out to lunch. He says, "You know, we've got great plans for Robert. You just can't let him quit now." I'd been a tire repairman, a car washer . . . all the way through their whole chain, you know. So I was really experienced. And she said, "Well, why don't you put it in the paycheck?" I've got to give her credit for that, boy! So I left. I drew three weeks pay. I had three weeks vacation coming and they only let me work a couple days after that. They wouldn't let me call on my stores when I'd resigned. So I left and went in business up . . . moved back to Minneapolis. And boy, it was tough. Because I was selling an idea. Pre-finished cabinets in cartons rather than have the local Swede and German carpenters make them.

DB: And moving back up to Minneapolis now. This is what, 1952?

RE: No. This would have been 1954.

DB: 1954 and how were things up here in Minneapolis as far as—? There was a huge building boom going on in the 1950s.

RE: Oh, yes.

DB: So how was it finding a home up here for your family?

RE: Oh, easy. No trouble at all. Bought a house right away. I moved up in Brooklyn Center.

DB: New house?

RE: Bought a new house. I had enough money to make the down payment on the house.

DB: And a new house in those days. Just to get a reference for it. What would a house cost in those days?

RE: [Sighs heavily] Oh, I can't remember. I don't know what it was. I really don't. I couldn't . . . I really couldn't . . . nothing compared to today.

DB: And your wife was happy with the move?

RE: Oh, yes. She wanted to move! She had come from St. Cloud. We didn't like it in Des Moines. Des Moines was dry. I mean you couldn't buy liquor by the drink. My boss was a drunk. He was an alcoholic. I didn't like him. And I *really* wasn't as comfortable as you could possibly be with all that personnel hiring and firing. It wasn't impossible for me but hard to do.

DB: But you're a salesman and you wanted to get back to sales.

RE: Yes. I like sales. I mean I like people. And so I wanted to get out of that. They taught me a lot in Goodyear though. I mean really. I learned how to organize myself. As a matter of fact, when I went into business for myself, my little company was organized on Goodyear's basis. I learned a lot in management from them.

DB: So now you're selling cabinets . . .

RE: Oh, yes. A year after I went into that, if Goodyear would have said, "You want to come back? Are you sorry?" I think I'd have went back. I mean I was tired. I missed the camaraderie of men to talk to. I could call the other ADMRs and talk to them about problems and I had company all the time. Here you're all alone in the world. So that was a little difficult.

DB: So your next contact was down in Louisville at the manufacturing plant.

RE: Yes.

DB: And so what you're doing is trying to exploit this huge building boom in the 1950s.

RE: Right. And I was in sales. So I finally got an account in Omaha who started distributing for me and then I got building material distributors in Rapid City and they tied in with Minot Builders Supply. So then I was starting to make a living.

DB: So how big—? This is a pretty large marketing area here.

RE: Oh! I had Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana. All of Canada I wanted west of Winnipeg. Winnipeg and west. And all of Wisconsin except Milwaukee. The guy that had Milwaukee, I don't know what happened to him, but he left Kitchen Kompact. So they asked me if I wanted to cover Milwaukee. I was into this little account in Madison, Wisconsin for a weekend sales deal they had. Another rep says, "What are you doing in Milwaukee?" I said, "This will be my first trip there." He says, "Boy, you go in and see the Drexel Company." He said, "They're just doing a fantastic job for me." So I went in and I

talked to him. Showed him the cabinets and he said, "That's a pretty good cabinet." The next time I called him, "Yes," he said. About two or three weeks later I went back again and I called on other people in town. Mainly I called on him. And he said, "Yes, I'll buy a truckload."

DB: At the time what was the logistics of your sales and your samples? You had a truck and you hauled samples around? Photographs?

RE: Oh, no. I just had little photographs and I had a sample cabinet. A couple of them with me. Small ones that I showed. And I showed him how the doors were made. I had door samples all wrapped up in sort of felt.

DB: You're spending most of your time on the road now?

RE: Oh, yes. Quite a bit. Back then I would be gone every other week for three nights, four nights. Then I spent a lot of time in the Twin Cities, of course, trying to get business because that's my big market.

DB: And this is all pre-freeway time, too.

RE: Pre-freeway. Long time with that. But anyway, Drexel, they said, "His credit . . . he hasn't got enough money to buy a truckload of cabinets, but Dun & Bradstreet said he has never missed a cash discount. We will take a chance on him." He'd come there from Germany. He'd been a prisoner of war. He was a German soldier.

DB: Drexel.

RE: Drexel. And he'd been in a Russian prison camp. Spent thirteen years. He was eighteen when he went in the army and he was thirty-one when he got out. Thirteen years. About eight or nine years in a Russian prison camp. I said, "Boy, that must have been tough." "Oh, it wasn't too bad." He was head of the Black Market. So he was quite an operator. Anyway, he came to Milwaukee with a hundred dollars and left there . . . he sold his stores to Boschwitz of Plywood Minnesota and he left there with about six or seven million. So he did pretty well for himself. But anyway, so I got him going. And within a year he was buying a fifty-foot car a week.

Everybody said, "This guys sells for his cash discount." Well, he would sell when he was one little shop . . . he would go to the other builders and say, "If you'll buy ten sheets I'll give you the hundred-sheet price." Well, that enabled him to get the hundred-sheet price for his ten sheets, and he didn't give them any cash discount. So he made the ten-sheet price gain plus the two percent and so forth. Then he got into a flooring deal, selling oak flooring. He was selling all over Milwaukee and that was great business. Back in those days you couldn't use carpeting but [had to install] hardwood floors in every house. Today all you do is put underlayment and then carpeting. And so I got him going and then everybody says to me, "Boy, you were a pretty smart guy to get Boschwitz." Well, Boschwitz looked for me from Plywood Minnesota. So I got him going, and holy cats! Well, his biggest order from me ever was seventy carloads when he had seventy stores. He bought a carload for every store in the new line.

DB: This is early 1960s now?

RE: Yes. Early 1960s. I think one month, I got $43,000 commission. And *that* was a lot of money back then. That would be like making a couple hundred thousand today, I suppose, in a month. And so anyway, it developed that. I did pretty well in the world. It cost me four hundred some thousand dollars to get divorced. My wife was afraid I was making all this money. I was going to go out and get some young girl and dump her. She was kind of insecure. She hadn't graduated from high school but she was plenty smart. Her brother wound up in a liquor store in St. Cloud and she talked me into buying it for $75,000. It wasn't a good business because right after we bought it they took off the fair trade. So that wasn't too good a deal. We got our money back but that's about all. We should have bought a couple of McDonalds. Or I would have gladly paid her tuition at college. She could have graduated college with honors. She was very smart. She was not dumb at all. But she had a poor self-image. And my life with her changed when I graduated from college. I started to chase around with guys like Boschwitz and so forth, you know, and he got me involved in Republican politics and she was a Democrat.

DB: So where did you first meet Boschwitz? Was that through the cabinet business?

RE: He looked me up. He called Kitchen Kompact and they told me to call him.

DB: And he was just starting out at this time?

RE: Yes. He only had one store. North Minneapolis. It was the old . . . what is it? Great Northern. It was the Great Northern building where they used for their offices and stuff when they merged with Burlington. Became Burlington-Northern. And that wasn't approved. He had that for four or five years. And all he paid, he had a month-to-month lease on it, seven hundred dollars a month rent. And he said in his new building, his first month's telephone bill was more than his rent in the old building. But then he started to franchise.

We were so cheap that I would bid on buildings and—I had another distributor in town, too. I had Kindom Company in Bloomington. Jerry Wellek who now owns Lake Shore Industries. He was their sales manager. You can go up and down Highway 94 and so forth. All those highrises. We got all the kitchen cabinets in them and all those down along Lake Street. We were so low you couldn't touch us. You see, the average cabinet maker up here could make cabinets two to three an hour. We were making fourteen. We had an automated line. Like old Henry Ford. Whatever color you want as long as it's black. We had one wood, one color, one style, but well made and we could deliver in a week. We stocked at the mill. And I actually had to put up a cash guarantee that we would deliver them at the bid price. That we were so much under the other bidders. We were killing them. One time Jerry and I had seventeen carloads on team track going in the building. We sold Kellogg Square in St. Paul. Took fourteen carloads for that one job. I'm telling you. We did a lot of business.

DB: So you hooked up with Boschwitz now. Was he already involved in politics?

RE: Oh, yes. He was very active in the Republican Party. Big fundraiser. One of the best fundraisers the Republicans ever had. And that's where he got his power. And then he ran for the Senate and then he was elected.

DB: And when did you get involved with the Republicans?

RE: Well, I was on his finance committee.

DB: Starting about when?

RE: Early on. Oh, yes. This would probably be 1962 or 1963. Along in there. Jerry Wellek was active . . . Kindom was active in the Minnesota Multi-Housing Association. So they got me to join that. It cost a hundred bucks, and there again I got active. I became chairman of the membership committee. I was the first one awarded a trip to Las Vegas as the one who got the most new members. This was my Goodyear training plus my sales experience. I got that going and then I was on another committee and then they elected me to the board of directors of the Minnesota Multi-Housing Association. And they awarded me director of the year for the work that I had done for the association. That's what got you the business. A lot of people think you spend a hundred bucks to join the association. Boy, they're going to flock in and buy from you. It don't mean a thing. But if they all get to know you, you get plenty of opportunities. By the same token, I had, for example, smoke detectors. Oh, God. I must have sold . . . I don't know, fifteen, twenty thousand smoke detectors in town. They passed a law that every apartment had to have smoke detectors and they all came to me, of course. And I had good pricing. I was a manufacturer's rep and I sold them direct. I only made I think seven percent commission on them.

DB: But volume.

RE: Oh, the volume! I sold . . . the majority of the apartments in the Twin City area had Erikson smoke detectors in them. Because of my connection with them and so forth. And that really helped me. When Boschwitz . . . on his finance committee I raised $70,000 for him the first year in his first campaign, because I knew all these people. A lot of them were Democrats like Harvey . . . Harv and Marv . . . who were they? Harvey Ratner. What has he got, six, seven thousand units? You know. Big operator. They call him the father of the apartment association. Big Democrat. Most Jewish people are Democrats, you know. But they still like to have a Republican in there for financial reasons. So a thousand bucks wasn't that difficult. Even though it was quite a little bit of money. These people were millionaires. So I raised $70,000 for Rudy on that . . . I've got a great big picture I got back there. He gave me an award for doing well for him. Made by Kuba whoever he is. I got an original Kuba painting that Rudy gave me. So anyway . . . I had some good experiences.

DB: How long were you involved with Boschwitz? And did you get involved with the wider Republican Party?

RE: Well, no. He became senator for twelve years. And then he shot himself in the foot. First by being too confident and then that letter that they wrote to the Jewish community.

DB: About Wellstone.

RE: Wellstone. He wrote a letter to the Jewish community to start with saying that I really should be your senator because as Jewish . . . most Jewish people are Democrats and I've been a lifelong Democrat and I should represent you.

DB: This is Wellstone's letter.

RE: Wellstone's letter. And so Rudy's supporters, Jewish, which are a minority of the Jews but they, oh, got all obsessed about that and they wrote a letter, which Rudy saw. He didn't sign it but he saw it. And he admits that he shouldn't have done it. But they said to Wellstone, "Who do you think you are to represent the Jews? You married a non-Jew. Your children are being raised as non-Jews. Why does that qualify you to represent the Jewish people?" And the Minneapolis paper, when they put it in, "You married a Christian and your children are being raised as Christians." Christians up here think, "What the hell is wrong with being a Christian?" They should have said like they did in the letter, non-Jews.

DB: Did the paper change it?

RE: Yes! Sure they did. They wrote Christian. Which is semantics. It's the same thing, really. Then again it isn't. Then there was a snowstorm in southern Minnesota and the Republicans carried it but just barely where they'd have had a landslide. They'd really have had it knocked up being a sitting senator and doing a good job. Well liked and so forth. You know, today he's ambassador to the Human Rights Commission in the United Nations. He's a pretty powerful guy. So I owe a lot of what I have in life to him, really. So then he actually eventually had to quit Kitchen Kompact because of the fact that they didn't keep up and Merelot came out with sliding drawers and all that stuff and he finally told the president of Kitchen Kompact, he says, "I stayed with you three longer than I should have because of Bob Erikson." He says, "I've got to quit." And we had plastic drawers. Mel Jazz and I made those commercials we ran where he stands on the drawers and stuff. I showed him how to do that when WTCN studios were at the Calhoun Beach Hotel. Mel Jazz . . . I never talked to anybody that liked him but they all watched his movies. He had the late night movie all the time. [Chuckles] He was corny. But he'd sell those cabinets.

DB: The Kitchen Kompact cabinets.

RE: Yes. The Kitchen Kompact cabinets. But Rudy and I are still good friends. I go out once a quarter with him to dinner. He really has been a good friend.

DB: That must have been a big business hit though when you lost Plywood Minnesota.

RE: Yes. We lost Plywood Minnesota. And then I hit seventy. I retired. My son took over the business and he's got Bertch Cabinets now, which . . . Rudy's still a big customer. He buys his Bertch premium cabinets. Rudy bought everything I sold if I was competitive. He wouldn't pay me more but he would be competitive. Like, he bought all of my Peerless faucets. That was another big line, even bigger line for me. Sold a lot of Peerless. Ton of Peerless faucets. I used to

get five, six thousand dollars a month commission from them. And then my son lost them. They merged with Delta. These companies like Home Depot and Wal-Mart and so forth, they don't buy from reps. And really the small towns are hurt by that. I mean you get all your business . . . take Willmar. I've got a good friend of mine lives in Willmar. The huge Wal-Mart store there. But all those little towns ten, fifteen miles away are hurting.

DB: And when you were starting out you were hitting all those little businesses in those small towns.

RE: Oh, yes. I sold the distributors that sold them.

DB: And now they're just gone.

RE: Now it's gone. My son's still doing well. I mean his business is good. He doesn't have Peerless faucets anymore but he's got another premium faucet line which isn't near as good but it's all right.

DB: Well, looking back on things and reflecting on your life. You started out and things were difficult. Your father died early. You had to take over. Be responsible. You had to go to war.

RE: Yes.

DB: But the war, I think, was a stepping-stone for you.

RE: Oh, really. Like you say. Getting shot was fortunate because during my lean years getting that disability helped me. You know, being able to make ends meet and the fact that I . . . and that being a first sergeant for about a year really gave me . . . that gave me a . . . I liked being in charge. Like my wife that I have now is a wonderful lady. I have been married to her . . . it will be twenty-eight years. She's got Alzheimers now. She's in the Minnesota Veterans Home. That's another benefit I got. She being the wife of a veteran can go to the Minnesota Veterans Home. Wonderful place to be. There were some criticisms about some parts of it in the paper but it is making mountains out of molehills in some cases. Because the nurse who calls on her who calls on nothing but nursing homes says that it's one of the best she calls on. So she's getting good care.

DB: So another benefit of your military service.

RE: Military experience. I never would have gone to college if it hadn't been for that. The training that I got. The experiences that I have. Like everybody else I've had some bad luck in my life but I've had a ton of good luck.

DB: You told me one time that when you got shot in the chest it missed your heart by a fraction of an inch.

RE: Yes. About a half an inch, I'd say. If it went straight it would have killed me but it went at an angle.

DB: But you said one of the good benefits of getting shot in the chest and losing part of your lung is it made you quit smoking.

RE: Oh, yes. That's right. I haven't smoked ever since the war. See the price of cigarettes today and tell of all the things that are happening to people because of smoking. Here I am eighty-six years old. My blood pressure . . . the last time I took it was 136 over 70. My cholesterol is 180. I got married twenty-eight years ago and I can still wear my wedding suit. I wear a thirty-six inch waist. In the service I was thirty-two, thirty-three. Now I'm thirty-six thirty-two.

DB: Doing pretty good.

RE: Yes. I'm doing pretty good. I try to keep myself at a hundred and eighty. If I gain a little all I have to do is cut back. So I'm in really good health. I walk two miles, five, six days a week.

DB: So I think we can say on many, many counts you're a real Minnesota success story.

RE: I would say so. Yes. When you think . . . coming out of a welfare family, and I can remember the Salvation Army bringing us Christmas dinner. The one I remember vividly was a capon and my mother used to be able to caponize when I was a little kid. And I just remember that distinctly. Having a capon. And so I am . . . on the Circle of Grace with the Salvation Army. Now I moved into this senior citizen apartment. I'm on the resident council and I'm chairman of the activities committee and I'm co-treasurer. The other treasurer and I raised about . . . I think it was about eight thousand dollars for the flood relief in New Orleans, in the south. Hurricane relief, I mean. So I keep active and I'm adjutant of the Military Order of the Purple Heart and I was secretary-treasurer of the 82nd Airborne Division Association Viking Chapter for eighteen years. So I can't sit here and look out the window.

DB: No.

RE: My wife . . . my second wife, is a wonderful lady who liked to travel. So did I. We went on twenty-three cruises. I've been in seventy countries. So my life has really been pretty good.

DB: Very full life. Well, Bob, thank you very much. It's been a great story.

RE: I enjoyed talking to you. You know me. I'm a good salesman. [Laughing]

DB: I know. Thank you very much.