Courtney Haines: This begins an interview with Mr. Edward J. Leonard on October 10, 2008, with Courtney Haines …

Abraham Peguero: … Abraham Peguero …

Carolyn Paznak: … Carolyn Paznak …

Jessie Doyle: … Jessie Doyle …

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: … And Sandra Stewart Holyoak. Thank you so much, Mr. Leonard, for having us here in Pompton Plains.

CH: We are going to begin with some early background information.

SH: Could you tell us where and when you were born?

Edward J. Leonard: Tell me [again].

SH: Where and when you were born?

EL: Yes, I was born August 10, 1919, in Jersey City, and I believe I was born at home which was common in those days.

CH: What is your religious background?

EL: I was a very, very religious Catholic boy, in spite of my wild boyhood, and, if anybody stole anything, I wouldn't partake of the loot. That was the only rule I had, I guess, but, at any rate, I was Catholic and my father was a devout Catholic.

CH: When and where were your parents born?

EL: They're both born in New York City.

CH: What is your ethnic background?

EL: My father was Irish and my mother was German, if you want to go back, but they were both born in the States, and my grandfather came from Ireland. My grandfather on the other side came from Germany, and my two grandmothers were born here.

CH: When your grandparents came over, where did they settle?

EL: In the city, New York City.

CH: Did you have any brothers or sisters while you were growing up?

EL: Yes, I had two brothers and two sisters.
CH: How was your relationship with them?

EL: [laughter] Well, let's see, now, ... I'm proud of my family and where I grew up. My mother was very devoted. My father lived for the family and for my mother, and I had two brothers and two sisters and we were very lovey-dovey, always, a lot of hugging and kissing. [laughter]

SH: Were you older or younger?

EL: I was the youngest, and my sister, Margaret, who was the oldest, just died recently, several years ago, in Edison, or down that way. Her two grandsons went to Rutgers.

SH: Did they?

EL: Her marriage name was McGhee and Jack and Jimmy McGhee got law degrees in Rutgers and just passed their state [bar] exam. I'm very proud of them.

CH: That is what I want to do, [laughter] eventually, hopefully.

EL: It's not easy.

CH: No, it is not. What was your father's occupation?

EL: My father was; my grandfather owned a harness business. He had a shop with seven or eight men making harness for big companies that had fifty or a hundred horses. Everything was horse when I was a little boy, and my grandfather had this shop and my father managed it. As far as I know, they had seven men making harness and my father would go out and measure the horses. You had to measure their necks and their backs, and so on, and get everything right. So, that's what my father did.

CH: Did you eventually take over that business?

EL: No. My father really didn't like horses or the business, and, when he got married, he left my grandfather's employ and became a truckman. He started with one truck and, eventually, had seven trucks and six drivers and he was doing fantastically well when I was just a little nipper. ... One of his drivers killed a woman with a truck and my father lost everything and it took him a long while to get started again, with one truck and himself, but he couldn't have it in his own name, because he still was under judgment from that terrible accident. So, that was very difficult for my father, who was a good businessman, and I guess insurance was not very prominent [in] those days, but, at any rate, my father continued to be a truckman all his life.

CH: Was that period of time a struggle for your family?

EL: Yes. We went through the [Great] Depression. Well, my father had no business and he took any job he could get and we had holes in our shoes. My mother would cut innersoles out of cardboard [laughter] and we ate a lot of beans, but we ate well. My mother and father were so
devoted, they made sure we ate well all through the Depression. I never remember being hungry or anything like that. I feel a little emotional about those days, but my mother and father, to me, were a couple of saints. …

SH: Do you know how your mother and father met?

EL: Yes. In New York City, there was a German district and close by was an Irish district. [laughter] They met at a dance. My father says my mother was sitting there, very demurely, and he asked her to dance, and then, … they kept company for about five or six years before they married. [laughter] My father was speaking German, to a small extent, [laughter] by the time they got married, but that's the story.

SH: That is a great story.

CH: That is. My grandma lived in that Irish district in New York City. What was your mother's occupation? Did she stay at home?

EL: We kids laughed about this a lot, but my mother tells us she worked with ostrich feathers. It was an industry. They used the feathers to decorate hats, mostly, but also some dresses. My mother was an expert with them and that's what she did before she got married, but my father was very proper and, as soon as they got married, my mother stopped working. My father, I remember, they talked [about how] they had a horse named Jake and a carriage, and the horse used to run away at times. My father hated him. He couldn't wait to get to the motors and the trucks and the cars. [laughter]

CH: Do you remember when that was, when you started using cars, when your family got your first automobile?

EL: Yes, 1924. When I was growing up and small, there were horses that delivered groceries to the corner store, there were milk wagons, all pulled by horses. They swept the streets with a broom that was pulled by a horse. … First of all, everything was horse, and the garbage men had teams of mules, pulled the big garbage truck. So, that was funny, for the street cleaners to do [it] with all the horses in the street, and some women would pick it [horse manure] up and put it in their gardens for fertilizer but, at any rate, that was my earliest impressions on the street. There were some beautiful workhorses [in] those days, and I was fascinated with [them].

SH: How far did you live from the business that your father had? Was it a distance or was it right there where your home was?

EL: Well, my father always worked in New York City, although we lived in Jersey City. So, he had his trucks in a garage in New York City. It wasn't until I was a teenager, or almost a teenager, at times, I would go with him. [At] that time, he had only one truck, but he always kept it in a garage and he'd go there in the morning, get up at four o'clock in the morning.

SH: Was he delivering anything? Was there a certain thing he delivered?
EL: … He eventually had what they call an ICC permit, [an Interstate Commerce Commission permit, which permitted truckers to carry commodities over state lines], and he was very professional and kept a lot of records. That was required and he had rate tables that he had to use, and he went all over the Metropolitan area, as far as South Jersey and Long Island and New York City.

SH: Did he ever talk about Prohibition?

EL: No, but my father claimed he [only] had one drink in his life. He was delivering beer, he said, and they talked him into having a few beers and he got tipsy and he threw up and he was an anti-alcoholic ever since. … No, he never drank a drop. He never smoked; caught me with a cigarette when I was sixteen and he just looked at me and he said, "I thought you had more sense." [laughter] Yes, I was crushed, but he never smoked, he never drank. He went to Mass. Every Sunday, he took up the collection and he delivered food to the poor, a marvelous man, and most loyal to my mother.

CH: Where did you attend elementary school?

EL: I went to PS 25 [now the Nicolaus Copernicus School/Public School 25], in Jersey City.

CH: Was that far from your house? Did you have to walk?

EL: No, that was on the Boulevard [Hudson County Boulevard, now John F. Kennedy Boulevard] and Griffith Street, and I lived up Griffith Street, about a block from the school, in the coldwater flats, [apartments without hot running water and other modern conveniences], at the time I was going there, and out of everything you asked me, I think of a story.

SH: That is good.

EL: The teachers, in grade school, they would say, "You don't belong in here," and they'd skip me to the next class, [laughter] and so, when I was eleven, I was graduating from grammar school.

SH: Wow.

EL: They skipped me three times, and then, when I was fifteen, I graduated from high school. I went to [William L.] Dickinson [High School].

AP: I went to Dickinson, too. I am glad you are from Dickinson.

EL: Hey, great school; I'll bet it's still great.

AP: Did you do the industrial program they had back then?

EL: Did I what?
AP: Did you do the industrial program they had back then?

EL: I can't make it [out].

SH: He wants to know if you did the industrial program.

EL: No. … My father worked very hard and he wanted all the kids to be in the office. That was his simple viewpoint. So, he talked us into studying commercial subjects, like typing, bookkeeping, and some general subjects, of course, like algebra and the like, but that's the course I had, it was the commercial course. It involved typing, accounting, but there were other parts, like history, and so on.

CH: What did you enjoy the most?

EL: … My recollection of high school was that, in some respects, I felt like a midget. I was the smallest guy in the class, always, and I don't think it was a very good idea that the teachers made me skip like that, and there are probably some things that I missed that would have had an effect, to some degree, but, at any rate, high school, to me, was a thing to get finished, get a job, get a car. [laughter]

SH: What year did you graduate from Dickinson?

EL: 1936, in June.

SH: 1936?

EL: Yes.

SH: Wow. Was that the same school that your sisters and brothers went to as well?

EL: Yes, I believe they all went to Dickinson.

SH: What were your plans when you got out of high school in 1936?

EL: [laughter] Well, you know, having gone through the Depression, the thing was, the feeling was, among people in my status, was to get a job with a big company and get some security and steady income. So, my first job was anything but. I worked as a printer's devil, [an apprentice in a printing establishment], setting type in a small print shop, making pads. We would print, hand print, these things. The press, you had to feed the sheets by hand, and then, we would count them and make pads of fifty or a hundred. … Also, we printed on the back of wallpaper, describing the product, and then, they made books out of those and sold them to merchants, but that was for the grand sum of twelve dollars a week.

SH: [laughter] In 1936, that was not bad, though, was it?
EL: Oh, it's better than nothing, let's put it that way, [laughter] and I paid, I remember paying, six cents for Social Security.

SH: Did you really? [laughter]

EL: Yes, and unemployment insurance, I paid that, it was pennies, and I learned a lot. … I liked to work with my hands and I learned things, like how to read upside down and backwards, and, also, when you ran the first copy, you would find it's light here and there. So, you put a sheet of onionskin over it and you would paste pieces of paper over the light parts, and then, you laid it on the bed and that would raise up your paper and make it a little higher, and those light spots would all come up then. That was called "make-ready," [referring to everything done on a press to prepare for the final print job], and I was fascinated with the whole thing, and it was the beginning of; wasn't really the beginning of work. I worked as a stable boy from the time I was seven until the time I was about fifteen.

SH: After school?

EL: After school. At night, I fed the horses, and then, I came back later and watered them, a couple of hours after they ate, and, sometimes, I'd grease wagons, for a quarter, but I loved the whole thing.

AP: Where did they keep the horses in Jersey City?

EL: There were stables all over the city, in the city, and this one was set back maybe a hundred feet, cobblestone driveway. This two-story building had four stalls, and the boss put one on the floor for a fifth horse, and we had five horses and the hayloft held the hay and the oats and the straw.

SH: What street was this on? Do you remember?

EL: Yes, it was Griffith Street.

SH: Okay.

EL: Yes.

SH: What were the horses being used for that you were feeding?

EL: That, he was a huckster, a peddler, if you will, … but he was kind of on a grand scale. He had regular customers. He had a lot of German women. Of course, he himself was of German descent, but … he wasn't a German immigrant. He was a big, bluff guy and he kind of adopted me.

SH: [laughter] What was his name?
EL: Fred Mauss, but I always called him "the Boss," and he called me "the Boss." So, this was kind of a silly thing, but that's how I grew up, and he would send me for a can of buttermilk for him at the grocery store and he'd give me ten cents for that, but he'd put it in the bank for me.

SH: Really?

EL: Yes, and, when I graduated high school, he and his wife said they would help me go to college, but I was this, you know, wise guy. I was a smart alec, and I wanted to get a job and a car, and, of course, I said, "No," but I wish I had gone. I felt that was something I should have had and I didn't, but, where you guys spent maybe four or five years in college, I spent five years in the Army and I traveled all over the world and I learned a great deal.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: [laughter] Okay, two more have joined us.

Michael Leonard: Mike Leonard.

Leslie Leonard: And Leslie Leonard.

SH: Great, please, continue.

CH: What were your brothers and sisters doing at this time, while you were graduating high school and starting work? What were their plans?

EL: My brother was helping my father. … They were driving two trucks at that time, I think, and my sister, Margaret, trying to remember, she had some kind of a clerical job. Oh, she worked, eventually, for the Civil Service. She was a stenographer, and a very good one, and she could type well, and, at any rate, my sister, Pauline, worked in a pharmacist's store, in a drugstore. Charlie, what did Charlie do? I don't remember. At that time, Charlie played a lot of baseball with local teams. He was the athlete of the family, more or less. He played soccer and baseball. He was a catcher.

CH: Did you enjoy any sports growing up? Were you involved in any?

EL: Not really. I got interested in gymnastics, but, [laughter] … as it was, I was too young to really embrace anything when I went through high school.

SH: Before we started the recording, you were telling us about having lots of fun being gone from morning until night. Do you want to elaborate on that?

EL: Yes, well, … there were a lot of Italian boys in the neighborhood. They were adventurous, and I was even more adventurous than they were, and then, there was a boy who was a little older. He was maybe fourteen, but he was like a "Fagin," [a reference to a Dickens character who runs a pickpocket ring]. He knew how to get around everything, but also knew how to swipe things, which I didn't approve of, but, for the excitement, I couldn't resist it. So, I ran with
this pack, more or less. … George would run after the trolley car and pull the rope pulley down and take it off its track with the electrical contact, and then, the trolley car would stop. … Then, all us little nippers would run up and get in strategic places around the trolley car, and the conductor would come back, cussing, "Get out," put the pulley back up and he'd get in. While he was walking to the front of the trolley car, we would all run up and get on the back of it, [laughter] and the other thing you could do to stop a trolley car was, they had a cowcatcher in the back and in the front. It was a system of slats that would fasten together, and they would drop them down if they thought they were going to run over some object and that would, like, sweep them off the track, and you could kick that cowcatcher loose. … He'd get an alarm and he'd have to come back, pull the lever and get it back up. So, that would stop the trolley car, too, but George taught us how to play pool, he taught us how to get on subway trains without paying and the elevated trains, we climbed up the outside and over the fence onto the platform to avoid the pay booth. …

SH: This was all in Jersey City. There was an elevated train.

EL: No, this is in New York City.

SH: Oh, my word.

EL: Because we went afar; we'd get on a train in Journal Square, [in Jersey City], after getting off the trolley, and we'd get off there. George would show us how to go between the cars to the next platform, and that would take you uptown, or wherever, and he was our leader, but he was very, very laid back. He wasn't pushy, he wasn't hardly saying anything, and, once in awhile, he'd say, "I'm not a fighter," and then, he'd smile. He had no front teeth, [laughter] but, once, on a platform, there was a dice game going, and I had a few quarters. I wanted to get in it, and he whispered to me that, "They'll switch the dice after you win a couple of times." So, I didn't care, I got in it. I won a couple of times. I picked up my money, I said, "Let's go." [laughter] So, we ran off and got on the next train, but that was how I grew up and he showed us. I mean, on the street in New York City, traffic was almost as bad as it is now and, all the time, there'll be taxi cabs they called Phaetons, [referring to a sedan-style car body]. They had a shed [a cowl-type convertible roof] in the back that would come down. … It was like a half shed, but they never had them down, they always had them up, but there was a hinge on the side and you could hold that hinge and stand on their back bumper. So, we rode them and we'd jump off when we came to a red light, and then, jump on again when it turned green, and it was a wild thing. … We went swimming off the docks in Weehawken, and the docks were on the other side of a railroad yard, and, occasionally, we would hitch a freight in the railroad yard. They were moving slow and we could hitch anything. [laughter] They were a piece of cake, compared to the busses and the taxis but, at these docks, there was a big tank of molasses. That was their business. There were barges that hauled the molasses. They had to pump it inside. So, it was all over, and we kids used to smear it on ourselves, [laughter] and then, dive in the water, [laughter] and some of the braver ones [would] go up on the piles, on the end of the dock, and dive off them. …

SH: You knew how to swim.
EL: Oh, yes, I could swim. My father and mother couldn't swim, but they took us swimming every week, without exception, and even some nights in the summer, they would take us up to Stony Point. It was a beach on the Hudson and we'd swim there. They would turn the headlights on in the car. We all swam like fishes. I couldn't understand how my mother and father couldn't swim, but they never learned, no. [laughter]

ML: How did you learn?

EL: I remember, as a very little boy, my mother gave me what they called water wings. You put them … across your chest and they come out here and were like two balloons, but it was made out of cloth and I started with them, but I gave them up early and I could swim from childhood on.

ML: They also taught you in high school or middle school, didn't they? Didn't they also teach you to swim in middle school?

EL: Oh, yes. In grammar school, we had a swimming pool, but I could already swim from swimming in "the Hacky." The Hackensack River was, you know, [on] the other side, and that was an excursion, too. We had to go through railroad yards to get to the Meadows, to get to the Hackensack River, and the railroad detectives would chase us, and just on the other side of the rail tracks was a beautiful, crystal-clear pond, and we couldn't resist the temptation. We all skinny-dipped in that one day, and, while we're in there, the railroad detectives came. … They grabbed our clothes and we're running and they're hitting us on the fanny with the sticks, and we were screaming so that they would stop. … It worked and they'd stopped hitting us but we found out later that [the reason why] the pond was so crystal clear was because it was polluted, you know, with some kind of chemicals, and the Hackensack River was terrible. It was like a sewer, but we used to go crabbing there. First, we would catch "killies" [killfish], string them on a wire, and then we'd get the crabs to fasten on to them. We'd pull them up near the surface and scoop them up with a net, and the Italian boys' mothers used to cook them and they'd bring them out to us. It was very exciting. The Italian boys were shooting songbirds. They said they did that, the Italians did that, in Italy, and their mother would cook them. Some of these birds were just one mouthful but I had to say, they were delicious, see. [laughter] You ate the bones and everything.

SH: Really?

EL: I mean, they were so tiny, and, … later on, I became such an avid animal lover but, at that time, we just couldn't do anything wrong. …

CH: Did you hang out with the same group of friends pretty much?

EL: Yes. We kind of grew up from, I would say, … eight or nine until twelve and thirteen, and then, of course, it started to break up. Everybody had something else they had to do, but there were the Parenti boys, there were [the] LaRusso's, the Papagno's, and, of course, this Leonard boy was in the middle of them. [laughter] …

SH: What was George's last name?
EL: Velacheik. Don't ask me to spell it, but that's how he said it, [laughter] George Velacheik. The last I heard of him, he took a job as a longshoreman, [one who loads and unloads ships' cargo], joined the union. … That was very corrupt and it suited him [laughter] but George was a guy who wasn't mean-spirited at all, you know, in a sense, a nice guy, but he [was] totally without honesty, and he was leading us into all these different things.

SH: Were you all in school together, this gang of boys?

EL: I think I was ahead of most of the Italian boys, but I did gain new friends, I became close friends with a family of Cussanelli's that lived in a different area, and, as a teenager, I kind of hung with them. … You know, we did so many crazy things, and, eventually, like, Michael LaRusso, and his brother, Matthew, opened a restaurant in Union City, and so on, and Parenti, Albert Parenti, was very capable mentally, but the police used to stop at his house a lot. He and his brother were always in trouble, but he became an engineer … in the commercial ships and he became a high-ranking union officer in the Merchant Marine. So, they all did well.

SH: How did the [Great] Depression affect their families?

EL: Well, surprisingly, like, my father seemed to do well with the trucking business, but we lived in a coldwater flat. We had the first telephone, we had the first automobile, my mother had a washing machine, and this was all big news in the neighborhood, but the LaRussos had their own house and their little candy store. The Parentis had their own house and a tenant. So, they weren't bereft or anything and they survived very well. Peter Papagno's father had a shoe repairing shop, and some of them worked.

SH: What about the New Deal programs that Roosevelt instituted? [Editor's Note: In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt set into motion a combination of programs that were collectively called the New Deal, providing economic relief, reform and recovery for the country.]

EL: When my father was really down, he worked on a project like that, where they were doing work for the city or the state.

SH: Like the WPA? [Editor's Note: The Works Progress Administration, established in 1935, employed people in a wide variety of programs, including highway and building construction, slum clearance, reforestation and rural rehabilitation.]

EL: WPA, that's what [it was], yes, and I remember, he had a job working in the Ford Motor Company and it was so strenuous, he was rubbing [car] bodies, and he'd come home so sore and tired and white. My mother was worried about him. She made him give it up, yes.

SH: What about your friends and yourself? Did you become part of the Conservation Corps? [Editor's Note: The Civilian Conservation Corps employed young men in conservation projects around the nation.]
EL: Yes. I had a job, eventually, for a company called the National Bag Corporation. I would type their bills and help them with the payroll, and that paid sixteen dollars a week. It was in Jersey City, and I remember, once, I had a chance for an interview, New York & Insurance Company, and this was my idea, big company, security, the Depression, all [that]. So, I took off without telling my boss, didn't show up. So, when I came in the next day, he asked me, "What happened?" I couldn't, still couldn't, tell a lie. So, I told him exactly what happened and he said, "You're fired." [laughter] So, I went home, told my mother. She told my father. My father just shook his head, like that, [in disapproval]. The next day, he got on the phone, talked to my boss, and he said, "He's young, he's inexperienced, he made a mistake. Give him another chance, you won't be sorry." So, I had my job back. [laughter] I don't know if I was happy or sad, because I didn't like being a typist but, from there, I left them and signed up in the CCCs, and the excitement was going away to Montana. Oh, God, I was in heaven.

SH: Were you?

EL: Yes. I mean, I was going West, for one thing. I was going to travel. I hoped I was going to a lumber camp. Lumberjacks were very exciting people, and, instead of that, we went to what was called a Bureau of Reclamation camp. [Editor's Note: Established in 1902, the Bureau of Reclamation constructed dams, power plants, canals and other projects in seventeen Western States, which promoted homesteading and economic development in the West.] We were building canals for irrigation but traveling through the States and seeing the Plains and [riding] on a train, that was very exciting for me.

SH: How many of you were traveling together to Montana?

EL: I'd say it was maybe, you know, a hundred or so.

SH: Really?

EL: I can't remember.

SH: Were there any boys that you knew?

EL: Yes. [laughter] On the train, I met a boy from my gang on Carlton Avenue that I hung with, the Cussanelli Boys, but this boy's name was Harry Winfield, and he was on the same train. We wound up in the same company in Montana.

SH: Which part of Montana were you in?

EL: We were about fifty miles south of Great Falls. It was on the prairie. It was a little town of three hundred. I think the name was Augusta, [between Great Falls and Choteau, near Freezeout Lake], but it was four miles from the camp. It was September and it was snowing already up there, and, that winter, it dropped to thirty-three below [zero]. They used to take us to town, once in awhile, for recreation, and drop us off. Then, we had to walk back the four miles. [laughter] I remember how cold it was on those [walks].
SH: I bet.

EL: Yes.

CH: How did the people differ out there? How were they different from back home?

EL: Well, we didn't get to mingle much with them, we went to dances, sometimes, but, mostly, young men, in that time and stage, had a kind of instinct to go carousing, rather than visiting. … The surgeon in camp said, we all had colds at one time, and he'd say, "Stop buying that Monahan Whiskey and buy orange juice when you're in town, you wouldn't have these colds," but that's the kind of things [we did]. We went to town, we drank, everybody smoked at that time. I smoked a pipe.

SH: How old were you then? What year would this have been, about?

EL: I turned twenty while I was in camp. I went away, I was nineteen, and I turned twenty [in] the first six months I was there, and then, I signed over for another six months.

SH: Did you?

EL: Yes. They seemed to think I had some talent and they put me inside; there were barracks of forty-five men.

CH: What made you decide to go into the military?

EL: Military?

SH: She is talking about the CCC.

CH: Yes.

SH: What was your decision based on?

EL: Well, you know, it was a quasi-military organization, really.

SH: Explain to them how it ran. [laughter]

EL: The CCCs was run along Army lines. You had a captain, a first sergeant and sergeants. I was a barracks leader, I was a corporal, but some of the barracks leaders were sergeants, and there was a difference in pay structure, the higher your rank. …

SH: Did they provide your clothing?

EL: Oh, yes, they gave us a uniform, which was an Army uniform, and everybody had their pants altered, so [that] they would flare on the bottom. That was stylish, [laughter] and the company tailor would do that for fifty cents. [laughter]
SH: You are not shocked at today's styles then.

EL: No. It was like sailors' flared pants. ... We had to have that and they gave us all Army uniforms, underwear, socks. The winter underwear came in handy there. It was thirty-three below one day. ...

SH: What was your job with the CCC?

EL: Well, I started out with the construction crew. I'd gained a lot of weight and strength and, after a couple of weeks, they put me in charge of the barracks, and then, they gave me a job as the Army truck driver. The camp had what they called the Army section, which was the noncoms and the officers, and then, there was the Bureau of Reclamation part, which were the Skrogs, [laughter] guys with the picks and shovels. ... The previous truck driver, the Army truck driver, ... we used to send off rolls of film to the film company, with a quarter in the package, and they would send you back the pictures, and this truck driver, his name was Jimmy Fox, he was taking the quarters and throwing the film in the garbage dump, because that was another thing you had to do [as Army truck driver]. You had to dump the garbage. So, when they caught him, they sent him home, and then, they gave me his job. [laughter] So, besides being a barracks leader, I was the Army truck driver. I had to go to Missoula, Montana, a couple of times, and, one time, it was very sad. One of the men was busy at the gas tanks. They were gassing up the trucks, and this flatbed truck backed up into him and crushed him against a gas tank. They carried him off to the medical quarters and this surgeon decided he was going to be okay, but he died within a half-hour or so. He had punctured ribs and his heart was punctured, also. I was ready to go to Missoula, at the time, for truck overhaul. It was a long trip. I had to cross the Rockies. I loved it. ...

SH: I hope this was not in the wintertime.

EL: No, it wasn't. ... I took off without saying good-bye to anybody, because I was ready to leave when this accident happened. After I learned that he had died, I was pretty shook up about it, but I got in the truck and I drove off, and the First Sergeant was very mad at me. They wanted me to take his body to Missoula, for an autopsy, but I was gone. So, they had to take him in the back of a car, to put him in the trunk of a car, and I went on my way to Missoula, and I liked that town. It was a beautiful college town, lovely, and there were forest fires at night in all the woods around. ... I used to go out in the woods and sit there and just drink it all in, you know. [laughter] ... The only wild thing I ever saw was an owl, but I was expecting to see bears, [laughter] ... but I loved it, and that was what I really wanted and expected to see in Montana.

SH: Did you get to go anywhere else out in the West while you were there?

EL: No. We occasionally went to a tournament. I took up archery, because all the sergeants were shooting the bow, and they got me into it. They took me into their group and we used to shoot at tournaments.

SH: Where were the tournaments held?
EL: They were; I'm trying to remember the names of the towns. Names are difficult for me.

SH: That is okay. I think you are doing really well. [laughter]

EL: But, they would usually be at one of the bigger towns and they would set up a range, and our target shooting was so much different than most people realize. You shoot long distances, and the arc is like that, and you have a point of aim out there and you aim at that with your bow. Of course, you're looking down, like this, and then, if you fell short, you'd go out and move the point of aim out, but I found it interesting, and I shot the bow, offhand, like, when I took hikes in the prairie. We'd shoot at the prairie dogs and stuff like that, but there was a river, the Sun River, that ran right past the camp, and there was a pump alongside the river that pumped the water up to our water tank. … There were trout in the river, not many, … and so, some of the officers used to go fly fishing, and I used to just hike.

CH: Did you get to go swimming out there?

EL: No. … The river was very shallow, really, … at that place and at that time, but it was part of the irrigation system.

ML: Didn't you also run into a porcupine?

EL: Oh, God. [laughter]

ML: Or at least the remnants of one?

EL: One of the officers had beautiful dogs, cocker spaniels and the like, and I loved dogs and I'd take them … with me on a hike and they would chase these jackrabbits, and the jackrabbits would just laugh at them. They would run away from them. When they got far enough ahead, they'd stop and they'd look back, like that, and the dogs would keep on running. Finally, the dogs would come back with their tongues out [laughter] but, one day, they caught a porcupine by the river before I could get to them and they had quills all over the outside of their mouth, on their tongues, oh, and I was aghast. I had to bring them back to this officer, and he was the education officer, and I felt like I couldn't bring them back like that. So, I was doing things like tying them up with a neckerchief, and then, holding their muzzles and pulling them out with my teeth, sometimes, and the ones in their tongues were difficult. … They were bleeding and, eventually, I got them all out.

SH: Unbelievable. [laughter]

EL: Oh, it was really something, the three of them with these sprays of needles on them.

CH: What did they say when you brought them back?
EL: [laughter] The officer who owned them was very understanding. He said, "Oh, those things happen," you know, sort of like that. He just brushed it off, but, to me, it was such a big event. I couldn't bring them back like that.

SH: Did you have horses at the CCC camp?

EL: No, but there was a ranch close by and I got to ride. They had a couple of mustangs and they had sheep, and this old rancher … had cattle. He had a haystack close to the house, and the cattle would eat around it, and he had milk cows and he'd send the old dog out to get them and he'd bring them back, nice and quiet. So, the one time I was there, he sent the young dog out, [laughter] was a disaster. He thought the young dog was ready for it, but he brought them back at a wild gallop. [laughter] Where did you grow up, in Arizona?

SH: Wyoming.

EL: Wyoming. So, you know what I'm talking about. Yes, he was really mad at that young dog, and, of course, he had to start training all over again, but that was a nice interlude, going up to that ranch. There was a young girl there, she was a college student, I think, but she had a crush on our company clerk, John Handago, his name was. He was from Nutley, I think. At any rate, we were always welcome there, John and I, because she had this crush on John. [laughter]

SH: Was that what started your interest in the Army?

EL: Well, … I knew what was going on overseas. I was interested in the news, always, and I read accounts in news periodicals and I knew what was happening, and I knew, I was sure, that we were going to be in it, and, also, they started a draft and I didn't want to be drafted. That was something I wanted to avoid. I heard about this cavalry unit that was going to be federalized, [called up to serve in the active US Army]. It was in Westfield, [New Jersey].

SH: Before we get to that, had you already come back from Montana when you knew about this?

EL: Yes. I came back from Montana and I was, let's see, … twenty years old and some, and I never did get a job between that and the Army, I don't think, but I enjoyed that period, because I was into horses very much and I rode at riding academies. … Eventually, I got all my friends to buy boots and go with me, and I taught them to ride bareback. … We all became proficient, and then, I would take my dates with me, for a dollar an hour. [laughter]

ML: That's what you paid them to go on a date with you?

EL: [laughter] Some of my dates had to buy boots, too, because they didn't have [any], but I enjoyed that period very much. I was hanging with this crowd, the Cussanelli boys. We used to sing a lot, the popular songs.

SH: Did you?
EL: And we used to go to dances. They had what they called "quarter rackets," and, for a quarter, you could go to the dance. Sometimes, there was live music, sometimes, it was piped, a phonograph, but it was great. It was a chance [to socialize]. You could take a date or you could go and meet somebody there, and we danced all night. ... It was an event and it wasn't any sit-around thing. Everybody was on the floor all the time and you soon got to know who were the good dancers and who weren't.

SH: Were you a good dancer?

EL: [laughter] You see, you make me say things I'm not to supposed to say. [laughter]

LL: I've seen him dance.

EL: ... I won a contest once. ... I didn't like jitterbug; I liked the smooth dancing. We did a thing called the "Montclair hop," which was very smooth and there were a lot of turns. At any rate, I could do the jitterbug stuff, too, and I could do the shag. In this contest, you had to do all those things, and we won the prize, which was four dollars. Yes, we spilt that, my date and I. Her name was Marge Villani and she was an excellent dancer. She taught me how to do the shag just the week before, [laughter] and I danced with her a lot.

ML: At this same time, Frank Sinatra was an up-and-coming star.

EL: Oh, yes. You could buy a beer for fifteen cents at an upscale place. So, we'd go to Rustic Cabin [in Englewood, New Jersey], on a Sunday. The Cussanelli boys had a car and we'd go there and we'd buy these fifteen-cent beers, and the band would be rehearsing for the night crowd which were the real paying customers, and we were buying beers for fifteen cents and sitting at the table and dancing. So, one time, we go to the Rustic Cabin, there's Frank Sinatra, singing with the band, and one of our guys, Celestino Mongilo, he knew Frank Sinatra. He had gone to school with him in Journal Square, a business school. He brought us all up and he introduced us, shaking hands with Frank. He wasn't that famous, you know, but he was starting to take off, but it was later on, I used to reminisce about that, you know, "When Frankie was just ..." beginning.

SH: Frank and me. [laughter].

EL: And, later on, when I was a telephone man, I put a phone in his mother and father's house. They had this big, life-sized picture of him. This was in Hoboken. It was on the bottom landing. I had to put the phone upstairs. It was for one of their tenants, really, but it was the Sinatra house. It was pretty nice, but I have a lot of memories.

CH: Wow. How old would you say Frank Sinatra was when you met him?

EL: I would say, at the time, ... let's see, we were, you know, maybe nineteen and twenty, and he was probably twenty-one, maybe about the same age. He was just starting.

SH: Go back to your story of the federalized cavalry. You were telling us about how you got into the Army.
EL: Yes. Well, I read in the paper about this unit being federalized. So, I borrowed my father's car, which was a 1926 Cadillac, and this was in 1940, and I drove out to Westfield, it was a bitter night, and I signed up. ... I got an exam and they said I wasn't sick a day in my life to look at me and so on, and I signed up, but, then, there was a Jersey City group in Newark. In Westfield was Company C or Troop C, and Newark was Troop B and this Jersey City group had been in that troop before the war and, now, they were being federalized, and they heard about a Jersey City guy signing up in Westfield. So, they pulled strings and they asked me if I would transfer, and I said, "Sure." So, they got me transferred to Newark. So, I wound up in B Troop and, of course, we went away with the horses but ... I want to just show you a picture.

SH: Okay, I will put the tape on pause.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: All right, continue to talk to us and explain to all of us, this big crowd, if you will, after your enlistment and being transferred to Newark, describe where they kept the horses and what you did.

EL: ... Well, the Newark Armory was right in the middle of the city and we had a hundred horses or so in there, and we had to lead them to the railroad yards, load them on trains, and each man led two horses. That was exciting, because they were prancing and dancing, and then, eventually, we followed them.

SH: How soon after you signed up were you transporting them, because you are heading south, if I read this correctly?

EL: I probably signed up in late December and we went away on January 1st, I think.

SH: Really?

EL: Yes. [laughter]

SH: This was January 1, 1941.

EL: Yes.

SH: How soon after you loaded the horses did you leave? Did you take the same train?

EL: I can't remember. I know we went down on a train, but I don't remember specifically.

SH: Where were you heading?

EL: We were going to Columbia, South Carolina, which was also the site of Fort Jackson, big Army fort.
CH: That was where you had your basic training.

EL: Yes. We had basic training and … we schooled the horses. We had to get new horses and that kept us busy. The new horses always needed a lot of training.

SH: Why did you have to get new horses?

EL: Well, some of the horses we took with us weren't fit for real heavy duty. Some of them were rank. There was one that was kind of unmanageable. [laughter] My first sergeant thought very highly of my ability and he would assign me horses like this. He'd say, "Leonard can handle that horse," but, [at] any rate, we would get remounts and they had to be trained, and some of them were unbelievably poor but, still, [there were] some good horses in there.

SH: You were trained to drill on horseback.

EL: Well, not really drill, but reconnoiter, mostly. Of course, we'd drill, too. We marched in columns and we did a lot of maneuvers with the horses, but the primary mission was to reconnoiter, but, actually, a lot of it was on the road, in column. Sometimes, we called it "dust distance." You had to … try and be far enough back to not get the other horse unit's dust, and it was all very interesting to me. I was into horsemanship, riding, equitation; we rode with two reins but we only had one bit, snaffle bit, but the two reins was for formal riding. [Editor's Note: A snaffle bit is a piece of hardware that is placed in the horse's mouth that controls its movements via the reins.] You had a curved bit and a snaffle. So, they wanted us to hold the reins properly but that was old hat to me. I'd been horsing around since I was seven, so, I didn't have any trouble with that, and the First Sergeant, when he found out I had previous experience, he sent me down to the blacksmith shop, to help the blacksmith.

SH: You became a farrier, [a person who shoes horses].

EL: Yes. Instead of regular duty, I did that, and the regular blacksmith was a civilian who they, somehow, put him in uniform and brought him along with [them]. [laughter] We brought cooks along like that, too, and his name, the farrier, was Eddie Kerr, a little Irishman, and he was my mentor for a couple of weeks, and then, I was kind of able to just go ahead and do what I had to do. … He made me pull the shoes, cut the feet, level them, and then, he would fit the shoes, make shoes, and then, forge, if they needed it, and throw them to me and I would nail them on, and then, finish up, and I never gave it up. I came home, I managed to get tools and I did a little horseshoeing here and a little horseshoeing [there], and, first thing you know, I had a business on part-time, and then, my two sons, who loved horses, Robert and Kenneth, they came along to help me and they learned to put horseshoes [on] and they're still shoeing horses today.

SH: Are they really?

EL: Right, and it turned out to be a lucrative [business]. I told them, "This is almost as good as being a plumber." [laughter]

SH: How often would you replace the shoes?
EL: Well, five to seven weeks, depending on the horse. Some horses' feet didn't grow as much as others, some were more dainty and they didn't wear shoes [out] as much, but, generally speaking, we had a seven-week limit and, mostly, we scheduled them for five weeks. ... I would go down to the stable and bring one up, and then, we'd do him and I'd take them back, bring another one up, and we had to do 150 horses, eventually.

SH: That is a lot of work.

LL: You had lots of experience with the horses, but were there a number of other men there who had none?

EL: Other what?

LL: Other soldiers there who didn't have experience with the horses?

EL: Oh, yes, most of them.

LL: The rookies.

EL: The bulk of the troopers were new to horses and it was a scream, in the morning, when they'd saddle up and the horses would cut up and, sometimes, they'd get bucked off. ... There were about five or six of us that had worked with horses all our lives and we would laugh at them, and people would get kicked and go to the hospital.

CH: Did you find yourself teaching a lot of the newer guys how to manage the horses?

EL: Well, no. At the time, I was a PFC [private first class] and the non-coms [non-commissioned officers or NCOs] did the training, the corporals, sergeants, and the officers, but there was a lot of training going on and a lot of orientation, initially, ... but I loved every minute of it. On Sunday, they always worried about the horses seizing up over the weekend from not working. You're familiar with that, right? and so, we had to have an exercise detail on Sunday and I would always go on that, and that was a fun ride. Some young lieutenant would get out there and really give us a crazy ride. He would jump things and we would follow, and we rode one and we led one.

SH: That is hard.

EL: And the rule was, if you lost a horse, you bought a case of beer, [laughter] and he'd make us jump over ditches. So, one day, I was riding this nice horse, but I was leading a real jughead and I jumped this creek, small creek, and the led horse didn't jump. ... He pulled me out of the saddle and I had the reins in one hand and the rope in the other and I landed in the creek. So, the officer said, "That doesn't count, because you didn't lose your horse." [laughter] So, then, I get up on the led horse, bareback, and I said, "I'll make you jump," and so, I took him around and I was leading this saddle horse that I had been riding, leading him with the reins. So, I really put my heels into the jughead, ... the bareback horse, and he jumped over and the saddle horse
refused to jump, the one who I'd just jumped before, and, this time, I didn't come off, but the reins broke in my hand. The Lieutenant said he'd excuse me for that, too, because I didn't let go. So, then, I had trouble stopping this jughead I was on, because, after he jumped it …

SH: He has only got a halter.

EL: I just had a halter and a rope on the side, and it's nice talking to someone like you, because a lot of people wouldn't know what I'm talking about. [laughter] … I finally circled him and got him down, but he was a piece of work, you know, but we had a lot of fun like that. There were horses that would rear up and stand on their hind legs, and I would seek them out on Sunday and have fun with them. I was kind of crazy like that. I was riding a horse bareback, not bareback, but backwards, one time. I was sitting in the saddle backwards and laughing, and one of my so-called friends rode up and gave him a whack and made him take off at a wild gallop. I had a hard time, but I didn't go off, [laughter] but that's the kind of things we did and, to me, it was all good, every bit of it.

SH: How long was your enlistment for?

EL: Well, the initial enlistment, when we signed up, was for one year, and, on December 8th, you know, it would have been up January 1st, December 8th, Pearl Harbor.

SH: December 7th.

EL: 7th, yes, and I was in the theater in Alabama, with a date. I had gone to a movie and they came out, turned off the picture and told [us], "All you soldiers, go back to your barracks," and we had to do that. We got on busses and went back to the barracks. …

SH: Did they tell you why at that point?

EL: Oh, yes, they told us that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor and, oh, it's unbelievable, but, then, we knew we had to go and we all wanted to go, because that was the difference. There was nothing [to debate]. It was not a war of choice. There was no choice, and we also felt that the worst thing that could happen would be for Hitler and the Japanese to take over the world. So, we felt very gung ho about going to war.

SH: When you got back to Fort Jackson, what did they immediately have you do? Do you remember?

EL: Well, there was no excitement to speak of, but there was a lot of conjecture about what the unit was going to do, and the general opinion was that the horses were out. The warfare of that time and stage, horses wouldn't fit in. They knew enough about what was going on, from France and Germany and England, to know that the cavalry was not going to work. So, they mechanized us.
SH: Before we talk about that, I wanted to ask about the cadre that you had at Fort Jackson. How old were they and how much experience did they have before Pearl Harbor happened, when you first got down to Fort Jackson?

EL: Well, some of them had been National Guardsmen for many years. Some of them, when the war started, went home to their wives and families, but, of course, a lot of them stayed on, and so, they were very experienced, in the military sense, but not in a combat sense, of course. They knew all about rules and regulations and posting a guard. Posting a guard; one time, [laughter] I was supposed to be on guard, but I overstayed a pass and I stayed in town and I didn't know I was on guard. You're supposed to check the roster before you go out. So, my good buddy, Bob Dunn, was corporal of the guard and he knew that I was missing. So, he talked some soldier into taking my trick and standing guard for me, and then, he got a jeep and came into town and got me and he brought me back to camp. [laughter] I could hardly open my eyes at first, but, then, I knew I was in trouble but he kept the whole thing quiet. … Then, there was one soldier, he was on the guard detail and he's standing in the middle of the company street and he's bawling me out and going over all the things I did wrong in not showing up for guard, and, finally, I flattened him. [laughter] I mean, I didn't want to. [laughter] My hands had a mind of their own, really, they did. I really never wanted to hit him, you know, but that's what happens a lot of times. … It was automatic or spontaneous. …

SH: Did anything happen to your stripes?

EL: No, I didn't have any stripes at that time. I was still a PFC, and Bob Dunn had smoothed over the whole thing. So, I stood … the rest of my guard duty without incident. We used to sit on a horse on one post, it was a horse post, and you'd get that poor, sleepy horse up [at] maybe two o'clock in the morning, take him out, saddle him up and take him out to these posts and he'd be standing [asleep]. [laughter]

SH: Not helping at all.

EL: You're going to have to push him up and down on [the post]. [If] they had a longer post, they'd put you on horseback, but we did that, too, and then, we got converted to jeeps and they gave us a choice. If you wanted, you could transfer to a horse unit in Fort Bragg and be horse artillery, and some of the guys went, but I wanted to stay with my unit.

CH: What did they have you guys doing after they changed the unit?

EL: They'd bring us jeeps, half-tracks, which is wheels in the front, tracks in the back, armored vehicles, and, eventually, armored cars, M-8s. They had armor all around and a small cannon, but, initially, they came in dribs and drabs and it was the end of spring before we were really equipped. Equipment was very scarce starting out.

SH: You were still at Fort Jackson and they were bringing this materiel to you.

EL: Yes, and they shipped the horses out and they were bringing us jeeps. They had, towed behind, thirty-seven-millimeter cannon that you towed behind the jeep, and they gave me a
rating. The First Sergeant made me a gun commander. I had a crew of four men and a gun and we used to practice pulling it, jumping out, swinging it around and setting it up.

SH: All your training was done right there at Fort Jackson.

EL: Yes, all the basic training with the vehicles was there, and they made courses that you rode with the jeeps, over hills and bumps, and a lot of guys turned them over, got hurt, some of them pretty badly, and we found out there were some things you couldn't do with a jeep. [laughter]

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: We have one more horse story.

EL: … Some young officer knew the horses' tails were too long [laughter] and he had the men cut them off square like. Oh, this was a no-no, and so, Eddie Burkhart, an old horse lover, like me, and me, we got the job of pulling tails, to shorten them.

LL: I'm figuring they don't know what pulling tails is.

EL: When you pull tails, you take a comb and you get three or four hairs, the longest ones, and you yank them out, and most horses stand for that very nicely, but there was one crazy mare. I rode her once and, when we came back, her mouth was bleeding and my hands were bleeding. That's how crazy she was.

SH: Hard-mouthed.

EL: Her name was Evergreen, and this first sergeant, I think he was a little vindictive. He used to assign me horses like this but, at any rate, her tail was long. So, I said to Eddie Burkhart, I said, "Oh, we can't pull her tail. She'd never stand for it." He says, "I've got a way. It's foolproof." So, he got three bales of hay and put them in back of the horse. Then, we lift the tail over the bails of hay. I thought, "This is great." Eddie's laughing and I take the first set and I pull the hairs out, and then, I see two feet, two horseshoes, right over the top of the bales of hay. She missed us and I said, "That's it. Evergreen's tail stays long." Oh, we had a lot of fun with the horses. I loved every minute of it.

CH: Did you miss that when you had to switch over to vehicles?

EL: Oh, yes. We were pretty busy, though. We didn't have much time to reminisce. We were always doing something there, maneuvers, whatever.

SH: After your initial and basic training with the jeeps, where did they send you?

EL: To Jersey City.

SH: You did not go on any kind of maneuvers down there?
EL: Oh, we had maneuvers. I remember them only vaguely. I do remember another horse story. We were on what they called a pistol range. It had targets along this course and we carried .45s, instead of sabers, and the idea was to gallop past these targets and shoot each one as you came to it. So, I got through that okay and I was watching the other guys, and poor Jack (Ames?), … he worked on Wall Street, [laughter] and his horse ran away with him immediately. … [The] first time he fired the gun, the horse bolted and he took the other hand to grab the reins, to pull him in. He shot the horse in the neck. [laughter] The bullet went right through his neck and came out the other side, not through the spinal part, but along through the muscle and out here. The next day, we had to swim the Pee Dee River. The First Sergeant, Dupree, said, "Hey, Leonard, you can ride that jughead," [laughter] and he made me ride the horse. I said, "He's got a hole in his neck; he'll drown," [laughter] but I took him across and, you know, he couldn't swim well enough to carry me. I had to get off alongside him, and a lot of us did, but they were telling us how there were cottontails in the river.

LL: Cottonmouth.

SH: Cottonmouth, the rattlesnake?

EL: Cottonmouth, yes, but we didn't have any incidents. We got through that all right, but that was horse maneuvers. [laughter]

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Thank you for the horse stories. [laughter]

EL: … I could tell you stories all night. [laughter]

LL: Like I was saying.

SH: Please do tell us some more. I guess we should go back to talking about getting ready. You said you went on maneuvers.

EL: I don't remember maneuvers specifically, but, at the time, I was a corporal. I had a squad of eight, and I remember my first encounter, going to the First Sergeant, telling him I'm having trouble with so-and-so. He says, "I gave you the job because I thought you could do it. Don't come to me when you have a problem." So, that was it, like there was this feeling in the Army, at that time, that you had to be not only a non-commissioned officer, you had to be an enforcer and some guys wouldn't do it. They'd just, like, work it out some way, but, sometimes, your men'd come home drunk and unruly, and so on. You had to handle it. You couldn't call for help. It was up to you.

SH: Being from Jersey City and being down in the South, what did you see of the Jim Crow South?

EL: [laughter] I remember, this girl I was dating said I spoke with a brogue, and she had the strongest Southern accent you'd ever imagine, and she said, "You speak with a brogue." I said,
"What does that mean, exactly?" She said, "You know, New York," but, [at] any rate, I liked the South, to an extent but I wasn't anxious to move down there or anything like that. …

SH: Did you have any African-Americans working on the post?

EL: No. There might have been. There was a quartermaster unit, I think, that was black, and, in Fort Benning, [Georgia], I had two black horseshoeing instructors who were the best horseshoers I ever met in my life, and they taught us horseshoeing in Fort Benning. … One of the black soldiers rode a horse through the mess hall. [laughter] It was a polo pony, so, it would do anything, and he took a ride through the mess hall and out the other end. There was a lot of crazy stuff like that going on.

CH: Did you see any discrimination, things of that nature, down in the South that differed from where you came from in the North?

EL: I experienced one thing that was interesting. It was Phoenix City, Alabama. I don't know if you know of its reputation, but it was considered to be the most corrupt, lawless town. … That was where I would go on my dates, and they'd kill the sheriff, … if somebody gets on the council, they'd shoot him, and it was a wild thing but that's really where I was when this notice came that Pearl Harbor had been bombed, Phoenix City, Alabama, infamous. That didn't give me a high impression of the South, and another incident that let me down was, when Bob Dunn was bringing me back to this guard duty, we're still in town and we pass a restaurant. … A girl and a young man were out there and the man, the young man, punched the girl in the jaw. [laughter] I was aghast. I said to Bob, "Stop," and I jumped out and I shoved the guy back about ten feet and I said, "Why don't you punch me?" [laughter] He didn't answer me, just took out a big knife, [laughter] with a six-inch blade or so, he was about ten feet away, and I stood my ground for a minute, and then, the girl is in back of me, she's saying, "Why don't you leave us alone?" You know, she was just with her boyfriend. "Mind your own business," she said. [laughter] Well, that was a help to me, because I felt I could break it off. I turned around to her, I said, "You going to be all right?" She said, "Yes, I'll be all right. Just leave us alone." So, I walked away from that big knife. [laughter] I didn't think that was a good idea, but that gave me a poor impression of the South.

AP: Did you encounter segregation or blatant discrimination?

EL: … Segregation was rampant at that time, you know. It was very prominent, especially in South Carolina. I think they were worse than other states.

CH: Would you say it was a totally different world?

EL: Well, if you were black, it was, and all I can say about it [was that] it was happening, and a redneck is a terrible thing. They have no conscience, no understanding, mostly. That's the worst part. They don't know what they're doing is so terribly wrong.

AP: During that time, based on your perspective, do you think segregation was justified?
EL: Oh, no. I don't think segregation was right in any shape or form. I didn't take part in any movements, but I definitely felt that segregation and keeping the colored people down was definitely wrong. I knew there were good minds and good talent and everything else and that they should have been afforded the same privileges as everybody else. I always felt like that, but I wasn't part of any movement. I was very busy living my own life, let's put it that way, and that's later on, when, after the war, you had time to think about it.

SH: Where did they send you then? From Fort Jackson, where was your next post?

EL: Well, we went to Jersey City and we got on a ship called the [SS] Dempo, a Dutch motor ship. [Editor's Note: The SS Dempo was a Dutch vessel taken over by the British and converted into a troopship.]

SH: Where did you board the ship?

EL: … Jersey City. So, I got to visit home. I got to visit my bride-to-be, Frances.

LL: Now, where'd she come from? [laughter]

EL: Frances Kelly. She's a beautiful girl and I had her picture in my armored car all through the war. All the other soldiers loved it [laughter] as much as I did, and everybody knew Kelly, Kelly, yes, but, anyway, I got to visit her.

SH: When did you meet her?

EL: I met her when she was about fourteen, claiming to be sixteen. [laughter] I was twenty at the time.

SH: You were twenty, okay.

EL: Or nineteen, and she was fourteen, yes, and, by the time she was sixteen, of course, she was claiming to be eighteen or nineteen. …

SH: Did she write to you while you were out in Montana?

EL: Oh, yes, we exchanged mail in Montana and overseas, also.

LL: And she could dance, too.

EL: Oh, she was a dancer. She danced better than I could, and she used to tell me that all the time. [laughter]

SH: Did she ever try to lead?
EL: … No, she was very competitive, though, and she didn't dance with me at these "quarter rackets." That happened later; I mean, that was earlier, before I was dating her, because I was sixteen. She was, at that time, eleven.

CH: Did she live in the Irish district?

EL: Well, see, her mother, Esther, came from Ireland, from Cork, and her mother's sister came with her, Nora, and they were O'Keefes. … Esther was a widow of limited means and they moved a lot and Esther, at one time, had to take in boarders, and so on, and Kelly [Frances] eventually became the mainstay of the family. She had a brother who died of tuberculosis when he was a young man in his twenties, and Frances was the breadwinner, in a sense. Aunt Nora worked in a laundry and contributed, but they had rough going.

SH: When you came to Jersey City, before you boarded and you received this little leave, what was Kelly doing then?

EL: Let's see, I was; how old was I? This was in …

SH: 1942.

EL: '42.

SH: I think it would be.

EL: '42, and, at that time, Kelly was how old? She was born in '24. I was twenty-three; she was eighteen. She was working for US Lines, in New York City, and she was very good to her mother, she relished being [the] breadwinner of the family. She helped while her brother was sick. She tended to him and visited him in the hospital faithfully, but I must say, I disapproved, sorry, she used to bring him cigarettes. … Of course, he wasn't … supposed to smoke, but he wanted crossword puzzles and he wanted Lifesavers, and they had collapsed one of his lungs. … So, at any rate, he died, eventually, and that's when I decided that we should get married, and we moved in with Esther for awhile then.

SH: This is after the war that you were married.

EL: This was after. I'm jumping ahead, yes.

ML: But, it was Frances Kelly, not Kelly. Fran is her first name.

SH: Okay, I am sorry. Let us back up to that leave at home. You got to see everybody in your family. Were all of your friends gone as well by that time?

EL: That was kind of a couple of hurried visits to the family and to Kelly, and then, back on the ship and away, and that was my first touch of the war and danger, that I was excited again. This ship had a crew of what we called Lascars. They were colorful. They wore sarongs, turbans,
they all carried a big knife in their sash, and most of them were barefooted, they were the crewmembers.

SH: Where were they from?

EL: Malaysia, Indonesia, someplace like that.

SH: This was a British ship.

EL: It was a Dutch motor ship, diesel motor ship, called the Dempo, and we were in a convoy and ... the destroyers and corvettes were escorting us. They kept steaming around us and protecting us from the submarines. One of the most dangerous places was off the coast of New Jersey; the submarines were sinking ships there regularly. ... 

SH: What time of day did you sail?

EL: I know it was in the daytime. That's all I know, and we rendezvoused shortly out of the harbor and on to the sea. We rendezvoused with this convoy, and then, not too far out to sea, still in the shipping lanes, the ship broke down, the Dempo. So, they left a corvette with us for a little while, and then, he left us, [laughter] and then, we were sitting there, but they were working on the engines, to fix them, yes.

CH: How many men were in the convoy?

EL: Well, ... we probably had the whole regiment on the ship, and what was that? around a couple thousand men, and we knew about the submarines and the fact that the Jersey coast had lost a lot of ships. Everything was total blackout from then on and, in the middle of the night, when the night was just about over, they got the motors running, and then, they went as fast as they could to catch up to the convoy. The convoy was zigzagging, but, of course, the captain of this ship, the Dempo, he knew where they'd be at a particular time and he headed there, and we picked them up, and then, the rest of the trip was uneventful.

SH: Where were you heading?

EL: We were going to England.

SH: When did you know where you were going?

EL: We didn't know, really, until we were practically in England. There was a lot of secrecy and quiet and we docked, I think, in Glasgow, took a train to southern England, beautiful. Oh, I loved it. There were streets paved with stones. There were picturesque houses, taverns, and beautiful fields with hedgerows and stone walls, oh, gorgeous, and we'd get conditioned by marching on foot along those things. We very rarely did a vehicle exercise.

SH: Where were you bivouacked at this point in England?
EL: I think the town was called Fairford, and it was … very close to the south of England, and we were quartered in a school and we used to watch the German planes come over. … The English Spitfires were stationed around us and they would take off and engage them, very exciting. We had great respect for our British pilots.

SH: Did you get seasick on the trip over?

EL: No, I didn't. Later on, I got seasick, on the invasion of Southern France, on a little craft that was pretty rocky.

ML: But, … when you docked in England, or some other point, you saw another ship, as they were lifting the torpedo nets up …

EL: Oh, that was in Naples, Michael. That was later on, several years later. We were traveling from Africa to Naples and there was a lot of submarine activity in the Mediterranean at the time. … We made it without incident, but one of the ships next to us, as it got unloaded and came out of the water, it exposed a torpedo stuck in the net. [laughter] They had nets slung alongside the ship and there's this big torpedo, halfway through the net. So, you know, they had been very fortunate.

SH: Somebody said their prayers.

EL: Yes.

LL: And was it the Dempo that also went down?

EL: Not that I know of. I think it survived the war, but [I do not know]. [Editor's Note: The SS Dempo was sunk by a German submarine on March 17, 1944, in the Mediterranean.]

SH: How was the food on the cruise over?

EL: I don't remember the food on the Dempo. I don't remember it at all, but, then, we went to Africa. …

SH: How did you come down to Africa? Did you load up in Southampton, England?

EL: No. … I think we might have shipped out again from Scotland, but we were on an Australian freighter and they served boiled fish for breakfast and it smelled so bad, we'd heave it over the side, [laughter] and most of us wouldn't eat it. We bought all the bread and canned food from the English commissary and we'd eat that, and the British crew members and sailors and soldiers, they were eating it and throwing it up. [laughter] … It was a mess, but I remember this, the boiled fish, and, also, we had gun crews … onboard. They were British trained, Australians or British, and they would, occasionally, throw over depth bombs, when they thought they detected a submarine. That was exciting, but we made it through to Algiers.

SH: Were you traveling in a convoy?
EL: Yes, this was a convoy also.

SH: As well, okay.

EL: And with escort, of course, and there was danger all the way from submarines, and then, in the Mediterranean, the Germans were very active, with submarines and aircraft and everything else. So, we got to Algiers and I was thrilled out of my bean to see that I was at Algiers, Africa. I couldn't believe it. … They unloaded us, put us in a little warehouse with a loft up on top of the hill, about a half block from the harbor thing, and the very night we landed, these German planes came over and bombed the harbor. … We were a half a block away in this loft and it caused a panic among some of my fellow troopers. They were running around, falling out of the loft, and my friends and I watched it. We were thrilled to see this action, these planes coming in. They had barrage balloons over the harbor, and we were waiting for one of them to run into them. One did, and the cable just ran up and the balloon came down as he went along. It didn't bring him down, and there was a grenade on the cable. So, I figured, "When he hits the grenade, he's going to go like [that]." [laughter] It snapped the cable, but it didn't bring down the plane and the balloon flew away and the plane flew off, no problem, but that was our first day in Africa.

SH: What harbor did you come into?

EL: Algiers. I couldn't wait to get into that atmosphere in there. The French didn't have any desire to really fight us. They stopped very early in the game and it was almost a peaceful entry.

SH: You were not under fire from the French.

EL: No. We weren't; some places, they were, and the British took over the French ships that were in North African ports and they took them out and sunk them all, and the French were really aghast over that. [Editor's Note: Mr. Leonard is referring to the destruction of the French Navy at Mers El Kébir and Dakar in Africa in 1940 after the fall of France.] They were heartbroken that they would do that, and it just seemed like a terrible waste but they were afraid that they would fall into the hands of the Germans but there were a lot of bad decisions made all through the war and I was painfully aware of that.

SH: Being there so early, I think you were in the learning curve.

EL: Yes.

SH: Where did you go then from Algiers? What were you ordered to do next?

EL: Well, they decided, because of our mobility and weapons, we were very heavily armed with light weapons, like machine-guns, thirty-seven-millimeter cannon, and we had great mobility and speed, … that we should protect Allied Force Headquarters from any assault or any danger. So, they set up a perimeter that we should guard and patrol. We had to do that twenty-four hours a day and we did that for quite awhile, over a year. Meanwhile, new American troops were getting
mauled very badly in Kasserine Pass. [Editor's Note: The series of battles known collectively as the Battle of Kasserine Pass took place between February 19th and 25th, 1943.] They performed very poorly and we weren't part of that. We were back by Allied Force Headquarters, but the Americans learned from that and there never was a disaster like that again. They did very well in Africa after that incident, but it reminds me of the Arabs and the state they were in. Most of them were very poor and we'd ride through the city streets and the little boys were running after us, asking us for candy or cigarettes. At the same time, they would slit open our barracks bags with razors and steal our stuff and, at night, if you laid down outdoors, like we frequently did, you had to keep your rifle next to you. They would steal your rifle. They would steal your boots and it was depressing in a way, but it was [because] there was abject poverty. … I'd blame that as the reason for it, but I wasn't going to let it happen to me.

SH: How often would the headquarters move?

EL: The Allied Force Headquarters stayed in Algiers.

SH: It stayed in the same location.

EL: Yes. It was the big, real big, officers, like [General Dwight D.] Eisenhower and the like, and they were afraid [of] a paratrooper assault, the Germans had done this on other occasions, they had landed paratroopers and assaulted high command posts. So, we're supposed to guard against that. If they saw a light fifteen, twenty miles away, we had to get out there and find it.

SH: Were they housed in tents or were they in a building?

EL: Oh, they were in the city, in nice buildings, [laughter] which, I have to tell you this, I was in Algiers, I realized there was a different approach to sex, or toilet facilities, let me put it that way. They had an open booth, that was a urinal, and the men would walk in there. You know, … there was just a cover from their knees up to their chest, and they would stand there and go and talk to their wives outside, and we were aghast. We were prudes and we didn't know it. So, then, I went in this building, and it was a very nice building. I think it was the American Red Cross building, but I had to go to the bathroom. So, they said it was downstairs. There's this big empty room, but, on the side, there were these holes in the floor. … It was all slate and tile, and there were footprints next to these things, and you squatted over that and you went there. [laughter] … While I was going, an Arab woman came in with a mop and pail and started mopping the floor, and she didn't pay any attention to me and I was [laughter] turning inside out, but I found out it was more natural their way, I guess, but it was shocking to an American boy whose father was very proper and correct and who raised us like that, yes.

SH: Other than the young boys that were trying to relieve you of your property, were there other incidents with the Arab population?

EL: No. … When we'd talk with them, they hoped that we were going to take over the country, because, in their mind, if you moved in with a superior force, you didn't give it back. You kept it. So, they felt that this was going to be an American mandate, or whatever. So, we'd explain to them that, no, we were allies with the French and we were helping them win the war, and so on,
but they were very disappointed. They hated the French, you know, the colonial thing, and, if you were there, if you saw the conditions, you would understand it, that they would hate the French.

LL: You had some time with some family over there, right?

EL: Yes, I did meet a family. I had a detail to take a squad of men to a roadblock some distance from our normal route and screen everybody coming in along this road, which was a key road, and it was manned by the French *zouaves*. You know what a *zouave* is?

SH: Tell us.

EL: It's a French cavalry soldier wearing a colorful uniform with a blouse or a shirt on the top that was tight-fitting and pants that were so voluminous, they looked like a skirt, like in pleats, but very baggy, and they waddled when they walked. These things went back and forth, and they wore boots when they rode their horses, and their horses were all stallions, no mares, no geldings. … They tied a collar around their neck on the picket line, and they tied them by the foot to the picket line and by the collar, and they would fight with one another. … The Arab who had picket line duty had a broomstick and he would have to beat on them to keep them from chewing each other up. Some of them had scars from that, but, at any rate, I was fascinated, all stallions, cavalry, wow, couldn't believe it. I joined them on the range, shooting their machine-guns, and I did pretty well. So, they started to adopt me. The second morning, one Arab came up to me and he said, "Here's your horse, if you want to come with us." He gave me a horse, and then, he took a turban, which he had, a spare turban, and he put it on my head and I rode with them on their patrols.

SH: Do you have a picture?

EL: No, I don't have any pictures of that, but I wish I did. It was really something, and there was a river close by. … When the horses were sweating, [after] we came back from a ride, we all rode down to the river, and I didn't know what was happening, nobody was speaking English, but these Arab soldiers started taking their clothes off, unsaddled the horses, and then, they rode them bareback into the river. … They had grooming tools with them and they were washing the horses and brushing them. So, I took off my clothes, jumped on my stallion and got in there with them, and they loved that. … They couldn't believe that an American boy could ride a horse but it backfired on me. Later on, I showed them pictures of me jumping small jumps in South Carolina, and they kind of signed me up for this big jump show, and … the jumps were this high. [laughter] I had never done anything like this. This is like steeplechase. So, they gave me boots and they said they wanted me to ride. … So, the next thing you know, I'm walking around the course with the officers that were going to ride it, and I'm thinking, "Oh no." So, the horse they gave me, he didn't want to jump. I turned him around and I forced him over the first jump and he cat-jumped it. He stood still, and then, he cat-jumped it and I stayed on, but, the second jump, he refused. After three tries, I rode off the field and … I felt humiliated and, you know, very abashed. … I got over it, [laughter] but it was an interesting experience.

SH: Do you think maybe they gave you that horse because of this?
EL: No, I think show jumping is so complex.

SH: It is.

EL: And you need to know your horse, the horse has to know you. … The horse was probably saying, "What is this guy doing up there? He's resting the reins on my neck," and I didn't know what he would do, he didn't know what I would do, and I felt that was the main reason.

SH: You are more gracious than my question. [laughter]

EL: I mean, he should have at least tried, [laughter] I assume that he sensed I was a different kind of rider. … I have to say, he never bucked me off or made me fall. … Then, they had a big [show]. The Arabs put on a show. They did this for dignitaries, too. They rode all kinds of crazy riding. They threw their rifles up in the air at a full gallop and caught them. They would ride three horses down a field together and they would all converge and bump, and then, go out again, and then, bump again. It was a wild scene, [laughter] and at the end of the course was a mountainside, and one poor Arab went over the side. … They said he died, and they kept right on with this, with the thing. [laughter] They kept doing the tricks and throwing their rifles up in the air. … I felt bad for the Arab, but, I have to say, it was some display of horsemanship, and that was a big highlight of my African tour.

SH: I imagine.

EL: Yes.

LL: But, nothing would be complete about North Africa unless you get to tell Michael's favorite story. [laughter]

EL: What's that one?

ML: You had a …

LL: Your pet.

ML: A pet in North Africa.

EL: Oh, yes. Yes, I came into the barracks once. I had been left behind to clean up a few details in a camp and tend to some things, where the main body was off to French Morocco, a thousand miles. The whole shebang went, and they left me with these few things I had to clean up, and, of course, a jeep to catch up. So, it was going to take me two days or so. I'm ready to go to bed the first night, but, first, I'm writing a letter and I look up. There's a chimney that goes up almost to the ceiling, then, it goes like this [Mr. Leonard indicates an elbow in the pipe] and up, so [that] the rain water won't go on the fire, right. At any rate, on that crook in the chimney sits a little monkey, [laughter] and I'm so surprised, but I was an animal lover from the word go, and so, I put a piece of bread on my arm and kept writing letters. … Pretty soon, she came
down, grabbed the bread, scampered up there again, and then, she came down and I had a glass of water there this time and she drank that. … The next thing I know, she was on my shoulder and she wouldn't get off. [laughter] She had bonded with me and she was not about to let go. So, I'm laying there and she's got her two paws on my shoulder and she's breathing in my ear. [laughter] I'm laughing, but that was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. [laughter] It only lasted about four or five days, and I named her Beatrice. [laughter] … I took her to a pub the next day and I was having a bowl of soup before I had some wine, and she jumped off my shoulder and put her head in the hot soup. [laughter] I had all kinds of incidents like that and then, I found she wasn't housebroken. Luckily, my jacket was waterproof-resistant, [laughter] but I used to try and give her to someone else, to hold her while I did something. She would have none of it, no way. So, I'm trying to catch up with the column and I finally do, and I'm exhausted. … I want to go to town and hoist a few and I just had to get her off my shoulder for a little while. I put a belt around her middle and I tied her to the wheel of a vehicle and she was frantic and I felt so bad. I felt guilty all the time I was in town, yes. So, I come back; she's gone. The rope, she had chewed through the rope and run off. I never saw her again, but the captain of my troop was sympathetic. He said, "Ed, I know you loved that monkey." He says, "Take a jeep and look for her and catch up with us later." [laughter] So, I rode all over the countryside looking for her. Nobody had seen her, nobody. I couldn't find her, [laughter] but she was a real thing and she was young. … When she transferred to me, I mean, she felt like I was her mother [laughter] and I would care for her and protect her, and so on. It was very touching.

SH: Yes, of course.

EL: But …

SH: Where was the column heading? Where were you?

EL: We were going to French Morocco, because Eisenhower, Roosevelt, Churchill, they were all going there, to Marrakech, [Morocco], and we had to set up a perimeter guard around Marrakech for that reason. [Editor's Note: The Casablanca Conference in 1943.]

SH: How long were you in Marrakech?

EL: I'd say maybe three or four or five days.

SH: Did you see any of the dignitaries that were coming?

EL: Not up close. I saw them at a distance, and, again, there were these Arabs [who] would parade with fancily decked out horses and uniforms, outfits. These Arab chieftains, dignitaries, would put on a display, but nothing like the one with the zouaves, no. They just rode, and they didn't ride these horses until the parade. They were led and covered and all that. They were parade horses, but Marrakech was beautiful.

SH: Was it?
EL: Yes. I got busted in Meknès, [in northern Morocco]. I overstayed my pass and I got in late and there was a ruling that if you came late from a pass, you had to take a "pro." That was, you know what a "pro" was?

SH: What was it?

EL: It was a tube of medication that you had to inject into your penis, and taking a "pro" was compulsory if you came back late.

SH: For VD [venereal disease].

EL: I had never had one, a "pro." … At the time, I was a buck sergeant. I said, "No way. I didn't indulge in any sex. I wasn't even near a woman all night." "Doesn't matter. The rule is, you've got to take one." So, I said, "No way." I wouldn't do it. So, … my company commander gave me a court-martial. He says, "How come, Leonard, you were late from pass?" I said, "I couldn't make the driver [move faster]." I was riding a horse and carriage driven by an Arab. That was the taxicabs in Meknès. I said, "I couldn't make him understand where I wanted to go." He said, "You're the interpreter for the troop. You're the one who goes to the head of the column when they can't understand, the French." I said, "Yes, well, sometimes, I can make myself understood in French and, sometimes, I can't." So, he said, "You're a private." [laughter] He busted me to private. I go back to my section. I had fifteen men or so. I turned my jacket inside out, with my stripes, and I said, "I'm a buck private and what am I going to do? Whose job am I going to take now?" So, they said, "You're going to clean the machine-guns." [laughter] They turned on me right away. [laughter] So, a little while later, I got called up and there was Colonel (McGarry?), Bob (McGarry?). He knew me from back to Newark [laughter] and he said, "Leonard," he said, "you said you didn't have any sex and I believe you and I think you made a mistake, but we're going to let it go this time." So, he reversed the court-martial [laughter] and I turned my jacket right side out, with my stripes out, and I went back to my guys and I said, "Now, who's going to clean those machine-guns?" [laughter] I had many, so many, experiences like that.

SH: Were the people in your section still part of that original group that had gone out of Newark down to Fort Jackson?

EL: No. We picked up a lot of recruits before we left Fort Jackson, because we weren't at full strength, see. So, … I got one of my best friends, who was a rancher from Nebraska, Skoda. He was, you know, such an excellent soldier, a little older and more wise than most of the boys, and we had a lot of Southern boys allotted. … So, it was a mixed group but there were a lot of wise guys among [the] Southerners and I was a wise guy from the big city. [laughter]

SH: Did you have a nickname?

EL: No. Most of my Southern boys just called me, "Sergeant," yes, and they're very polite and, sometimes, I'd get mad at them, and, sometimes, they'd get mad at me. Like, one time, we got an order to move out immediately, you know. This is in combat, in Italy, and this Burnett, this Southern boy, he's making hot coffee. He's got a little stove. I said, "Come on, Burnett, mount
up," and he just laughed at me. So, I knocked his stove over, with the coffee, and he never really forgave me for that. [laughter] but I felt like orders are the thing, you have to do it. I broke them on occasion, like I wouldn't take that "pro," but, … when it comes to combat and moving out, and so on, I was by the book, by the rules, you know. … This same Burnett, one time in Italy, we took about four prisoners. My section and I, we were off and we were in one of these walled towns, a medieval town with walls around it, up in the hills in Italy. That was beautiful, too, but an armored car went in here and shot up a few Germans, and they brought them out and one of them was holding his stomach, like this. He's just a young boy. I figured he was eighteen or nineteen at the most. He's holding his stomach like that, and my guys are saying, "Look at this guy, Sergeant, look at him." … I motioned to him to put his hands down. So, he went like that, and … he was holding his intestines. I looked them over and I couldn't see any holes in his intestines and he wasn't bleeding bad. So, I got him up on the hood of a jeep, and, before I did, … one of the other prisoners, a German sergeant, behind his back, was telling me, "Put him out of his misery. Shoot him." He's making the motion.

SH: Like holding a gun to your head.

EL: Yes, that I should shoot this boy, and I said, "No way." Somebody, Burnett, pipes up, "I'll shoot him, Sarge." [laughter] You know, he would have been glad to shoot him. Anyway, I got clean waste, the stuff we used to clean the guns. It was clean, it was cotton, and I saturated it with water and I laid it on his intestines. I knew they had to be kept moist and I told the driver, "Take him back, and make sure he gets there," [laughter] and he did. He took him back, and, about a week later, I [was] talking to the medical officer. I said, "How did you make out with that German boy I sent back?" He said, "He was fine. He didn't have any holes in his intestines. We put them back. We sewed him up. He was walking the next day." [laughter] "He was walking when he was holding his intestines, too," I said. [laughter] That's why I didn't want to [shoot him]. I mean, I couldn't even think about killing him. He was just a young kid and he didn't have to die. … Right about then, a German farmer, I mean, an Italian farmer, came up to me and said he had a German who was shot down at his place. So, walking down there, he's telling me that he came out of his farmhouse and this German was in the orchard and fired at him. … He said he had a shotgun and he said, "I fired back at him and I hit him, and he's bleeding." This was more [through] sign language. I look over at the German soldier and he's got a big hole in his head, and I said, "You never did this with a shotgun," I pointed to his gun. I said, "No shotgun." So, then, he showed me what he was shooting, these pumpkin balls, [shotgun slugs], you know, round balls, that they used sometimes to hunt deer. That's what he was shooting and that's what went in the German's head.

CH: Gosh.

EL: But, the German was unconscious and I felt I had to give him a chance. So, I made my guys carry him up to the road, and they were cursing me for it. They didn't want to do it, but, … when I told my unit where he was, when they came to pick him up, he wasn't there. [laughter] … The guess was that the Italian family hid him or buried him or took him away some place. They didn't want to be blamed for shooting him or get in some kind of trouble, and they thought, I guess, that maybe while he was there, some German soldiers might come and turn the tide. So, I didn't save that guy.
SH: Oh, dear.

ML: So, at this point in the war, after being there for maybe close to two years at this point, how had your attitude changed from when you first enlisted, or your attitude specifically towards the Germans?

EL: Well, when we heard all the stories about Pearl Harbor and the terrible deaths, and so on, we all wanted to kill Germans and Japs. That was the big thing, but, after the first combat experiences, after awhile of it, I didn't want to kill anybody. … I would fire my gun at the drop of a hat, but I couldn't deliberately kill anybody that I didn't have to, and that's how I felt about it and I felt like this is a terrible thing. I found a German soldier once in the woods, on a patrol in Italy, and he was a good-looking, young man, with blonde hair. He was wearing shorts, he was in a uniform, and blue eyes, and I looked in his wallet. There was pictures of family, you know, children and a woman, and that made me realize what a terrible thing this was to see.

SH: He was already dead when you came upon him.

EL: He was dead.

SH: I am sorry, I thought you met him.

EL: Yes, and I could only guess that he was killed by Italian partisans. They would take advantage of the Germans when they could. A short while later, maybe minutes later, I saw a machine-gun on the side of a hill. … Somebody had made a platform, had a machine-gun on it, pointing down, on us, but nobody was on it. So, I hopped up there and I couldn't find anybody. So, I opened the machine-gun, [laughter] I was handy with weapons. I took the bolt out, so [that] it couldn't be fired, and I brought that back with me. I didn't know whether it was German or Italian, but I couldn't take a chance, but that's the kind of things we ran into. … We were, a lot of times, on the perimeter of the main force. …

SH: To go back to Marrakech and how you secured that perimeter, did you stay in that position, where you were always defending the headquarters of the Allied command?

EL: No, … Allied Force Headquarters remained in Algiers, really. This was a meeting of dignitaries and national heads at Marrakech. So, we went back to our duties around Algiers. We knew every town for miles around. There were orange trees in the street. There were orange orchards. There's oranges laying on the sidewalk, yes. There were grapefruit orchards. There were grape vineyards. It was a very agricultural area and we rode around all through all these little villages, and it was an experience.

SH: From Marrakech, where did you go?

EL: We went back to the Algiers area.

SH: Okay.
EL: And then, we were told we were going on a training mission in preparation for Italy. We went to an area in Oran, near Oran, on the beach, and we prepped all the vehicles for an amphibious landing.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Okay, now, from Oran, you went to …

LL: Was it Iran, though?

SH: No, Oran, [in northwestern Algeria].

EL: Yes.

LL: Oh, okay.

EL: Yes. That was the staging for our landing in Naples, Italy. We were going to Italy from Africa.

LL: Oh, okay.

EL: And we didn't do any amphibious training there in Oran. We just conditioned the troops for about a month. I used to take them swimming, [laughter] but we're supposed to march them, and some of our rebels would take hand grenades, throw them in the water, and then, have a fish fry with the fish. [laughter] I was afraid they were going to [start a fire]. We were in a cedar grove. I was afraid they were going to set it on fire, but it never happened, thank God, but we landed in Naples and, the next day, we were in combat.

SH: Do you remember the name of the ship that took you to Naples? What was the craft you were on?

EL: … No, I don't remember the name of the ship, but it was, again, a convoy.

SH: Okay. Was Naples where you saw the ship with the torpedo in the net?

EL: … With the torpedo, yes, that was Italy, right. Yes, we landed in Naples, [laughter] and I thought we were going to have some kind of respite, but, no, the next day, we're told, "Here's your mission," and I said, "Well, where are the Germans?" "Who knows? [laughter] That's your job, find them," and that was quite exciting.

SH: What specifically was your section assigned to do? Are you part of the 36th or 34th Infantry Divisions?

EL: No. We were what they called corps troops, like, we served everybody in the whole shebang, in a sense. They would put us on the flanks and make sure that the flanks, which
always had light resistance, were not harboring some big force that was going to cut them off. That's mostly what we did. Also, our job was to find out, "Where are they now?" When we took Rome, I thought we were going to get a respite. Then, my unit went right through Rome. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Would you repeat what you said about when you were in Rome? You went right on through.

EL: Well, that was quite awhile later, you know, but the idea was to keep contact with the enemy. I hated it, [laughter] but that was the thing, we had to know where they were and tell them back there [the US forces] where they were. So, the thing was not to break contact, if you could help it. By the [way], that … could be pretty deadly sometimes.

SH: You landed in Italy, in Naples, and then, you just made your way up to Rome.

EL: Yes. Well, that took quite awhile.

SH: I was going to say, it took a long time.

EL: And I remember the first day out, we knew that Germans were up on this hill and we had a young lieutenant who was very green. … He was in charge of my platoon and he ordered me to go up the hill where we heard the gunfire, and he's saying, "I want you to go right up there." I said, "Lieutenant, there's no cover. It's so wide open." He says, "They won't expect you to go up that way, because there's no cover." I said, "Yes, but they won't have to expect; they'll see us right away." But he insisted I had to go up this uncovered approach. It's like a green meadow. There was a wall at the bottom of it, a stone wall. So, I get my men [assembled]. I said, "Follow me," and I stand up to go over the wall and a German machine-gun starts shooting and I can hear the bullets going by. … I get down and I turn around and I say, "Lieutenant," and he's gone, [laughter] and we had codenames, you know, and his codename was "Blanket." So, I said to them, my platoon sergeant, he was in the covered section, I said, "Mitch, where's Blanket," he says, "I don't know. He jumped in a ditch. I haven't seen him since." [laughter] So, we had to manage without him. [laughter] I've mentioned we got him relieved, there were many incidents like that, where his leadership was very poor, and I felt a little sorry for him, but I didn't want to die for it, really. So, we got rid of him and we got a Lieutenant Egbert, from out West. He was a hardy, rough-and-tough guy, but college bred, later on, went into the ministry, but I remember bringing him a prisoner once and he called him a Nazi and punched him in the jaw, [laughter] Lieutenant Egbert. … He came in, he was green, too, but he didn't give orders and think [that] he knew anything. He would say, "Isn't that right, Corporal Leonard?" and I'd say, "No, we can't do that, Lieutenant." [laughter] I knew the book. I had really studied, you know, and I had been soldiering long enough to know what was right and what was wrong. So, eventually, Egbert got his feet wet. He never came with us. None of the lieutenants did. They stayed back, about a mile or so, and we kept contact with a radio. … They kept telling us to push forward, "See if you can get into this next town or village," and so on. … There's some, a lot of casualties in the early stages, yes, like this time when the Lieutenant, the Lieutenant Blanket, was trying to send me up the hill. Up there, one of my good friends, Ken Horner, was shot in the leg. He bled to
death. He wouldn't let his man carry him. One of the bigger soldiers picked him up, but the pain was so severe, he made him put him down, and then, when the medics finally got to him, an hour later, he had bled to death. That was the first one. Then, there were armored car drivers [that] would get shot in the head, shot in the throat. We had two motorcycle riders. One got shot in the spine and was paralyzed, Bob Pikerel. … Everybody loved him. He was one of the favorite troopers, and his buddy and fellow motorcyclist he was so shaken by the whole thing. They had to relieve him and send him back, but I'd like to say that about my unit; nobody called anybody coward. Some guys would break down and my unit would try and work things out for them, there were details like guarding prisoners, there were jobs in the kitchen, they would give them. I had a man named Pappas. He was rough and tough. Nobody would mess with him, and he taught me how to sharpen a knife so sharp you could you shave your hair off your arm. … When bombs were falling, or artillery shells were falling, he'd get in a hole and he wouldn't come out. So, I'd go in the hole and talk to him. I said, "Listen, you know, I just came from out[side]. There's nothing going on," but I couldn't [convince him]. So, they gave him a job in the kitchen. He had been a butcher, and, if he was in the infantry, they would have brutalized him. They would have sent him back out again, in the infantry, push him up there, but my unit was esprit de corps. They had all kinds of traditions, and I was very proud of that.

SH: Are there any other stories between Naples and Rome? [laughter]

LL: The armored car that flipped into the creek, at some point, going across a bridge?

EL: Oh.

LL: We'd hear stories, but don't necessarily get them in order. …

EL: … That one was in France.

LL: That was France, okay. We'll hold off on that.

EL: Yes.

AP: Did all of this affect you psychologically in any manner?

EL: Well, I changed my viewpoint about killing people after I was in combat for awhile, very definitely, and I also felt that if I wanted to be lucky or fortunate in any way, I had to do the right thing with my prisoners. … In one instance, this was in France, an officer ordered me to take my prisoners out and put them in a ditch and shoot them, because we had a mission that we couldn't take them on. … It was, "Hurry up, hurry up," you know, and, because I was a soldier and I understood where he was coming from, I said, "Yes, sir," but I swore and cursed after he turned around, and then, my mind started working, "How can I avoid this?" This officer was a first lieutenant, and there was a captain attached to us. He was an artillery forward observer. So, I went to him, I said, "Captain, I was just ordered to shoot my six prisoners. I feel like I can't do that. I want you to help me. You outrank him. You can reverse this thing. You can help me out and you can save those men's lives." This officer was a decent guy, this captain. He came back a half-hour later and he said, "It's all taken care of. I talked to the local gendarme, [French
policemen]. He put them in the lock up. He's going to keep them until he can turn them over." So, I didn't have to do it, I didn't believe in things like that. I was turning over in my mind, "Two days from now, I may be a prisoner," and it was about four or five days later, I was a prisoner.

…

AP: Do you think that if you had not acted in that way, those soldiers would have been killed?

EL: If I didn't step up for them, there were plenty of men in my unit who would shoot them, you know, and I just was in a position where I got the order and I tried to save their lives and I was successful. If somebody else got the order, they might have carried it out, and there were soldiers, like Burnett, who volunteered to kill that German boy. He would have shot them. Some guys wanted to shoot somebody, which is so juvenile and ridiculous, but I felt, if you want to have any kind of good fortune, you can't do things like that.

CH: Right.

EL: I also wouldn't keep souvenirs, for the same reason. Some guys were taking German watches, German binoculars. I said, "No, that's saying I'm going to go home with these, and there's a good chance you won't go home. Don't push your luck." So, I wouldn't save anything.

SH: How long were you in Italy before you were shipped out to Southern France?

EL: Well, let's see, we landed in Italy, I'm trying to think, I think it was May, and we pulled back in August for the invasion of Southern France.

SH: How far north had you gotten in Italy? You talked about going through Rome.

EL: We went through Rome and we went as far as Grosseto, [north of Rome], keeping contact with them, and we were glad to get pulled back, and, while we were staging to go to Southern France, I kept hoping; I knew that the Normandy invasion had taken place.

SH: You were aware of that.

EL: Yes. I kept hoping that the Germans would capitulate before we got to go, but they didn't. So, August 15, [1944], we landed in Southern France, and [laughter] we did rendezvous at Ajaccio.

SH: At where?

EL: Ajaccio, in Corsica, and there was a thing called "sandfly fever." Some guys were getting these terrible temperatures and had to be taken out of the unit, put in [the] hospital, and they felt it was [spread by] a fly or something. They didn't know. "Fever, unknown origin," was what they called it. We called it, "the FUO," [pronounced "foo"]. [laughter] …

SH: Please tell us about the staging area in Corsica. Who was there besides you and your section? Are you being reformed?
EL: Well, it's a big harbor and they had the infantry units, [there] were three divisions, the Third, 45th and the 36th. We had fought alongside them in Italy and they were marvelous, good troops, but the sad thing is that, when you talked to the men, they said, "You know, this is not the unit I came in with. Everybody's wounded or killed and this is entirely different, all replacements," but they still were a great unit.

SH: When you were in Italy, did you see any of the Japanese-American units?

EL: No. I heard about them after the war, you know.

SH: Did you see any of the African-American units that were there?

EL: Yes, they were almost all, without exception, assigned to quartermaster duty. They were hauling supplies, and they had to take their chances, in many cases, doing that, but they weren't in regular units with weapons, you know.

SH: You did not see the 92nd Infantry Division.

EL: No. I heard, after the war, about exemplary units that had distinguished themselves, but I didn't see any of that.

SH: Did you run into any other New Jersey boys when you were in Italy or in Corsica?

EL: [laughter] In Algiers, I met a fellow I worked with in Jersey City and was completely surprised. … He had been drafted and sent over there in the infantry, and there he was, this big guy. He'd been in the shipping department. I recognized him immediately.

CH: At any point in time, did your unit join with any British troops?

EL: Oh, yes, the British, the British were somewhat amused. They also used to get mad at us, because they said when we landed in Africa, the price of everything went up immediately. They couldn't buy anything with the pay they got. So, they said, you've probably heard this, they said we were "over paid, oversexed and over there," [laughter] and they were doing a great job. They were on the Adriatic side of Italy and driving up the coast on the Adriatic Sea, and we were on the other side.

CH: You never really went on any missions with them.

EL: No, we didn't get to work with them, no, but we saw a lot of them when we were in England. We were there for several months, training, and so on, and we had our respect for them as soldiers and their courage.

SH: When you were in Corsica, how long did it take to prepare for the invasion of Southern France?
EL: We didn't really land. We stayed on ship. It was just a rendezvous, and we were there maybe two days, and then, we all took off *en masse*, this enormous flotilla, with the warships all around us and airplanes flying overhead.

LL: Did you have any people with you? You had said that you lost some men here and there. Did you have any new people who hadn't been in, say, North Africa with you? …

EL: Occasionally, we'd get just one man from a replacement depot. This reminds me, one time, in Rome, I'd been up for three nights. I was in a terrible state and the Germans were dropping these antipersonnel bombs. They would go off, you know, a hundred feet above the ground, and that was happening and a young guy stepped up to me and said, "I've been assigned to your unit. I came from a replacement depot." He said, "You want to take my name and sign me up?" So, I started to write his name and I couldn't write. It's the only time I was like that, and I really had it. I mean, it was nothing to come, be in combat during the day, and then, be sent out on a night patrol, and then, just when you think you're going to rest, they say, "We've got to move," and maybe it wasn't combat, but you had to move … with everybody. So, I complained to … this same lieutenant who ordered me to shoot those prisoners. I said to him once, "We've got to have some rest." He said, "You're crazy." He says, "This is a war." I said, "I know, but I can't depend on these guys. They're falling asleep." I put a man out on a listening post once, we stopped short of contact with the Germans, because it got … dark, but I sent this man out in this tall grass and bushes, and he's the best soldier you'd ever want to meet, Youngblood, his name was. I told him, "It's a listening post," [laughter] and then, I went back to the unit and set them up for the night. … Later on, we get the order, we've got move, and it's still dark. So, I've got to go out and pick him up. So, I said, "Well, Youngblood is probably going to shoot me, but I've got to get him." I'm going through there, and I have a good sense of direction, so, I could find him in this grass and bushes. … When I get close, I say his name once, and then, I listened and I hear snoring. [laughter] Yes, well, I laughed and I kept on [going] and he was sound asleep. I said, "Some listening post," but he was such a good soldier and I didn't blame him a bit. It was just one of those things; you could fall asleep anytime, you were so exhausted most of the time. It was a rotten, rotten business, the whole thing.

SH: Did they send you back for some R&R? When you were not able to write, did they send you back?

EL: Oh, no.

SH: No? [laughter]

EL: I got over it. [laughter] We rode through Rome and they told me, "Keep contact with them, keep going." So, I didn't get any respite. I couldn't write, [laughter] but I could walk and talk. So, I kept on.

SH: In Rome, it was an open city.

EL: Yes.
SH: What did you see there?

EL: It was very empty, except there was still shooting going on. We didn't actually get shot at, that I knew of, but there was shooting in various places and we knew there were pockets of Germans still in there, and we just couldn't find where. Our orders were to keep going.

SH: As you went through, did you see any of the sights that, as a tourist, you would have stopped and looked at?

EL: Well, on the way to Rome, we saw things like two women who had fraternized with the Germans being abused by the Italian citizens, just cutting their hair and beating them up, and one thing or another. [laughter] … One time, when I was telling you about that German prisoner with his intestines out, these Italian women had evidently had the Germans, … in their homes and they scolded my guys, saying, "You didn't have to shoot him." [laughter] "What else?" and that reminds me, thinking of that particular crew, Alfred Dinato was the driver. He was a real Yankee from the Bronx, and he was the driver, and Dundon, the radioman, was from Jersey City. Dundon was a very Catholic boy and, when we got under fire, he would take out his beads and start reciting the rosary in the armored car, next to the driver, and the driver would say, "Goddamn it, Dundon, put those beads away." [laughter] He'd say, "You're driving me crazy." He was scared, too, but he couldn't stand to hear the Hail Marys. [laughter] I think … those two guys both made it through the war, I think. [laughter] Dundon became a police lieutenant in Jersey City, yes, and he took the pictures at my wedding.

SH: Did he?

EL: My wife hated them. [laughter] He was just starting a business, anyway.

SH: OJT [on-the-job training], right?

EL: They were pretty awful, I guess, but every time we'd look at them, years later, she would yell at me. [laughter] Frank Dundon; he, you know, … was reading the Bible, saying the Rosary, and he was practicing the quick draw with the .45, and he and this Jewish boy used to practice the quick draw all the time. This was in Africa, and the Jewish boy, he stepped on a mine when the war was almost over and he had a whole bag full of binoculars and wristwatches and everything else [that] he was going to take home to Tennessee, and, of course, he never got there. I forget his name, but he was gun ho, a good soldier. I guess we had different approaches.

SH: When you were in Rome, you did not get to see any of the sights.

EL: [laughter] No, there was no fun at all.

SH: No Coliseum?

EL: No, no glasses of wine, nothing; right through.

SH: Can you tell us then about the invasion of Southern France?
EL: Yes. Well, the first story that comes to mind was, we're all throwing up on this little boat.

[TAPE PAUSED]

EL: … I was really fascinated with the Arab quarters, and they usually had a wall around them, very picturesque, big gates, and I go in these cafes and there'd be French Foreign Legion [in there], with their uniforms, you know, colorful uniforms. [laughter] I felt like I was in Hollywood, and they had dancing girls, occasionally, you know, belly dancers, and the Arabs were drinking coffee, and mostly coffee. They didn't drink wine, but they had [coffee] heavily dosed … with honey and sugar, and the French Legionnaires were drinking everything, but that's the kind of setting, that I couldn't leave them. I was fascinated with that thing, yes, and I loved to go in the Arab Quarter. I bought some of their handiwork. I bought a nice silver bracelet for Frances and sent it to her. Africa, I felt somewhat like a tourist, because I wasn't in direct combat. I was looking for Germans and not finding them, mostly, you know, but that's how I overstayed my pass. I was in one of those cafes too long, yes.

SH: That was what happened.

EL: Yes.

SH: Where did you pick up your French?

EL: In Africa. … Algiers is a French-speaking nation.

SH: I know, because you said that one of your commanding officers …

EL: It seemed torub off on me, you know. I picked it up. I learned how to say omelette, "Avez-vous les omelettes?" and poulet [chicken]. I learned the words for soup and bread and wine, and then, I started to say, "Où est la route pour," this town or that town, "Where is your route?" and I'd get directions, and the first [thing] you know, I was starting to think in French a little bit, and I tried to talk like they did. Like, they didn't say, "Oui, je comprends;" they'd say, "'Weege' comprends," [spoken quickly], you know, they ran words together, and I would pick up on that and say it that way. So, I was accused of being a Canadian. [laughter] Sometimes, the French would say that to me, and I would say, "Je parle français mais pas beaucoup juste un petit peu," and, sometimes, I'd say a few things in French and they'd let off a string and I would be completely lost. [laughter] I had to stay within my two hundred words or so.

SH: Did you pick up any Italian?

EL: No. The only thing I knew was, "(Je ne parlare d'Italiano?)," which is, "I don't speak Italian," and they would say to me, "(Tu desci par natuta?)." That meant, "The Germans took everything." They had no food, they had no anything, you know, and they always blamed it on the Germans. … I had this sheath knife in Italy, and that was when I was still gung ho, and we had a mission and we were going to run into Germans, we were sure of it, and this Italian partisan, he said he'd take us there and show us how to get them. … He said, "I have no gun."
You have a gun. Let me borrow your knife," [laughter] and I let him borrow my knife, and it's the last thing I saw of him. In the skirmish that followed, he disappeared, and, of course, my knife disappeared.

SH: Were the partisans trustworthy, both in Italy and in France?

EL: Well, I admired the ones in France, and I didn't get to know the partisans in Italy that well. *Partigiano*, they called themselves, and they were killing Germans when they could, … but they were more like loyalists, whereas the French were more like patriots, I thought. The French *Maquis*, [French Resistance guerillas], they were wonderful, but they took us to Montrevel, [a commune located in the Dordogne Department], so [that] we would avoid the Germans, and [we] went all around them, way past them and cut them off, and we were cut off, a short time later.

SH: When you first set foot on French soil, what were your orders? What were you starting to do? What were you told to do?

EL: Well, we were to move inland as fast as possible and find them. …

SH: You were looking for the Germans that were escaping.

EL: Yes. Well, we didn't know what we were going to find. We just knew that the Germans had occupied Southern France and we were there to root them out. So, we had to find them first and they weren't on the shore, but that landing craft that came in, it hit a sandbar. … A boy in a sailor's uniform opened the tailgate and ran out on the tailgate and put a big stick down and he waved the first armored car off the ship, and it promptly went underwater, disappeared. [laughter] … Their crew scrambled out and managed to get back on the tailgate, but, then, the officer in charge backed his craft off the sandbar and went in another place and we went right up on the shore, didn't even get our feet wet. [laughter]

SH: Did you ever retrieve the armored car?

EL: No. We abandoned so many things like that, yes.

SH: Tell me how quickly you moved up then.

EL: Well …

LL: Was that at night, also, or [in the] daylight?

EL: We were moving up, like, fifteen, twenty kilometers a day. We were making enormous leads, because there's only light resistance, and I don't know the exact figures, but we were quite a ways up there. We had taken a few towns, and then, came Montelimar, [a commune located in the Drôme Department, France], where the Germans put up a big fight. … In Montelimar, I was doing my sneak-and-peak, reconnoitering thing, and I found a place where I could look off the high slope, off a cliff and down, and the Germans were in the lowland below, so, I could tell them [the American forces] what was going on down there. I gave a report back to my company,
of course, and then, I went on and found another place where I could observe and, again, I
sneaked up to the precipice, so [that] they couldn't see me, and I was watching and it was a great
place to direct artillery. I told my captain about that, too. So, the first thing [he] did was; this is
what I call the "John Wayne approach." [Editor's Note: John Wayne, a popular American actor
and icon, was known for playing characters that epitomized the gung ho mentality.] I really
hated this. I knew better than this. He took the whole troop and lined them up on this bluff, and,
[when] the first train came by, he ordered everybody to fire, cannons, machine-guns. The train
could have been full of French people, not only that, but … we were saying to the Germans,
down in the valley, "Here we are, and we've got these kind of weapons and we've got," you
know, "this and that." Then, he orders me to take two artillery officers up to this other place,
which I said was a good observation post. … I brought these two captains up, and I'm a platoon
sergeant, four stripes, and they're captains, but I did suggest to them, "You know, if you can see
them, they can see you," but that didn't [sink in]. They were gung ho. They had shoulder
holsters, and they get on the porch, put up chairs, set up their tripod, with binoculars, and they're
looking down the valley, and they're smoking cigars. … I leave them like that and I'm saying,
"Oh, my God." So, the next day or the day after that, my captain says, ("John Wayne" again), he
says, "Leonard, take an armored car and pick up those two dead bodies. Bring those captains
back," and I'm thinking, "I have to go through this with one armored car,
[laughter] and the Krauts have already been there? Maybe they're waiting for me." I didn't believe that dead bodies were worth
risking an armored car and four good men, but an order is an order. We get the armored car, we
go down the road about two miles, and the way we operated was, we always pulled up and took
as much cover as we could. Sometimes, you could get behind something. If you couldn't do
that, you at least tried to get in the shade or behind some bushes or some trees. … So, I'm next
to this farmhouse and I'm talking on the radio, like this thing [points to the recorder]. All of a
sudden, I see a German soldier put his head out of the loft right above me. I have a machine-
gun up at the top. I swung it around and I get off a few shots. I hit the corner of the opening, but he's
gone. So, I said to my men, "They're all around us." Just then, two of them put their heads
around the corner of the building. That was forward. So, I swing the gun around, [laughter] and
I shoot at a corner of the building and, again, they're gone. I chipped the building a little bit.
Then, one German soldier runs right across the road in front of us, as if we weren't there, and
they're yelling at him, the other Germans, that are in back of the house, and they were, evidently,
telling him about my armored car being there. So, he dove into the ditch, but I could see him
plain, from up in the armored car. I fired a string of bullets down the ditch. I don't know if I hit
him or not. Later on, I said, "I hope I didn't hit him," yes, but we were in the midst of all that and
I wanted to put my head in, because it's heating up. So, I get down on my gunner's machine-gun
and I try and get off a round and the gun jams. I'm cursing silently, and I get back on my gun,
which didn't jam and which is running fine, and, just then, I see this heat wave in the back of the
armored car and a tremendous noise like I never heard before, sounds like a freight train going
by. … This heat wave's going up, and my barrack bags were hanging in the back there and they
were gone. So, I realized what happened, and I said, "John, we've been hit." I said, "See if you
can find the SOB and go after him." He's got the cannon. So, he gets on, he has a scope, he gets
on it, he starts scanning, and, you know, it had to be at about a twenty-degree angle off to the
side there. So, he says, "I see the SOB." [laughter] Well, he put a round in the chamber and he
says, "I got him, I got him." I said, "Good. Now, let's get the hell out of here." So, I said to the
driver, "Back up and get on the road again." It was a narrow road, with a big ditch on each side.
The armored car would turn over or at least be immobilized. So, I had to back up, couldn't turn
around. So, the driver says to me, "The car is not running." I said, "Oh, well, try and start it." So, he tried. After about three tries, he got the motor running. Then, we backed up for about two long blocks to an intersection, and my head was out all the time and I'm saying, "Right-hand down, halt. Left-hand down, halt," this narrow road and the ditches on both sides. So, finally, we got there and we turned around. We go down the road a little ways and an American soldier jumps out of the ditch alongside the road. … He's running after our armored car, and I'm yelling at my driver, "Slow down, you *!!*;" [laughter] I'm cussing him. He won't slow down, because our armored car engine was missing and he wasn't about to slow down, but I made him slow down, and this guy caught up with us, dove right in the top of the turret, and it was a guy I knew, Sergeant Thonack. … He said his armored car was parked in the driveway there and it got hit by a German antitank gun, like mine, and he said everybody was dead, so, he was bailing out. [It] turned out everybody wasn't dead. We met them in PW [a prisoner of war camp], later on.

SH: Really?

EL: Yes. So, at any rate, that was to go and get two bodies, that happened. So, again, the "John Wayne" instinct takes over. Captain Wood says to me, "Leonard, take some men and see if you can find that gun that knocked out Thonack's car." So, by this time, I'm a … wreck but I have to do it. So, I take hand grenades, put them in my pockets and I take four or five men and we start up through the brush and grass, and, when we got there, the Germans had left, but, I didn't want to do that, any way. [laughter] I was in a state, from having my head out all the time and expecting to get one in the back of the head, but, at any rate, that was Montelimar. So, I got the armored car back, a couple of days later. They fixed it. The round had gone through the armored plate on the side, over the top of the motor, took out some wires and stuff, and out the armored plate in the back. There's this big hole in the side. So, everybody's, "Ooh," and, "Ah." Captain Wood used to say, sometimes, to his men, "What do you mean there were shots coming from all over? I don't see any holes in the car." [laughter]

SH: You finally got one, right? [laughter]

EL: We got it back a couple of days later, and then, we're getting ready for this maneuver to Montrevel, but we didn't know it. … A friend of mine, Bob, had taken a captured German vehicle and got it running, a truck, and he comes careening down the road and he cuts off my armored car. … My driver swings the [steering] wheel like that and the [car] wheel goes over the edge. … What had happened was, we were on a small, limestone bridge. You didn't know it, because … the creek bed was full of young saplings, but, soon as that wheel went over, the other wheel went over and the armored car just flipped, upside down. It raked my face, going down, but, like a miracle, the front end of the armored car was on one bank and the other end was on the other bank and I was in the middle, with about this much room, hanging out. I crawled out and I'm yelling at them to follow me out the turret, you know. So, we all got out and they totaled that car. So, it was lost over a prank, … even though we had brought it back from getting hit by a an antitank gun. So, it was crazy, yes.

CH: Where was Montrevel in relation to Normandy?
EL: Oh, a long ways. Montrevel is over by Switzerland, in that area of France, you know, way over, [laughter] way over on the east side of France, and the Normandy front was on the west side of France. So, it was actually the whole of France between us, but they were making progress and we knew it.

CH: What were your initial thoughts when you got word of the invasion of Normandy?

EL: We kept hoping that they would say it's over, but they never did, and it went on for ten months more. …

SH: Just for the record, when does Montrevel take place?

EL: When? September 3, 1944. [Editor's Note: Troop B's redeployment to Montrevel began on the night of September 2nd and a battle took place there on September 3rd.] They sent us, with the Maquis, in the middle of the night, in the dark, with no lights, on these back roads around the German flank. We went around Lyon and we came in, from the side, to this little town of Montrevel. … Our mission, I found out later, was to cut off the German force that was trying to leave on the main road that we had intercepted when we turned into Montrevel, but, initially, it seemed pretty good. We had seventy, eighty prisoners, first thing. They were sleeping in the town hall. They had their guns neatly stacked. [laughter]

SH: You were the ones who found them?

EL: Yes. No, I wasn't the one, but I went in right after them and they were waking, [laughter] get them up and tell them they were prisoners, you know. … We had a couple of guys with the "killer instinct" standing over them, so [that] they wouldn't make any false move, but we had these prisoners. All our officers went in that same basement facility and they set up their CP [command post] there. I set up a mortar crew to fire on the road. Diagonally from where we were, we'd hit the main road the entrance to Montrevel. … Then, came back and I set up this road block. We're on this little road that leads up to the main road, and there were buildings on the side of us and there's this courtyard with a big area that was sheltered. Most of the vehicles were in there, but the ammunition and gas trucks couldn't make it in. So, they were parked on the road outside of town, just [where] we could see them but … they couldn't fit in. So, about that time, the Germans saw them.

SH: Saw the ammunition trucks.

EL: Yes, and they had tanks and they fired at them direct, straight trajectory fire, and they blew them up, one after the other, no misses, one had gasoline in it. We always had a gasoline truck, and an ammo truck and a kitchen truck. That was a joke. Anyway, then, we knew that we couldn't go out that way, those vehicles were burning, … we expected them to try and go along the main road. … This armored car, and me and a few men, were looking at that intersection from this side road, maybe seventy-five feet back from the intersection. So, a light tank starts to come around it and everybody in the courtyard opened up on him. [laughter] We had a lot of machine-guns and he backed right up, and then, they probably said, "Oh, there's a pretty good-sized force there." So, they told us later they thought we were a full battalion. We only had a
hundred-and-fifty men, but we had a lot of firepower, but that was when we knew how bad off we were. So, a short time later, maybe an hour or so later, I saw a light tank coming down the high ground above us. That's on the other side of this main road on the little road. It's on the little road that we're on. They would have run right into us if they kept coming, but it was a light German tank and it was going fast. … The gunner in our armored car was Renzi and the car commander was Schmetzer. … They hit that tank and it slowed almost to a crawl. Then, they hit it again and, this time, it stopped and the gun was askew and it was finished. So, that was the first thing we ran into. So, then, about an hour later, we're still looking at the intersection, "Yes, that's our position." We're worried about our back, because they could come around us. So, that's why I had the dismounted men, to look that way, but we see this big thing coming out from the side of the building, you know, about ten feet high, and we realized, when it got out there, it was a muzzle brake on a cannon, the big, round muzzle brake. It was a big Tiger tank, [a German heavy tank], and it was inching out very slowly, [laughter] and I knew as soon he got out there, he's going to swing around and we were chopped meat. So, again, Renzi is on the gun and the tank's track shows and, [as] soon as it got out about a foot or two, Renzi fired at the track and he [hit it]. The track broke and laid over on the ground. So, now, essentially, they could only go in a circle. So, they were immobilized. They slowly backed up on that track, [laughter] and the gun disappeared, but we knew they were right around the corner. I thought Schmetzer and Renzi should get a medal. They weren't even mentioned later on. It was only me, and a few men, who saw it, but, [at] any rate, the Germans eventually got some tanks in the covered area above town, the high ground, where that light tank had tried to come down the road, and then, they fired at the school building where the prisoners and our officers were. … At this time, we knew we had attacked a panzer division, [a German Army armored division], with six thousand men and attached infantry. … They had Tiger tanks, with eighty-eights, [eighty-eight-millimeter guns]. We had thirty-sevens. So, anyway, from that covered position, up on top of the hill, they fired a round and it went through the first floor of the school where the officers and the prisoners were down in the basement. All they had to do was lower their sights. So, at that point, a German officer came out, instructed by our officers, to [negotiate a] surrender. He came out with a white towel and he walked up the street past me and around the corner, where the Tiger tank was, [laughter] and he told his unit that we want to surrender. There had been fights going on the perimeter. We had men getting killed, a few, and we had various things happening. Renzi, for example, got out of the armored car and took a rifle and started shooting, and he got killed. That was a shame, because he was so heroic as a gunner there, but, at any rate, the Germans loved it. They came riding down full of [vigor], as if it was a tournament or a tennis match and they said we [the Americans] did great. We put up a great fight, they're telling us. [laughter]

SH: They are telling you guys this.

EL: Yes, they're giving us compliments, you know, saying, "You're the best unit we're ever up against," they were saying, and they were stealing our cigarettes, and they didn't give you one, [laughter] and then, they took us off and put us all in a big barn.

SH: How did they treat you, other than telling you that you had put up a good fight? Did they treat you well?
EL: The first thing they said was, "For you, the war is over, and don't worry, we're not SS. We're the old Wehrmacht, [German Army]." You know, they had esprit de corps like we did, in other words, they were saying. It was true. They treated us fine. They took us in their vehicles.

SH: How many were taken captive that day?

EL: Well, there was roughly a hundred-and-fifty men, except for the wounded, very badly wounded, and maybe half a dozen dead soldiers. They took maybe a hundred-and-forty prisoners.

SH: How did they treat the wounded? Did they allow you to bury the dead?

EL: No, but they did see that the wounded got to the hospital. I found this out later. The badly wounded were, somehow, sent to a French hospital.

SH: To a French hospital.

EL: Yes, and they buried an officer, and that was an incident, where they took us all out of the barn in the morning, after we slept there at night. ... We're all lined up in a big row, and then, they pull up three tanks, and I figured, "They're going to kill us." So, instead of that, one German soldier comes up [laughter] and he goes down the line and he says, "This one," [laughter] pulls him out of the line, gets his watch back and his binoculars, [laughter] because he had been one of the prisoners. He wanted his watch and his binoculars back, but, the Germans pulling up the tanks and all and lining [us] up, they wanted us to see their ceremony for a fallen officer. You know, they had these big shells that the eighty-eights used. They were like that big, and they used them as ornaments and, if I remember correctly, they buried him on the spot, but he was an officer. ... At any rate, they went through this exercise. It was like a traditional exercise that they did, and then, they loaded us up in their vehicles, and whatever, and started driving us up to Germany.

SH: Did they separate the officers from the men?

EL: The officers, yes, the non-coms, no. That happened later, in Germany. The non-coms and officers went to a separate prison camp and the enlisted men went to another one, and the Germans could draw on the enlisted men for work details. They couldn't do that to us but it was quite a thing, getting to Germany, because the French Maquis occasionally attacked the column. ... I didn't see any of that action, but I know the column would stop, and then, the Germans would tell us, and, also, the American planes would strafe it, and one boy I knew, Decoteau, was killed by an American plane strafing on that march. ... Then, we got to a border town, Alsace-Lorraine, I guess it was, where the area was Alsace-Lorraine. I forget the name of the town, but I'd written on my hat, in French, "I am an American." A couple of civilians went by and I'd say, "Bon jour," and, pretty soon, there was a half a dozen there. The Germans were fixing the vehicle and, pretty soon, there was a big, unruly crowd all around the armored half-track, and they were yelling, "Let the Americans go." ... The Germans were getting nervous. There's only about four or five of them. So, they sent for an infantryman and he came with a rifle and a bayonet, and he went in that crowd and they disappeared like magic. He looked like he was
going to run them all through, but that was the first time I almost got in trouble with the Germans. [laughter]

SH: Were you aware of any Germans that spoke English?

EL: No, I don't remember meeting any. When we were interrogated, later on, in Germany, there was a German [captain] from Detroit, Michigan, who spoke American and he'd talk about the baseball games. … He said, "You look to me like a good soldier and I'll bet I could get you a commission in the SS," and I said, "The only thing I can tell you, Captain, is my name, rank and serial number." I wouldn't even answer his requests. So, that was the beginning of being a prisoner.

SH: Were you separated from your men or did you stay together as a group?

EL: If you were lucky, you had one man that you knew with you. I was with Skoda for awhile. One prison camp was a tent camp. It was a pre-staging camp. … The American B-17s, [a four-engine heavy bomber], flew over the second day we were there and they opened their bomb bays just before they got to this tent camp, and just as they got over the tent camp, they let the bombs out. So, Skoda, and I, old soldiers, we didn't think anything of it. We said, "You know, they'll land a mile from here," and, of course, they did. There was a railroad terminal about a mile down the road, but there was a panic in the camp. Guys were running all over and jumping in the ground. They thought that the B-17s were dropping the bombs right on us, but that was an experience. … Skoda had two bars of soap and he bartered them with a Czech guard, who was in [the Wehrmacht]. You know, he was German, but he was really a Czech. … He got two pocketknives, good-sized pocketknives. … He gave me one and I kept it all through. I brought it home with me, but I had to hide it every time I got searched. It was like a contest.

SH: The people who took you prisoner told you that they were the Wehrmacht.

EL: Yes.

SH: Were there other people who had been conscripted into the German Army?

EL: Yes. Actually, I think this unit was largely self-contained and largely German. I don't think there were any other nationalities, ethnic nationalities, in there, but, once we got into [the] prison camps, there were a lot of men who were not happy to be in the uniform in Italy, once, we ran into cavalry, Germany cavalry. They were really Mongols. When they overran them, in the Russian sector, they enlisted them in the Army, and there they were, in Italy, on horseback, and I didn't want to shoot any of the horses, but we did take them all prisoner.

CH: How long were you a prisoner of war?

EL: Actually, it was nine months, about, but, for six months, I was classified as missing-in-action. So, my mother was considered a Gold Star mother and she was going to Mass every day, hoping that … I wasn't dead, and my father, of course, was going to Mass with her. … Then, I got a letter through to them, from the Red Cross, after about six months. [Editor's Note: Gold
Star mothers were mothers who had lost a son in the service. Service Flags, displayed by families with children serving in the US Armed Forces, featured a Blue Star for each living child and a Gold Star for each deceased child.

SH: The first camp that you talked about was in the Alsace-Lorraine area.

EL: No, the first camp was very close to Limburg, and that makes me think [of] when they first put us on these trains, in Germany.

SH: Were you transported by train after you were taken prisoner or were you walking?

EL: Yes. For awhile, we were on trains once, in the early part, the first train we got on was a passenger train, and they put us in the second car. … We were going through the woods, steaming along, and, all of a sudden, the train stopped, everybody jumped out and ran in the woods. So, I said, "Come on, let's go." I opened the door and there's a German soldier with his rifle pointing at me, saying, "Stay there." So, I had to stay in there with my guys, and this plane circled around, was a P-38 [Lightning, an American fighter] with the twin fuselage, and he swooped down and he missed the engine. He hit the first car in back of it. We were in the second car. [laughter] Eventually, he flew away, and they all came back, got on the train, and then, we continued on our way, but that wasn't as bad as the boxcars. They put us in boxcars with a little opening on the top. They were like cattle cars, and there were so many guys, you couldn't lay down, you could squat, maybe, if you were lucky. … We had tin cans to go in, then throw it out the opening, and they gave us a package of Limburger cheese and a piece of black bread, or a loaf of black bread. So, I sat on the black bread. I used it as a stool. It tasted horrible to me and I smelled the Limburger cheese and we threw it out the opening. Later on, I would have been glad to have it. … They would park us in railroad terminals and the Allies would come over and bomb railroad terminals. … If you were lucky, … we didn't get hit, but that was an experience. … Eventually, we got to Limburg, and then, to the Poland border, a town called Kustrin, [now Kostrzyn nad Odrą in Poland]. It's on the Oder River, and the biggest German town was Frankfurt-on-the-Oder, [approximately thirty-three kilometers to the south], and there was an enormous prison camp there, with Allied prisoners.

SH: Was that considered a stalag, [a German prisoner of war camp]?

EL: Yes, that was definitely a stalag.

SH: What did they do with you there? How long were you there?

EL: Well, see, they couldn't force us to work, but the food was so bad and the barracks were so cold. They gave us a big slice of black bread, a square of margarine and a spoonful of sugar, and then, ersatz tea, but, before that, you got turnip soup that had no turnips. It was just yellow water. [laughter] They had used turnips, I guess, to make it, but there were none in it. So, in thirty days in there, I lost thirty pounds. So, meantime, we had done things, like, we stripped an empty barracks building that was a recreation [hall], used for recreation. We stripped all the wood out of it inside and put it in our stoves, to get a little heat. [laughter] They gave you half a blanket, a well-worn half a blanket, for a mattress, and another half to put over you, but they
were very worn. Anyway, we were stripping this building and I said, "Sooner or later, it's going to fall down," but some German guard found [out] about it. [laughter] … Next thing you know, they had to bring the soldiers in. … We're laughing at them. I said, "They're guarding that damn building. It's stripped and what good is having all those soldiers there now?" but that's the kind of things you were in to, we had a master sergeant, he's a rough, old bird. He would cut up the bread and divide the things, and, when a German officer or a non-commissioned officer came in, they wanted you to call everybody to attention. So, this old master sergeant would yell at the top of his lungs, "Horse-shh," horseshit, [laughter] and the Germans would smile and we'd all snap to and stand at attention. [laughter] … Then, in the morning, when we had formation, he'd call everybody to attention by saying, "F-U." [laughter] That was going on all the time and, one time, a young American soldier was baiting a soldier outside the fence. He was doing rifle duty. He was holding a rifle, and this American soldier was baiting him.

SH: Baiting him?

EL: He was telling him things like, "You're going to be in here, we're going to be out there," and this guard was getting madder and madder. So, pretty soon, he said, "You stay there," and he told a guard, another guard, to watch him and he'd go around and get him. I knew he'd bring him to headquarters and they would beat him up. They beat up some guys pretty badly. So, I yelled, "Everybody over here," and there was always fifty men in the yard. So, everybody came over and I said, "Get around this guy and swallow him up." So, we all got around him and I said, "Beat it." [laughter] He left, through the crowd, and he wasn't there when the soldier got there, but, then, we all dispersed. We didn't want to be there when the soldier got there either. So, that's the kind of things that were going on, some guys would escape and they'd bring them back, take them up to headquarters and beat them unmercifully and you were in the middle of; you were worse [than] in the middle of Germany. You were over on the Polish border. So, escaping was a joke. You had to go through all of Germany to get safe.

SH: Did they move you then from Frankfurt-on-the-Oder?

EL: Yes. Well, some of my friends were on a farm, and they knew I was losing weight, and so on. … They came back to get me, and they were all robust. They were saying, "We got all the potatoes we could eat. We don't have to work hard. You've got a good bunk and a spring on the mat." So, they talked me into going with them, and that was an experience. We were trying to sabotage the farm and, at the same time, not let them know it, we would make the threshing machine breakdown by feeding it too much. … Then, I would always put bad potatoes in with the good ones, and they caught me doing that. They threatened to shoot me, but, at any rate, we kept doing things like that whenever we could. We broke all the pitchforks by working too hard and I was driving an ox team. I loved that. You'd hook up these two oxen, they weren't very big, but I'd hook them up to a wagon and you guided them with a stick, like tapping them, and they just moved at one speed. … They'd load the wagon up with potatoes and I'd have to take it to town. I could escape any time I wanted, but who wanted to leave and be in the middle of Germany? [laughter] and they warned us that the German farmers would shoot us with shotguns. They were all hunters and they'd love to shoot a prisoner. So, at any rate, I'm doing this one day and this rebel is doing it with me and he says, "You know how dumb these oxen are?" He says, "Watch, I'll show you." So, he leaves them alone and they walked right off the road (the road
took a little turn) and then, the wagon turned over. So, the potatoes were all on the ground. I went into town and I told them what happened, and the next thing you know, they send a wagon out with another team of oxen and they'd fix it up, but that's what it was like on the farm. We were crazy, and we'd eat a big mixing bowl of potato soup, and, if you wanted, you could have another one. There was one guy who used to do that, and then, he'd throw it up, [laughter] but he'd been so starved in the stalag that he [felt he needed it]. … I stole beans from the cow barn, where the oxen were, and we'd throw them in the soup. I used to eat the raw wheat. It would turn into gum in your mouth, like a big wad of gum, but I felt it was nourishment. It was quite a thing. I watched them herd sheep with their dogs. That was magnificent. The dogs were so good. They would run over the backs of the sheep, sometime, to get to the other side. … When something was coming down the road, they would get all those sheep to stay on one side of the road. I couldn't believe it, you know, amazing. They had a young horse and I looked in his mouth and the German says, "You know how many years [old it is]?" I said, "He's about five," and he says, "Wow," he still had cups. I could tell, but we didn't get to drive the horses. That was, you know, a special job, but they had slave laborers on that farm, Czechs. They were civilian slave laborers. They had them in houses. …

SH: Did you hear any news of any of the other POW camps, work camps or anything? Did any information reach you?

EL: No, no communication back and forth but there were all kinds of things going on in the big camps. We had a group that, if we got a Red Cross package, or part of one, there would be some cigarettes and they would assess everybody one cigarette. So, then, they had maybe ten thousand cigarettes, and with these Czech guards, they were buying parts for things, and they claimed to have seven rifles and the ammunition. … That bothered me, because the last thing I wanted them to do was start shooting and get us all killed, which was what would have happened, but they felt, "It's nice to have, you never know."

AP: At this point, you were in Poland, correct?

EL: No, we were on the border, in Germany, but on the border with Poland.

AP: Did you hear any news of the extermination of the Jews?

EL: We knew it was happening. Yes, we heard news about it.

SH: When did you hear it?

EL: When I first got into this big camp, in Kustrin, they stopped this truck we're on. We're looking over the side and there's a horse and wagon detail and they've got dead bodies on it, and they're throwing them in this shed like wood. … Then, all the horror stories I'd ever heard came into being. … So, I said, "I hope … that's [not] going to happen to us." This German guard said, "Oh, they're Russians. Don't worry about it. They're animals." "We treat the Americans good," and their idea of good was to lose thirty pounds in thirty days, but they never really beat us or anything, unless you tried to escape or you got in trouble some way. I would say they weren't
abusive, but they were starving us, and they had Red Cross packages, but they wouldn't give them out.

SH: Really?

EL: We found that out later.

AP: Did you know about the gas chambers or about the executions of Jews?

EL: We didn't know all the details, but we knew there were gas chambers and we knew they were executing the Jewish people and gypsies and, sometimes, Catholics. … My buddy, Withers, and I found out, one morning, that we had lice, and we're both shocked. We're checking each other over every morning. So, we decided to go take a shower, [laughter] and we're laughing all the way down to the place where you take a shower, saying, "[As] soon as we get in there, they're going to turn on the gas," but, of course, they didn't. We took a cold shower. … We knew about it, but we didn't know the details. That came out later, the numbers and the horrible details.

SH: Macabre sense of humor.

EL: What troubled me the most, after the war, was to know that the German civilian population didn't really try to stop this. They pretended it wasn't happening, but they knew it was happening. They saw the Jews being rounded up and everything. They knew what was happening. They knew; the Germans would, I mean, they would tell one another, when they came back from trips and the train people, they knew what was happening.

SH: Were there any Jewish soldiers in your group?

EL: Oh, yes. We had several, like this one boy that had all the souvenirs. Yes, he was Jewish.

SH: When you were in the prison camp, did they separate them?

EL: No, I never heard of anybody being singled out for being Jewish, and I'm sure there were some Jewish boys in there. There were a lot of Air Force prisoners, you know, they came down with their parachutes and wound up in PW.

SH: They were not separated out.

EL: There were camps that were designated for the flyboys initially, but they got so crowded that, after awhile, they put them along with everybody. … There were two of them that never washed and we called them the "Gold Dust Twins." [laughter]

SH: Who, the flyboys?
EL: Yes. … In fact, we blamed them for the lice when we got it, because they were bunking next to us, but, at any rate, I never saw a Jewish soldier, you know, get in trouble over being Jewish.

SH: Were there any incidents where you felt that people were being played against each other by the German guards?

EL: No, I never saw anything like that. I remember one uplifting incident. … I had a toothache when I was out on the farm, in Hackenough. So, I said I needed some relief. So, the old guard, "Pop," we called him, he's worried about me. He calls me, "Len-nard." He's going to give me the rifle when the Russians come, and he tells his superiors on the telephone and they send a young corporal over. He's got one arm. He lost the other in the East, and he's dapper as could be, a good-looking, young man and he's very dapper and he's got a pistol on the side. … He said he was going to take me to the dentist, to be ready the next morning, "Just one thing." I said, "I have a friend, back at the camp. I know he's very hungry. Could we bring him some bread?" He shook his head like that and, the next morning, he showed up with this beautiful loaf of bread, like this big, and it wasn't the black bread, it was a real nice rye bread. … I really wanted a piece myself, but I had gained back the thirty pounds and a couple more. So, I was fine, but Skoda, back in camp, (he wouldn't come out with us), and I brought it to him and it made him happy. [laughter]

SH: Did the prisoner of war camp increase in size or did it stay the same from the time you got there?

EL: Well, I was caught almost eighty days in a regular stalag and, during that time, like, I had no shirt, because I'd been sleeping under an armored car and it rained and I got soaked and I took off my shirt. So, I had no shirt, and there were Americans who had extra shirts. I couldn't get any of them to give one to me.

[TAPE PAUSED]

EL: That German corporal took me to a dentist. They did a kind of root canal, filled the tooth, and there I was, on a train, with all these German civilians and this corporal guarding me. … I'm thinking, "I could take that pistol away from him, but what would I do?" you know, and he was such a nice guy. [laughter] … He got me this big loaf of bread for Skoda and I didn't feel like, I had no heart [for] trying to escape, but I thought that was an uplifting incident. I hope he survived the war. …

SH: How did you keep your spirits up?

EL: Well, I was kind of arrogant, you know. … I never got submissive, and I was lucky, in a way, because, you know, they could have done a number on me, any number of times, but I felt it was a matter of time. We were going to get out of it, but, then, there was an order from Hitler to kill all the prisoners near the end. That was upsetting.

SH: Did you know that that order had been issued?
EL: I heard about it. See, that's the thing. You could hear all these news [bits], the British prisoners had a radio. Using this cigarette thing and bribing the guards, they got enough parts for a shortwave radio and they used to copy the BBC news every day. … They'd sneak a copy over to us in the American compound, and so, we knew, approximately, what was going on all the time, and I started to talk about not being able to get a shirt from any of the Americans. I was a little bitter about that, you know. Then, there was a French compound right next to us. They had new prisoners coming in and they took all their extra clothes and put it in a pile in the middle, and they took the new prisoners, "What do you need? Take this, take that." So, through the fence, I told them, "Je n'ai pas la chemise?" [laughter] and they talked among themselves a few minutes. They looked me over, they give me a shirt that fit me and I said, "Jeez, you couldn't get it from an American; a Frenchman gave me this shirt." I thought that was uplifting, too, you know.

CH: How did the other soldiers feel? How was the overall morale?

EL: The other prisoners?

CH: Yes.

EL: Well, if you think of the story where … this guy was baiting the German guard and they were stealing the wood, and the non-cons were swearing at them and not letting them know it, you know that … nobody was giving in. It was good morale.

ML: And didn't they steal the wood from the outhouse … and get in trouble?

EL: No. Speaking of the outhouse, some guys would not eat their full piece of bread and they would put it under their blanket to save it, and there was one guy who cracked up a little bit and he was stealing the bread from the other guys. So, they got in a mass hysteria shape, they wanted to take this guy and throw him down the latrine head first, and I thought that was pretty extreme. So, a couple of us started instigating and talking around them. We got them to abandon the idea, he (the culprit) was probably mentally unbalanced by this time. He had been hungry for, maybe, two years. Some of them were in there much longer than I was. … I thought I was always worried about this mass action that might take place when you get a bunch of men [together]. I stopped about ten boys, in the CCCs once, from scrubbing another boy who they felt wouldn't take a shower, and I caught them, you know, just before they started. … I gave them a good calling down, and I got the guy to take a shower, [laughter] but I always felt like [that].

SH: Where you were at, at your stalag and there on the farm, were the Americans able to penetrate that far with their bombing runs, or was there any action, any fighting, going on anywhere around you?

EL: No. Speaking of the outhouse, some guys would not eat their full piece of bread and they would put it under their blanket to save it, and there was one guy who cracked up a little bit and he was stealing the bread from the other guys. So, they got in a mass hysteria shape, they wanted to take this guy and throw him down the latrine head first, and I thought that was pretty extreme. So, a couple of us started instigating and talking around them. We got them to abandon the idea, he (the culprit) was probably mentally unbalanced by this time. He had been hungry for, maybe, two years. Some of them were in there much longer than I was. … I thought I was always worried about this mass action that might take place when you get a bunch of men [together]. I stopped about ten boys, in the CCCs once, from scrubbing another boy who they felt wouldn't take a shower, and I caught them, you know, just before they started. … I gave them a good calling down, and I got the guy to take a shower, [laughter] but I always felt like [that].

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SH: Really?

EL: And then, they dispersed, went back into the prison camp, or they went on German farms close by, and, eventually, the Russians passed through and the Germans rounded them [the escaped POWs] up and took them to another stalag, but I wasn't in that group. I was out on the farm, but what they did to us, one morning, German soldiers came there with an armored detachment, they got us all on the road, with a lot of other prisoners, and they marched us to another stalag, Luckenwalde.

SH: The Germans did this.

EL: Yes, and we knew that … the Russians were coming. It was just a matter of time. So, we went to Luckenwalde and the four of us who had been on the farm, we had stayed together, and Mitchell, my old platoon sergeant, had somehow managed to get wire cutters and a road map. … We were in Luckenwalde for awhile and the Russians came in and took over the post. They were giving us horses to eat, stuff like that. They were giving us bean soup or pea soup, tiny beans that had holes in them, and in every hole had been a little black bug, and me, being the inquiring mind, I had to take one out, spread him out, say, "Six legs, that's an insect." [laughter] … I used to put them on the side of my canteen, you know, rather than eat them. So, this coalminer says to me, "Hey, Leonard, why are you taking out the seeds?" [laughter] I said, "If you look close at those seeds, you'd see they've got six legs." [laughter] "Ah, that's protein," [laughter] and he kept right on eating them. You know, I was a little fussy, but the Russians gave us more of that soup, instead of less, and they did provide us with these animals, mostly horses, some of the men were butchers and they would butcher them, and my friend cooked up a roast and we had it.

LL: But, he told you it was pork, right?

EL: … He told me it was pork. I didn't know until later it was horse.

ML: Because you told him specifically …

LL: "Whatever you do, don't come back with horse."

EL: He knew how I felt about horses. [laughter]

SH: How long were you a prisoner of the Russians?

EL: Well, after a couple of weeks, we knew we had to get out of there, because the rumor was that they were holding us so [that] they could take us to Russia. … They said they were going to ship us out of a Russian seaport and send us back to America, and the reason being that the American government would pay them so much money for each prisoner that they repatriated. So, there's no way we wanted to go to Russia, me and my three friends. So, one morning, about three-thirty, I get a tap on the shoulder and it's Jimmy O'Brien, and he says, "Come on, we're going through the fence. We don't want … anybody else to hear us." So, Mitchell, with the
pliers, cut up an opening. The Russians were guarding, but they were few and far between. It was a piece of cake to get out. So, we cut out the fence, we're on the road in a few minutes. [laughter] Mitch has the road map. He's got us oriented, yes, and we know that the American lines were over there someplace. So, we're walking to the west and, eventually, we came on a bombed-out house. It had no roof on it, had feather beds, and we plunked ourselves down on them, but we couldn't stay, but that was an abandoned farmhouse that was hit by a bomb. … The big danger was that we should run into Russians and they would shoot us. So, finally, one night, we did run into Russians, but they had pulled back and they were cleaning their guns, and they were a cavalry outfit, like us. … They had armored cars, and they were American make armored cars, and they had jeeps. So, they were using the equipment that we had. They weren't friendly. They were standoffish. There was a Russian officer and he wanted to know where we came from, but I wanted to get something to eat. So, I kept saying, there was a German woman there, and I was saying, "Drei tage, nichts essen," "Three days, nothing to eat." "Haben ze." So, the Russian officer says, "Ah, you came from Essen, [Germany]." [laughter] So, I explained to him where we came from, and he said to the woman, "Give them some food," and she gave us canned meat. … It turned out to be horse meat, too, but, at that time, it was welcome, because we were starving. So, we walked twenty-six miles to the American lines and we came on this American outfit, was [a] reconnaissance unit, like ours, piled up with riflemen on the back of it. They were gung ho, making time toward Berlin, and we thought they would take us in. "No, no way, we've got a mission. Keep going that way." [laughter] So, we kept going and we came to a "repple-depple" [replacement depot, where they] took all our clothes and threw them away and they sprayed us with DDT, and then, they gave us clean clothes and a bath. … Then, the next day, they flew us to Le Havre, on the beach, Lucky Strike Beach, they call it. … We flew in this DC-9 that was a cargo plane, [a C-47, with] a young pilot, and I said, "Are we going to run into any[thing]?” He says, "No.” He said, "This is a piece of cake. No, we won't have any trouble.” So, I said, "I noticed you're the only one who has a parachute.” [laughter] I said, "You jump out that door, I'm going on top of you.” [laughter] He just laughed and we got there without incident, but we were rattling around on the floor. It was a cargo [plane]. There are no seats or anything and there was turbulence and we're bouncing up and down.

SH: How many of you were in that plane, just the four of you?

EL: No, there was maybe ten soldiers in that group. They were straggling in from other places. There was a choice. You could go to Paris or you could go home on the Queen Mary. The Queen Mary went so fast, the submarines couldn't get a bead on it. So, they said they would take us home on that and we'd be home in no time. So, I couldn't help but go for that. Later on, I was sorry I didn't go to Paris [laughter] but that ship was something. I mean, we were on the decks, under the decks, under the staircases; there were American soldiers every place.

SH: When was this? When were you finally on the Queen Mary?

EL: I'd say that was, well, it could have been August, May, June, May; no, May, I think, [was] when the Russians freed us. I have that kind of thing …

SH: Okay, you can check it later.
EL: In my papers someplace, but it was past spring. It was coming on to summer, I would say. …

SH: In other words, victory in Europe had already taken place, but the Japanese had not surrendered yet.

EL: No, no. The war wasn't over yet in Germany. So, it had to be before the Armistice. …

LL: And how long were you in Le Havre?

EL: Le Havre, I don't know, maybe four or five days. They wouldn't let us do anything. [laughter] I felt guilty. I said, "You know, I surrendered. Why are you treating me so nice?" That was my viewpoint. …

SH: When did your parents find out that you were a prisoner of war?

EL: Well, I got this letter through to them about six months after I was captured, which was maybe in March.

SH: All right.

LL: When did they find out that you … were free and coming home?

EL: I don't think they knew until I walked in the door. [laughter]

SH: That must have been a shock.

EL: Yes. You know, I'd read accounts in the paper of four boys from Jersey City, in a jeep, missing-in-action. They had everything wrong, but, you know, they didn't know about Montrevel. They didn't know about the German panzer division. All they knew was that we went the wrong way, we got captured, something like that.

SH: Oh, no.

EL: But, I kept a copy of that, and, later on, when I was trying to get a hearing aid from the VA [Veterans Administration], I used a copy of that to verify my story, yes. … I think, after that round went through my armored car and made the heat waves, I think, after that, I had trouble hearing. I used to give the phone to my corporal and let him relay the message to me, but I didn't think much about it, but I was having trouble after that. So, that was probably the loudest noise I heard during the war, but there were air raids in England, there was the air raid in Algiers, there was artillery fire. This captain who was so "John Wayne," he put us up one night under a seventy-five-millimeter battery that was firing all night. [laughter] I said, "Captain, how can we sleep here?" There were rounds going off and you could hear them going through the air. They make a noise like a train, and he says, "Hey, it's safe." So, that was the night when it rained and I lost my shirt, but he was something else. One night in Italy, we were just new in combat. So, at night, the cavalry's supposed to pull back a little bit, hide in the woods, or take cover behind
something, get secure. Captain Woods says, "I don't see any concealment." He says, "Just circle all the vehicles in a big ring, like the covered wagons," he said. I said, "Oh, my God." There's high ground on the other side of us. So, I said to myself, "You know, this is ridiculous." The first pop of daylight, when it got bright, the mortar shells started coming in from that hill and they were getting closer and closer. So, then, it was, "Mount up, everybody, move out," and it just was what I expected to happen, but there were so many mistakes like that. It was upsetting but it was part of the war.

SH: When you came back on the Queen Mary, what was your reception like? Did you come quietly into New York Harbor or was there a celebration?

EL: Well, the way I remember it is, I don't remember even if I got home, but I did get to Atlantic City. They put us up in a big hotel. Everybody had their own room, an expensive room. We could have breakfast in bed, if we wanted it.

CH: Wow.

EL: And then, they started all the medical tests, and they treated us like vacationers. They couldn't do enough for us, at the Hotel Dennis, and we stayed there for about fifteen, sixteen days. [laughter] That's when they told me I couldn't hear [laughter] and I said, "Really?" He said, "Yes, you lost quite a bit of your hearing," So, they discharged me with a disability.

SH: What did you do then after that? The war is still not over in Europe and the war is still going on in the Pacific.

EL: Yes, they mustered us out, and this was September when they mustered me out, and the war was over in Europe.

SH: The war was over by then.

EL: Yes, and when did Japan surrender? Do you remember?

SH: In September. September is when the treaty was signed.

EL: September, yes. So, they surrendered shortly after, but there was no question that we were going to be mustered out. They felt that we should be turned loose, and I found out I had twenty-seven cavities in my teeth, and they blamed it on being a prisoner of war, but they gave us a good physical and sent us home.

SH: Did you take advantage of the GI Bill?

EL: No. I wish I had. Again, I wanted to get a job and I wanted to get married. I wanted to have a family like my mother and father. They were my idols. They had a big family, we all stuck together, we all liked each other, and I wanted to do that. In Italy, sometimes, I'd crawl into the blanket and say, "Please, send me home to have a family. I just want to live to be forty years old." [laughter]
SH: Just want to be forty. [laughter] Do any of you have any questions that you would like to ask?

CH: Were you part of any prisoner of war organizations?

EL: Did I what, dear?

CH: Were you in any prisoner of war organizations?

EL: You mean sort of probing to see if we had suffered some kind of setback?

CH: Yes, just any kind of organizations that had to do with the war or being a prisoner of war.

EL: No.

LL: You mean American Legion and VFW?

CH: Yes, anything, any veterans' associations.

EL: There were no required meetings like that, only medical appointments.

CH: Okay.

EL: And we were having a good time, drinking and eating and having a good time. It was like a vacation, but we had these medical appointments that kept cropping up.

CH: What about the National Guard?

EL: The National Guard, I went out to the Armory and the Guard hadn't started yet, but they had a kind of a substitute Home Guard, and they had horses. [laughter] So, I joined up and rode horses with them, and then, when the Guards started up again, I joined up with them. … They made me a lieutenant and they gave me a company, eventually. That was a year later, or two years later. I went away to camp with them a couple times.

LL: What about the Essex Troop?

EL: The Essex Troop was the civilian name for this National Guard unit.

SH: Okay.

EL: It had a long tradition and went back to World War I, and so, [what] everybody talked about is the Essex Troop. We called it the 102nd, starting out. Then, later on, when we were made the 117th, over in Africa, … there was a separation. The 102nd, … the half of the regiment that stayed in England, made the invasion of Normandy. We were in Africa, Italy and Southern France by then.
SH: Any other questions?

CH: Do you feel fortunate in being able to see so many different parts of the world?

EL: I do. I got a big thrill out of it every time we went to some place new. I loved it. I couldn't wait to get to Africa and I thought I was going to find jungles. [laughter] Algeria's nothing like that, and I was really titillated, all through the war, by going to new places and seeing things; we joked about always wanting to go on the Riviera, and here we were. [laughter]

CH: Going back, did any of the fighting in Rome affect the statues and ancient artifacts there?

EL: We never ran into any desecration of any statues to speak of. In all the time I remember, we never had an occasion to be involved in that, but, speaking of monuments, after the war, the people of Montrevel, they knew that we had liberated the town. It only lasted for eleven hours, [laughter] but they were extremely grateful. They felt so appreciative, they wanted to honor us. So, they built a monument and, [laughter] if you wanted to subscribe for it, for a hundred bucks, [laughter] … you could get your name on the tablet on the monument. I'm on there. [laughter]

SH: Are you there?

EL: Yes. I never went to see it, though; I'd like to go see it. I'd like to see the town and the street I was on when that Tiger tank tried to go around the corner, and so on. I'd love to be back there again and see it once again. I'm sure it hasn't changed that much, you know, but the people of Montrevel have always adopted us and felt like we were their liberators, and they had parties going over there, … when the war was over, that would celebrate their liberation, and some of the Essex Troopers would get to go on a junket with them. I never went.

LL: And there were forces that went toward Montrevel, but not everybody ended up in Montrevel, right? … Wasn't there a split?

SH: A Troop and B Troop?

EL: Well, to tell you the truth, this was a special force that was made up of one reinforced company "B" Troop with an extra platoon from another company. So, what the rest of the squadron was doing, I really am not sure of this.

LL: But, I mean, some people had gotten there, but … weren't there some historical accounts of people who had been at Montrevel, but not in the situation where you were?

SH: Had pulled back?

EL: Well, there were several people who got out after the shooting started. Sergeant (Cronin?) was one of them, I think he was a lieutenant by then, but he got out on the road going north, toward Germany, and then, cutting off and going around, but he's the only one I can think of, off hand.
SH: We thank you so much for hosting us and talking to us.

EL: Yes, well, it's all in there, and, sometimes, it comes out, sometimes, it doesn't, you know.

SH: We are certainly blessed for being here to hear it.

EL: You're easy to talk to.

SH: Thank you.

LL: And how old were you then when you came back? How old were you when you came back?

EL: How old? See, that was September of '45, I was twenty-six.

LL: Okay, so, he's had quite a few years beyond that.

ML: What have you been doing since then? [laughter]

EL: I felt like an old man sometimes, when I had young guys in our unit, yes.

SH: We thank you so much.

CH: Thank you very much.

EL: You're welcome. I hope it's of some value. I get pretty voluble. [laughter]

SH: We have enjoyed it thoroughly.

[TAPE PAUSED]

CH: This continues an interview with Mr. Edward J. Leonard.

SH: Okay, there was one more story to add to the record.

EL: There was an incident in Italy, where I always, almost always, led the column with a jeep. It was easy to maneuver and get out of spots, and this one day, there was a report that there might be a tank ahead in a small village. They asked me to move back and let the armored car go up front. So, I did, and then, a short while later, Lieutenant Egbert was on the phone, saying, "They're moving way too slow. Leonard, get up there in the armored car and get the column moving again." [laughter] So, I got out of the jeep and I got in the armored car, and I had a driver in the jeep named Gordon Chance. I called him "Bonne Chance," ["good luck"], but, anyway, he was just such a nice boy, very polite. ... He was following me with the jeep and I was in the armored car now and I'm looking back and giving him this, "Follow me," and just then, a big explosion. Gordon Chance went up in the air. He was on fire and he was dead.
immediately, and he was sitting over a full tank of gas and he went over a road mine. … Because I was looking back, waving him on, I saw the whole thing. So, I jumped out of the armored car and I threw a blanket over him, but he was quite dead. It blew all his clothes off. He just had one boot on and he was still burning when I put the blanket over him, and I had been sitting next to him just minutes before. So, I was very fortunate in a sense but, then, we couldn't move, because we didn't know how many more mines were there. … They had to get a unit and they'd probe with bayonets and found them all, put telephone wire on them. We withdrew and they pulled them all out, (in case they were booby-trapped). That's the way they did it, but that's when I lost Gordon Chance, and he was a marvelous soldier. He came from the Chesapeake Bay area and he wanted me to come and visit him and we were going to fish and hunt ducks. He was a drinking partner, too, when we went to pubs together, and he was such a polite, nice boy.

SH: And his name was?

EL: Gordon Chance.

SH: Chance.

EL: And I never could find any mention of him in the records, either, and that was very sad. … I remember the air pilots, we had these small Piper Clubs, and the pilot said, "We don't see a tank ahead, but that doesn't mean it isn't there. It just means we don't see it," [laughter] but there wasn't a tank there. We eventually got through that. … If there was one, it had withdrawn but that was a very sad incident and a real close call for me. I bandaged up one of the other men, and the officers, the medical officers, used to pay me compliments. They'd say, "We hate to take your bandages off them." [laughter] I loved that.

SH: A good compliment.

LL: Did the medics arrive?

EL: Oh, the medics came driving down, at about sixty miles an hour, into this area where we knew now there were mines, but they were back there a half a mile, and all they knew was they had to go pick up this wounded man and this body. So, they're coming down. They're in a panic and, fortunately, they didn't go over anything, but they could have well blown up themselves, but there were a lot of mine incidents like that, especially in Italy.

SH: Again, we thank you, and we will turn it off again.

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

Reviewed by Melinda Kinhofer 10/7/09
Reviewed by Nicholas Koval 10/7/09
Reviewed by Stephen Melton 10/7/09
Reviewed by Christian Martinez 10/7/09
Reviewed by Kristie Thomas 10/7/09
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 10/16/09