

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH SPERO J. ARBES

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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Michael Golden: This begins an interview with Mr. Spero J. Arbes on October 11, 2007, in Howell, New Jersey, with Michael Golden, Mrs. Arbes and Sandra Stewart Holyoak.

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: For the record, can you tell us where and when you were born?

Spero Arbes: Where was I born?

SSH: Yes.

SA: I think I was born in a hospital in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

SSH: What was the date?

SA: Let's see, I was born ...

Dita Spring Arbes (Wife): August 6th.

SSH: 1924.

SA: 1924, year.

SSH: August 6, 1924. We just want to make sure we have the right Spero Arbes.

SA: Well, I've got to think, honey.

SSH: That is all right; I am just teasing you.

SA: August 6, 1924.

MG: Do you know anything about your parents' history before coming to America?

SA: Do I know where my parents were from?

MG: Yes.

SA: Greece.

MG: Both were from Greece.

SA: Both were from Greece.

MG: Did they immigrate to this country?

DSA: Yes.

SA: Yes, they came over; I wasn't born, of course. [laughter] My father and his brother, my mother--they didn't know each other at that time--they came across from Greece to Rikers Island; not Rikers Island. What's that?

DSA: Ellis.

SSH: Ellis Island?

SA: Yes, and they had to pass all kind of physicals. If you had a tear in your eye, you got back on the boat and shipped back home. Did you know that?

SSH: Yes, I did.

SA: They were very rough on them. Today, now, they go down there, they just walk into the country. [laughter]

SSH: How did your mother and father meet?

SA: My Aunt Anna and my mother settled in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and, evidently, my mother met my father and Uncle Pete, and so forth, they also [met], probably. They got together and got married.

SSH: Pete married Anna?

DSA: Yes.

SSH: Did the two brothers marry the two sisters?

SA: The two brothers, yes. In fact, my Uncle Pete owned that restaurant over there in--what's it?

DSA: Elizabeth.

SA: No, the one that they had, that Andy took over.

DSA: (Colby's?), Freehold.

SA: Yes.

DSA: (Crab Colby's?), which is Outback now.

SSH: Really?

DSA: But, it used to be (Crab Colby's?). The wealth is on the other side of the family, not our side. [laughter]

SA: Yes, I can't give you any much of the history on that, because I wasn't even born yet.
[laughter]

SSH: Did you have brothers and sisters?

SA: I have two brothers and my sister that just died, about a year now?

DSA: About a year, yes, Holly.

SA: And I was a misfit. [laughter]

DSA: Oh, honey, don't say that.

SSH: Why?

SA: No, I won't say I was a misfit--it's just that they were much older than me.

DSA: I think he was a surprise to his parents. [laughter] It happens.

SA: You know what I mean? My brother Steve is almost two hundred years--no, how old is he now?

DSA: Ninety, ninety or ninety-one

SA: He's ninety and my other brother is probably ...

DSA: Damn near.

SA: Two years under him, and here I am. So, I wasn't in their group.

DSA: Unplanned. [laughter]

SSH: Did your brothers serve in the military?

SA: Yes, Steve, the oldest, went to Italy. I don't know too much about it. I never questioned him. My other brother was a Marine. He got as far as Guam and the war ended. He played football for [the University of] North Carolina and they kept holding him back, holding him back, and then, what did they have, that military school or something?

DSA: ROTC?

SA: And he went, got on Guam, and the war was over and he was a captain. He asked me one day, when I saw him, "How do you think I would have made out?" and I said, "If you were a good officer, they'll take care of you; if not, you're dead." [laughter] Oh, I'm being honest.

SSH: Good, that is what we want.

SA: I mean, if he went in there and started pushing his rank around, it's tough. That's all I know about them.

MG: How did your family move from Elizabeth to Westfield? You said they met in Elizabeth, but I read that your family owned a diner in Westfield.

DSA: Yes.

SA: Can I read that?

MG: Sure.

SA: Be easier for me to read that. Where are we here now? [Reading from the paper], "The Spero Family owned the Westfield Diner in Westfield, New Jersey," right, "went off to war," right. Maybe I'll tell you that I was a football star in Westfield High School.

SSH: That is what we want you to tell us.

SA: I'm telling you now.

SSH: Good. [laughter]

SA: I'm not getting fresh, I'm not getting fresh.

DSA: He has to say things when he remembers them. Otherwise, they're gone.

SSH: That is fine.

SA: I was the star in Westfield High School, football star.

DSA: Yes, he was. He could've been pro, but he broke his collarbone.

SA: I wanted to go and become a soldier. They took all, what? seventeen-year-olds and we had to sign up. I think it was seventeen. Most of us went to the South Pacific and I went the other way. Where am I now?

SSH: In Westfield.

SA: In Westfield, okay. I wanted to go in the Navy, but they put me in the Army, and it's a good thing, because I get seasick. [laughter] Now, I'm terrible with waves and stuff.

DSA: He gets seasick in a rowboat. He does.

SA: And then, went in the Army, I went to Fort Dix, put a uniform on me. Then, I went down to Camp--down in Georgia [Camp Wheeler]--hot, snakes, and I couldn't take that, but I stayed.

[laughter] Then, from there, they shipped us up to the Hudson River and put me on the *Queen Mary*. [Editor's Note: The RMS *Queen Mary* was a Cunard-White Star Line luxury liner converted into a troop transport during World War II. The 29th Infantry Division traveled to Great Britain aboard her in October 1942.]

SSH: From Camp Shanks.

SA: Right, that's right, went and got on the *Queen Mary* and landed up in Scotland.

SSH: At Prestwick?

SA: The *Queen Mary* had something, like, there are Spitfires, they came out and greeted us, to make sure that the Germans didn't come with their airplanes and shoot. From Scotland, they shipped us all the way down to Plymouth, England, and then, from that area, they separated us, First Battalion, Second Battalion, Third Battalion, and they shipped me over to the Third Battalion, which was the 175th, over in St. Ives, beautiful place, and I was happy. [Editor's Note: The 29th Infantry Division included the 115th, 116th and 175th Infantry Regiments.] I played football for the 29th. They needed a football player and I don't know how they know these things, I really don't. [laughter] A jeep pulls up and says, "Spero, you're going on the jeep. They're going to take you up to;" I don't know, somewhere up in England somewhere, and we played football. I only played two games, because, when I got there, it was almost over, and they won. Tommy Thompson, they tell me that the quarterback was Tommy Thompson of the Philadelphia Eagles, but I can't swear to it, because I didn't even know who Tommy Thompson was. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Tommy Thompson played for the Philadelphia Eagles from 1941 to 1942 before entering the US Army. After the war, he returned to Philadelphia to play from 1945 to 1950.] Then, I came back and they shipped me to an airfield, a British airfield. I said, "Why the hell'd they send me there?" Jeep pulls me over and he says, "Spero, you've got a fifty-caliber machine-gun on the jeep, you've got a driver and you're going to go over to the British airfield." The British weren't too hot with us.

SSH: Really?

SA: I was the only American and they would be eating there and I'd be eating by myself. I says, "This ain't right." So, they started to warm up a little bit, once they warmed up and knew I wasn't going to steal their girls. I'm not going to steal them. [laughter] You hear of those Swordfish airplanes the British had [Fairey Swordfish torpedo-bomber biplanes]?

MG: Which ones were they?

SA: They were old. They were too beat-up, obsolete, really, and they had a big banner, like they have at Asbury Park. I'm sitting on a fifty-caliber machine-gun and it started to fly and I said, "God, I hope I don't shoot the plane." [laughter] I was nervous, but, then, by the end of the week, I was a pro, but I was very nervous. [Editor's Note: Mr. Arbes is describing an antiaircraft exercise in which an aircraft tows a target sleeve.]

SSH: I bet you were.

SA: They were all watching me, and I'm only eighteen years old. [laughter] The British weren't too hot with us for a long time.

SSH: Really?

SA: Not at all. I remember, one time, over in [Germany], up north--what the hell is it? The British had this section, 29th had this section, right, and over here is Aachen. You've heard of Aachen? [Editor's Note: The 29th Infantry Division took part in the Battle of Aachen, fought from October 2 to October 21, 1944, in an effort to penetrate the Siegfried Line and attack the industrialized Ruhr River Valley.]

SSH: Right.

SA: Okay. The British had these big Crocodile tanks [the Churchill Crocodile flamethrower tank]. Me and my friend were over here, along a hedgerow, and we're sleeping and everything. I hear, "You blokes, come over here. We have some tea for you." I said, "Who the hell is that?" So, we went down and the two British tankers had tea and crumpets [laughter] and they warmed up to us. Tea, I don't drink, but I drank it in this case. That was the only time I had any kind of relationship with the British in combat. They had their section, we had our section and that was that, and then, the war started up.

DSA: The worse was Omaha Beach, [a landing site for the Normandy Invasion, June 6, 1944].

SSH: Can we go back to when you were in England and you were training?

SA: In England? Okay, there's something that they kept quiet for quite a while; you probably know what I'm going to tell you.

SSH: Please do.

SA: LSTs, you know what an LST [landing ship, tank] is?

MG: Yes.

SA: Okay. We would get on these LSTs on the English Channel, the English side and the French side. We would sail up and down, up and down, right. I got seasick, naturally, and so, I slept most of the time. Then, we would go, they would land, the mouth opens up and we would have to go up to the moors, the British moors, rotten place to go, cold, wet, rocky. We had to sleep there overnight. It was terrible. So, to make things easy, (Adas?) says, "Well, where the hell is Sherlock? Where is everybody?" So, I saw a farm down below. We went down there and we dug ourselves into a haystack and warmed up. When the sun came out, we ran back up to the thing. [laughter] You had to.

SSH: Yes.

SA: It was cold.

SSH: Yes, it is.

DSA: Unbelievable.

SSH: It is windy.

SA: Yes, "Sherlock Holmes, where is he?" Nobody knew where he was. I guess he didn't exist.
[laughter]

SSH: This was just landing training.

SA: Okay, now, we had something like maybe nine LSTs going up and down. This is something that I didn't know until lately--the German E-boats sunk two of our LSTs and they kept it quiet. We never knew it until I came home and everything. That's when I found out that two of our LSTs were sunk by the Germans.

SSH: You did not even know that.

SA: Didn't know it at all, no, did not. Did you ever hear of that?

MG: No, this is the first time I am hearing of it.

SA: You never heard it, either?

SSH: Slapton Sands? [Editor's Note: On April 28, 1944, during Operation: TIGER, a training exercise off the coast of Slapton Sands, England, in preparation for the amphibious assault at Normandy, German E-boats sunk several LSTs, resulting in over 750 Army and Navy deaths.]

SA: You didn't hear this, that they were sunk?

SSH: I did hear of it, but only after many years. Stephen Ambrose's books were the first time that I read about it.

SA: They kept it quiet.

SSH: Yes, at Slapton Sands, I think.

SA: Yes, but the English moors, we became tough, let's put it that way. [laughter]

SSH: The training was working.

SA: Oh, we would get down, put our shoes on--they had little nails, at that time, in them--and we'd be walking through a village. The English people says, "My god, the Germans are here?"
[laughter] They didn't know. They heard all that noise, cobblestones, and so forth, and they

realized that we were Americans, wasn't Germans coming, [laughter] but we did a lot of training, a lot of varied training. Then, Eisenhower makes the speech. We were on an LST when we went from St. Ives across and they had all these boats. The British had boats that were like rowboats. Everything that could go across, they tried it. Eisenhower gave a speech over the loudspeaker and he says, "We are embarked on a crusade. Some of us may not come back." Then, he [a soldier] would say, "I'm not one of them, I'm coming back," [laughter] and the other guy says, "I'm coming back, too." I'm a kid and my friend was also my age, (Dick Firman?), the fellow that got killed. We weren't scared. So, then, you want to know what happens?

SSH: Of course.

SA: Okay, we left Falmouth, all of us. Then, the horns were blowing and everything else. Eisenhower called everybody back, because it was rough, raining. The waves must've been fifteen feet high. I don't know; I slept. [Editor's Note: The 29th Infantry Division was one of the leading elements of the June 6, 1944 assault on Omaha Beach in Normandy, France. The invasion was scheduled for June 5th, but was delayed by Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower for twenty-four hours due to inclement weather.]

SSH: After being seasick all that time.

SA: I'd go in the hold and I slept where all the canvas is, because I can't take the waves. So, the next morning, we set sail again. I walked out, a guy says, "Spero, you've got to go there, got to have your breakfast." So, I went in and I looked up and our sky was darkened with airplanes, I mean dark. Every type of airplane was coming across from England and we stood, we looked at them. I said, "My God," and I looked behind us and I went in the back of the ship and I saw nothing but ships. Over here, they had battleships lined up, cruisers, destroyers came, any other [type of ship] that could have a gun in it or a cannon or something was there, and then, us, with our rifles. I couldn't believe it, couldn't believe it at all. So, they put us over and we had to go over the side of the LST. The boat was going down, we were up here--we went down, the boat came up. We couldn't jump in. On the side, they have, like, a rope thing you'd climb down the side of. So, they says, "Okay, go around. You go through the middle of the boat and we're going to open up the front and jump in." So, we jumped in. Instead of going straight to the beach, the driver of the LCVP [landing craft, vehicle, personnel], which is thirty-six men or one tank, he took us way over here and saved our lives.

SSH: Really?

SA: And then, from there, we hit the beach.

SSH: Why did that save your life?

SA: Well, it was chaos. Everything was chaos, everybody was [mixed up]. The bodies were floating and everything else. I mean, it was--I wouldn't want to see that again, not at all. We're over here and the main part is over here. So, we had to go along the edge, and then, go up into Vierville. Did you ever hear of Vierville, the church? That was our aim, to get to where the church was. We made it. It got dark. I'll tell you, those battleships, they kept blasting away. It

was terrible. Bodies floating, your buddies, it was not--you can't cry, because you've got to save your own life. We got to the other side of Vierville and dug a hole and slept.

SSH: When you were getting off of the small craft onto the beach, who was in charge?

SA: Our sergeant.

SSH: He was there. He made it.

SA: Yes, he was a sergeant, yes. Like I say, there was thirty-six of us in that boat.

SSH: Where was your sergeant from? Do you remember anything about him?

SA: What's his name? I forgot.

SSH: I just wondered if any of those names are still with you.

SA: Well, you forget names.

SSH: Of course.

SA: You say, "Sergeant, can I do this?" or "Corporal, can I do that?" You didn't go by names anymore.

SSH: Just rank.

SA: You've got people coming in that were taking over for guys that got killed, and so forth.

SSH: What was your specific job?

SA: I was an infantryman.

SSH: Okay, just with a rifle.

SA: I had an M-1, and an infantryman is a killer. So, my buddy stayed right next to me wherever we went, but, then, he got hit.

SSH: When you made it to the church, you dug in.

SA: On the other side of the church. We dug in, we dug in and rest.

SSH: You had to go up the cliff to get there.

SA: No, you're talking about Pointe du Hoc.

SSH: No, but these areas were not flat.

SA: No. Well, where we went ...

SSH: Yes, I want you to tell me about the tall one.

SA: It was a mound, like this. There was a road where the Germans used to come down and put [in] those girders and those iron things [landing obstacles] and everything else and that's the road that we went up. It was not a very wide road.

SSH: It was clear.

SA: It was clear, because our airplanes were up there blasting everything. The tanks didn't make it yet. The tanks were on the boats and I didn't see a tank [until] maybe third, fourth day.

SSH: Really?

SA: Coming up a road. So, we went up, the infantrymen went up.

SSH: When you dug in on the other side of the church, how many of the men off of your boat do you think made it that far?

SA: Every one of us, every one of us, yes.

SSH: Amazing.

SA: Every one of us made it, then. Then, it started. The Germans were fighters.

SSH: You encountered the best of them.

SA: Well, the next day, as soon as it got daylight, we started to move. This is funny, but it's not funny. We're walking--hedgerows, they were loaded with hedgerows. I didn't even know what a hedgerow was. So, we'd come off that road and we went along the hedgerow and we stopped there. Then, what happened? Somebody was waving a flag, a white flag, on the other side of a hedgerow that was over there and there was a field in-between. Guy is waving it--I shouldn't tell you this--it was a German officer, asking us to surrender. I had my gun on him. My friend, Francis, was next to me. All of a sudden, I hear, "Spero, I'm hit." I turned around and says, "What happened?" Soon as he said, "I'm hit," I shot my M-1, I killed him, but I didn't know my friend was hurt. So, he was on the ground and he says to me, "Help me, help me." We had no medics. The medics were still on the beach.

SSH: With all the wounded.

SA: Very few of them made it up like we did. I ripped his shirt off in the back. He says, "My back." His spine was hit and it was oozing up like an ice cream cone. I was the only one there that could help him, outside of--my other guys, they didn't know anything. We didn't have any training for being a medic or anything. We didn't have any medicine. So, all I did, had, was a

powder, that if you'd get hurt or something, you'd put the powder on it, so [that] it doesn't get infected, until the medical comes.

SSH: The medics, yes.

SA: He's laying flat and I tried. I ripped [his shirt], tied him up with a bandage, dug a little hole for him and he says, "Spero, don't leave me, don't leave me." He's from Jersey.

SSH: Really?

SA: He was my best friend. So, here's what happens--they tell me to go down and try to get something that we could put him on.

SSH: Like a stretcher?

SA: Stretcher. I went over a hedgerow, another hedgerow, and I saw a farmhouse. To me, it seemed like it was empty. I didn't think there'd be Germans in there or anything. I grabbed the door and I'd ripped the door off. I took it, went over the hedgerow, and I put it next to him. I start to put him on the thing. "Oh, Spero, he's not going right now. We'll wait for the medics. I want you to go back," and he took the door and he put somebody else on it. I didn't know he was going to die. That was the reason--he wouldn't say anything. So, I went over the hedgerow with another guy, I took a soldier with me, went over the hedgerow and another hedgerow. The medics weren't there yet. So, we put him there, come back. I says, "Okay, I'm going to take him." He says, "No, now, you're going to take--who do you call?--So-and-So," yes, went back over the hedgerows with this fellow. I said to them, "Can I take him now?" He said, "No, Spero, he's not going to make it." I stayed with him all night long, laying next to him. I talked to him. He says, "Don't leave me, don't leave me." Then, about maybe three o'clock in the morning, he stopped--that was it.

DSA: Take it easy, honey.

SA: Now, for some reason, they know who I was, the civilians, and they put the flowers at his grave for me and I don't even know. [Editor's Note: Mr. Arbes is referring to the grave of his comrade Private Francis Scrimente at the Normandy American Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, France.]

SSH: There is a picture that Mr. Arbes has of the grave marker at the front of the cemetery.

SA: Yes. So, I'm going back, I'm taking my honey with me, not this year, but the following year.

DSA: God-willing, the following year.

SA: We take students with us and I'll take her back, to see what we went through in France. Germany was a different question. That was rough.

SSH: Did you have to leave your friend there? Were you able to bury him? How did that work?

SA: Wait a minute, what's she saying, Dee?

DSA: Were you able to bury your friend or did you have to leave him there?

SA: Oh, no. Here's something that happened. It's getting daylight and I see a guy coming over the hedgerows from behind there. It turns out to be a guy from Westfield, New Jersey, (Erick Cross?), and he used to eat in my father's diner.

DSA: Small world.

SA: I don't know how it happened, but it happened. I said to him, "(Erick?), what are you doing here?" He says, "I'm picking up the dead." He was, and he put them in the ...

DSA: Bags.

SA: Canvas.

SSH: Body bags.

SA: And I said to myself, "I couldn't do that, I couldn't do that," and he says, "We have a lot to pick up." Normandy was rough.

SSH: Where was Francis from? Your friend that died, where was he from?

SA: Okay, Summit. Is Summit where it has a railroad and a station?

DSA: Don't ask me, Spero.

SSH: Yes.

SA: What's the other town up that way?

DSA: I'm lucky I know where I live. [laughter]

SSH: There is Millburn, there is Summit.

SA: No.

DSA: Not too good with directions or anything.

SA: Summit, I think it was Summit; Morristown? There's Summit, then, Morristown, okay. Morristown, that's the bigger city than Summit. I went to visit the mother and father.

SSH: Did you really?

SA: Yes, I went. I had to. They didn't seem to be alarmed or anything. I told her, more or less, how he died, and so forth. I excused myself and I left, but they were from Morristown. I think that the family had a taxi company at the railroad station, I think. That's the last I saw of them. I figured that I went, I did my job.

SSH: You really did.

SA: My duty, whatever you want to call it. That was it. I took his sister out a couple times to the movies, but it wasn't [romantic]--I felt bad. I don't know what happened to her. What do you want to know, Aachen, the Ruhr River?

SSH: Let us follow you as you went. Now, you were at the hedgerows.

SA: You want to know the next step?

SSH: Were you at Saint-Lo?

SA: Okay. Well, we're in Normandy. We fought our way up to Brest, where the submarine pens are, and they had pillboxes. [Editor's Note: The 29th Infantry Division took part in the Battle of Brest in Brittany, France, from early August to mid-September 1944.] They had their pillboxes. They had the whole town surrounded with these big pillboxes. I started to crawl on my stomach and I said to Spero, that's me, I says, "What am I doing here? I've got a hand-grenade. Now, what am I going to do with a hand-grenade with a pillbox?" I started to cry. I looked around me, I didn't recognize anybody and I cried. They told me to, "Pull yourself back," and I did. That was the end of my crying. I went up there and, on the side, with a couple guys, tried to get down into the submarine pens and the MPs [military police] stopped us. They wouldn't let us go down to them. They says, "Get back up. Nobody goes down there," because they had their submarines there, the German submarines. That was the end of that one. So, I went, we went, around, we went in the back of a pillbox--there was nobody in there. It's something that I realized, the Germans used a track, like a train track, from one pillbox to another to another to another. We never did that and that's how they shipped their food, their ammunition and everything. I said it was amazing. So, I saw a door and I tried [it]. I pulled the door up and me and a couple guys started to go down. We were stopped there by the MPs. There was a hospital three hundred feet down under those pillboxes. Germans were all German sailors, and so forth, that thirty-some feet down or something, thirty-two feet, something, and they chased us out of there. Then, they gave up in Brest. Then, from there--oh, you got to hear this--we saw movies, the same picture every time, [laughter] *Mutiny on the Bounty*, every time. [Editor's Note: MGM released *Mutiny on the Bounty* featuring Clark Gable in 1935.] Some of the guys in some outfits liked the movies, they kept it, and they were supposed to spread them around. We had Clark Gable--wasn't it Clark Gable in *Mutiny on the Bounty*?

SSH: I do not remember.

SA: And we couldn't stand it. So, anyway, it's over now, right? Train pulls up, backwards, and we're going to get on these boxcars. They were the filthiest boxcars you ever want to see in your

life. In the corner, we put a tin can, number ten can, if you have to urinate, all right. It was built by the Belgians, these trains, where the Jewish people, remember how they put them in there. Well, this is what they did with us. We went--filthy, oh. They would stop every so often, and then, go urinate or whatever you had to do, and then, jump back in the filthy box. I said to myself, "I can't imagine the Jewish people and what they were doing in these boxes." So, we went all the way up to Belgium and we got off the train and we took a bath in a coal mine in Belgium. So, I go, we all go in, I said, "Well, what do we do with our clothes?" The guy says, "See the hook up there?" He says, "Take the rope, lower the hook, take your clothes off, put it on the hook and shift it back up, and then, go take your hot showers," and we put our dirty clothes back on again. [laughter] Well, what else can you say? but I didn't know what to do with my clothes up there, [laughter] funny, huh? Well, I guess we all had a laugh. Then, from there, we went up to Holland. I'm going to stay; shut that off.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SA: Back on, okay? From there, we went up to Heerlen, which is Holland. It was like a rest area for us, [for] maybe a couple days or something like that. That's where I had my first beer, and I don't drink, but I did drink there. From there ...

SSH: Here is Aachen, down here. [Editor's Note: Here and throughout the remainder of the interview, Mr. Arbes and the interviewer refer to maps and photographs in a published work on the war in Europe.]

SA: What's down there? Oh, Aachen, you found it. We started going into the town of Aachen--the 175th was on this side of the line--and blasted the hell out of them. Then, from there, if you can pronounce all those German names, [laughter] anyway, this is the Ruhr River. The Ruhr River was very rough for us, but I just wanted to show you how we went from here all the way over to the Ruhr River.

SSH: Talk about how you made your way from Saint-Lo over to Paris.

SA: I told you, on the railroad cars.

SSH: You did take the train the whole way, but did you come south, down here to Vire?

MG: Was this your path here?

SA: There's the train.

SSH: You came up and around Paris.

SA: We never got off it.

SSH: I see. I was looking at the map. You never stopped.

SA: Unless you had to pee or something, and the train won't stop. [laughter]

SSH: No sightseeing in Chartres.

SA: I never got off the train. I don't know where it was. [laughter] No, we didn't know those towns when the train was going by.

SSH: Were the people in France and Paris welcoming to the GIs?

SA: The what?

SSH: In Paris? You did not get off the train.

SA: Didn't get off the train, except I had to run to the bathroom. [laughter] Oh, a lot of guys went AWOL [absent without leave].

SSH: AWOL.

SA: A lot of them. They were scared, they were tired. What happened to them, I don't know, because I don't know everybody on the [train]. I only know my platoon. I didn't think any of the people were going to do that, but they did. In the railroad station, there was a lot of cars, guys that were wounded, and so forth, and we had to wait for them to get taken care of before we moved all the way up. From Aachen ...

SSH: You did not take the train from Aachen.

SA: You know what your feet look like? [laughter] No, they had trucks, some light trucks would take us, but this is only a small part. This whole thing is a small part.

SSH: Talk about getting across the river.

SA: This is--I think that's the Ruhr River, but I'm not sure.

SSH: That is what it says.

SA: That's when the war started again for us against the Germans.

SSH: Can you talk about the crossing?

SA: Talk about it?

SSH: Do you remember?

SA: I'm hard of hearing; I can't hear good. I don't want to know nothing. [laughter] No, I was not scared anymore.

SSH: Really?

SA: I was scared when I lost my friend, but, after that, nothing. Where's that book? Just give me a few minutes.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SSH: Okay.

SA: Go ahead, put it on. We came down here to Aachen. Now, this is fighting now--this is not a pleasure trip. From here to Julich, this was a very bad fight. I lost a few people there. I had an officer, a German officer, coming down the stairs, across the Roer River, and I killed him. He had his pants [down], he was caught. He was in the bathroom and, when he heard us coming, his pants was hanging and everything else and I shot him and he rolled down the stairs. I took his gun from him. Anyway, you know what this is? [Editor's Note: On November 16, 1944, the 29th Infantry Division began an assault aimed at crossing the Roer River and capturing Julich. The division began on a line running from Bettendorf, Oidtweiler and Baseweiler and advanced to take the towns of Siersdorf, Schleiden, Aldenhoven, Setterich, Durboslar, Koslar, Bourheim and Kirchberg over the course of the next few weeks. The Germans made a stubborn last stand on the Roer's west bank at the Julich Sportplatz and the Hasenfeld Gut. The 29th took these strongholds by December 8, 1944. While the division was preparing for a cross-river assault on Julich, the Battle of the Bulge, also known as the Von Rundstedt Offensive or Ardennes Offensive, was launched on December 16, 1944. The 30th Infantry Division and the Second Armored Division, slated to make the assault with the 29th, were sent to respond to the German attempt to break through the Allied lines in the Ardennes Forest in Luxembourg and Belgium and the 29th was assigned to hold the line from Barmen to Pier. On February 23, 1945, the 29th finally made the river assault and took Julich in a two-day battle. The 175th Regiment took numerous towns in the Cologne Plain--Stetternich, Holzweiler, Rerverath, Kuckum, Keyenberg, Borschemich, Wanlo, Wickrathberg, Gudderath, Oldenkirchen, Bell and Geistenbeck. By February 28th, the 29th Division captured the city of Munchen-Gladbach.]

SSH: How did you hear about Malmedy? [Editor's Note: The interviewer is referring to the Malmedy Massacre of December 17, 1944, in which American POWs were shot by SS troops.]

SA: Okay, we were up here [taps on map] ready to go--where is it, where's Julich?--oh, here. This is supposed to be the Roer River, I imagine. We were all lined up with, I guess, maybe ten or twelve tanks. They were all spread up along a hedgerow. We were sleeping here and over here was the Ruhr River, all right. We were going to make a move across the river, because it was a very dangerous place. They were shooting these "buzz bombs" [German V-1 rockets] that were going to England. They were hitting them in up here, up in Brussels, Antwerp. The Germans wanted to wipe Antwerp off the map and, from there, this was no picnic. We went up to Munchen-Gladbach, street fighting, did a lot of street fighting, and then, from there, we went up here to Munster.

SSH: Did you have trouble crossing the Rhine?

SA: With trucks. In other words, they put us on a truck and got us so far, and then, the rest was on your foot. Then, from there, it's no picnic, don't even think about it as a picnic.

SSH: This is where the ...

SA: I never went to Cologne. That wasn't our area. We went up this way.

SSH: You went north, towards Munster. When were you aware of the Battle of the Bulge?

SA: Okay, I just told you; didn't I tell you?

SSH: In a way ...

SA: The tanks were all ready. Malmedy, it was about, I'm going to guess now, twenty miles, twenty-five miles.

SSH: South of where you were.

SA: I was sleeping. I woke up and I didn't see any tanks. Then, they said, "The Battle of the Bulge;" they didn't use the word "the Battle of the Bulge" then. The tanks went down there, to Malmedy, and so, we just sat. We had to sit. That was it. We didn't know what was going on. The tanks never came back. So, when it was all over, then, we started going up to this way.

SSH: To Munster?

SA: Up to the Elbe River, met the Russians.

SSH: You did?

SA: But, see, I was nowhere near here, Cologne and that.

SSH: No, the 29th went this way.

SA: Because the 29th went up this way.

SSH: We can just go through this page by page.

SA: If you can pronounce all those German names. [laughter]

SSH: No, I am not very good at German.

DSA: My father could. [laughter]

SA: This is the 30th Division--that has nothing to do with us. Second Armored Division, no, we don't need to know that.

SSH: We are up here.

SA: We're up there. You can turn this [off].

[TAPE PAUSED]

[Editor's Note: The recording continues with Mrs. Arbes describing her father.]

DSA: Of German decent, and I swear, sometimes, he was born in Germany. [laughter]

SA: Well, they [the book's author] make it look like you have a picnic; I don't even know what a kitchen looked like up there.

SSH: How often did you get a hot meal?

SA: They fed us the ...

DSA: K rations.

SA: Oh, K rations. Listen to this, no, I got to tell you something--they gave us, when we were in Normandy and, after a while, we were filthy, dirty, they put showers in the back of us, maybe two miles or so. They said, "You fellows go walk back there. You're going to have your first showers and they're going to give you new uniforms." Our uniforms, in the A&P [ammunition and pioneer] platoon, was formaldehyde [infused]. We had our suits, our jackets and everything were formaldehyde. So, I asked them, while we were on the LST, before we made the landing, "Why do we have formaldehyde?" "Oh, just in case the Germans used mustard gas." We were the only ones that had it, stunk. When we were walking in the Channel to get ashore, it felt like a million pounds, believe me. So, when we went to the shower, they gave us new uniforms. I put the shirt on, I put the pants on. I started to walk--the pants fell. I'd lost so much weight. I was eating canned rations. So, they had to give me another pair of pants, but it was just funny. I'd put the pants on and everything else and I started to walk and they fell. [laughter] They gave us our regular uniforms. It was funny. What can I say?

SSH: There is Julich.

SA: Okay. This was a rough thing. You had the Roer River there and we had to cross it.

SSH: This is the R-O-E-R River.

SA: And the engineers--I'll show you what I'm talking about, that's the Roer River--engineers made these little things and we ran across them.

SSH: A very small pontoon bridge.

SA: You see it?

SSH: Yes, it is literally just wide enough for one person to run on.

MG: That is how you crossed the river.

SA: [Yes].

MG: Wow. Were you being fired at while you were crossing?

SA: So, the engineers, during the night or something, put it across. The Roer River was a fairly wide river. You can see it here.

SSH: It looks like it.

SA: Anyway, but, putting my new uniform on and it fell apart, I had to laugh anyhow.

SSH: From Julich, you went north to Munster. Setterich, Siersdorf and Bettendorf--here is the coal mine where you took the bath.

SA: Well, Siersdorf, yes, there was a castle there, Siersdorf Castle. Did you ever hear of it?

SSH: No.

SA: We took it over. The walls were eight-foot thick. It was a castle, with a moat around it. We took care of it. The officers had the second floor, we had the ground floor and we rested for a couple days, Siersdorf.

SSH: From Siersdorf, it looks like you came to ...

SA: I don't know the town name. Here's us, in behind the 75th.

SSH: You were with the 75th.

SA: Yes.

DSA: Yes, 175th.

SSH: Then, you came into Aldenhoven.

SA: It was the 175th, yes, it came this way. Some of it was this way, some of it was this way.

SSH: It looks like you went to Bourheim, and then, you go north towards Julich.

SA: No, that's another step going towards Julich.

SSH: That was the 16th.

SA: You know, if you could think of all these German names, that they have a little sign out there, the town, I never paid attention to it. It wasn't my job.

SSH: It shows that, in Julich, there was also a fortification around the old part.

SA: Well, Julich had--what do you call [it]?--a stadium and there was a big battle in the stadium.

SSH: In the Sportsplatz, right here. What did the Germans have in there that they were protecting?

SA: They didn't want us to cross into their country.

SSH: Okay.

SA: It's their country; that's Germany.

SSH: Just over that line. Actually, you already were in Germany at that time.

SA: This here papermill was a battle; this whole thing here in Julich was a fight. They didn't give up.

SSH: This was in early December it said, December 8, 1944.

SA: December 8th, 1944, the sports plaza, I was up here. You see, now, 175th, 116th and the 115th was the 29th Division and, when we spread out, like, here would be the 115th or something. I didn't know what they were doing and they didn't know what we were doing, but they knew we were fighting, you know what I mean?

SSH: There is a photograph of a chaplain. Did you see chaplains often?

SA: No.

SSH: This was a really tough winter.

SA: I don't know anything about these people.

SSH: It was a really tough winter in Europe in 1944-45.

MG: I was reading here that you held defensive positions from when you took the town of Julich until February. You were there from December to February.

SA: I just said that about the sports plaza. Where'd you get this?

MG: I actually got that off the computer.

SSH: The Internet.

SA: He's already got it in here. I didn't know.

SSH: We want your story.

SA: I'm only telling you what I know. I didn't know he had it.

MG: I just want to make sure this is correct.

SSH: Did you actually ever see a doughnut wagon?

SA: No. [laughter] Don't say I did, because I didn't. They tell me they had them, I don't know. I'd never seen them.

SSH: You never got involved. This is Julich, pictures of the sports plaza there. You went right through here.

SA: Yes, we came this way.

SSH: Then, you cut north.

SA: And, over here was the big bulge, over this area, about thirty miles, I think. We didn't even know what was going on.

SSH: Did you hear about the massacre?

SA: Hold on a second. The engineers, I don't know how they do this, I really don't know. All I know is, "Okay, let's go." I don't know how they do it. How did they put all these things in?

SSH: How often did you get replacements into your platoon?

SA: In our division, to be honest with you, 175th, where I was, I didn't see too many new guys coming in. I know we shrunk, but I didn't see any new guys coming, because I didn't pay any attention, either.

SSH: Your platoon stayed pretty much the same, same guys.

SA: Well, in Normandy, we lost a few of them, yes.

SSH: What about the officers in charge of your unit? What did you think of them?

SA: I was supposed to get a very high medal when I killed that German officer and took care of my friend the best I could--over in Normandy now, I'm back in Normandy. The Sergeant says to me, "You're going to get a very high medal." I say, "Fine." I didn't care; I didn't think anything about medals. Going into the Ruhr River, I ran into him and he started to [say], "Oh, oh, hi, Spero, how you making out?" right. He went from our platoon to where the officers were.

SSH: Headquarters?

SA: Right. He says, "Spero, I've got something to tell you and I want you to know that you're going to get a..." He got a very high medal for telling me to go get the doors and make stretchers, and so forth, and, since that, I didn't see him. He got my medal. It could have been the Congressional Medal of Honor, I don't know what it was. It wouldn't have been a small medal, because they knew what I did, trying to keep people alive.

DSA: And the Sergeant took credit for it.

SA: I never saw him after that.

DSA: Pretty petty.

SA: I got cheated. As a kid, I didn't care about medals, [laughter] but, as I got older, yes, I thought about them. I got the Bronze Star, I got Bronze Stars, I got medals from France, and so forth. I got them in my [home]; you don't want to look at them, do you?

SSH: Not right now, but we would like to see them.

SA: They make pictures and pictures--where the hell were these guys? I never saw them. We never saw them. There's a guy who went hunting--got time to take a shotgun, go hunting? [Editor's Note: Mr. Arbes is referring to photos of other 29th Division personnel depicted in the book.] Okay, these are the battle credits of the 29th Division, right here, "Normandy, Northern France, Rhineland, Central Europe and Normandy." I was in every one of those battles.

SSH: What did you hear about the general in charge of the 29th?

SA: We had a good general. I don't know if he survived or not. We had a good general, General Gerhardt [Major General Charles H. Gerhardt, commanding general from July 1943 to the 29th Division's demobilization in January 1946]. I think I remember that. [laughter] I don't remember it sometimes. I can say it today; tomorrow, I'll forget it. General Gerhardt, he was a very good general. He took care of his men, but I never saw him. No, I'm being honest, I never saw him, never saw Eisenhower. They tell me Eisenhower was around--well, where was I? [laughter]

SSH: It looks like you were pretty busy.

SA: But, our generals, and so forth, were pretty good. I never saw the guys going on parade. I'm over there fighting and they were marching. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Mr. Arbes is referring to photos of other 29th Division personnel marching depicted in the book.]

SSH: You talked about how hard the Roer crossing was. What about the Rhine? Was that hard?

SA: The Rhine? The Rhine River, do you know what happened there? It was tough; it's a big river to cross.

SSH: Especially when you were crossing it up there.

SA: I don't know if there's a picture in here or not. I have a picture of crossing the Rhine somewhere. They put us on trucks. The night before we took over to cross the Rhine River, the engineers put pontoon bridges up. I don't know how they did it. All I know is, they said, "Get on the trucks," and, sure enough, rolled right across. How'd they do it?

SSH: Unbelievable. They were under fire when they did that.

SA: Engineers deserve every medal in the world, believe me, because they put themselves out in front of you.

SSH: After the Rhine, you went right into ...

SA: We went up, crossing the Rhine, went up towards--oh, this is something. They put me on a jeep with a fifty-caliber machine-gun and Cosmo was in the other one. He's still alive. He's the only one I know that's still alive.

SSH: Really?

SA: Well, I'm eighty-three now, so, Cosmo's got to be eighty-three. He was from West Orange.

SSH: There were a lot of Jersey guys in this group.

SA: Yes. So, when my friend died, he'd come up to me, up in Brest, and says, "Look," he says, "why don't we just get together, you and I?" We always split, like, a tent--I had half, he had half--and Cosmo followed me all over. [laughter]

DSA: Yes, and they became buddies.

SA: We're very good friends. So, what'd you ask me?

SSH: You said they put you on a jeep with a fifty-caliber machine-gun.

SA: Okay, both of us. We had a command car, naturally, officers, was about four or five, two jeeps, command car, something else, and we were supposed to go shoot across Germans' land. We went through houses and we'd come to a house and it was getting dark and we'd tell the people there in the house, "You have to get out. We're taking the house over," right. So, they'd go to their neighbors, and then, daylight, in the morning, we'd get in the jeep, and so forth, and take off again. Well, here's a funny thing happened--came across an airfield and we pulled our jeep up by the door there and the officers, I don't know, they were somewhere else. Nobody wanted to open up the door. So, I opened up and I went and I slid a door open and I walked in. I saw this airplane, I says, a very small airplane, did not have a propeller and a small wing, a very

small plane. On the bottom, it was laying on wood, like with wheels. So, I told the guys, "Hey, come on in here, you want to see something funny?" So, they came in. They were scared to come in, because they thought there might be booby traps and stuff. All of a sudden, the officer comes in and says, "Everybody out, get everybody out." So, I found out later it was their jet plane that the Germans were trying to get up there, small, very small, no propeller. I said, "Look, this ain't an airplane, is it?" but it was their new jet plane. I've never heard about it later. That was it. We get in the jeeps and we took off again and we got up towards the Elbe River. We took over a horse farm, and then, the river is there and the 29th was here. Then, they said, "The Russians are coming." So, the Russians did come. I tried to get across to meet them, right, Cosmo tried and everything, and the officers chased us back over the river. They took their pictures with the Russians and everything, they drank with them and everything, and us poor bastards couldn't do anything. We had to go back. Okay, so, when the war ended then, they sent me up to Denmark, which was a pleasure.

SSH: Tell us about that experience.

SA: What, Denmark?

SSH: How you were chosen to do that.

SA: How I was chosen? I think the paper says it, right there, the book says it, doesn't it? I earned it; me and Cosmo earned it.

SSH: Cosmo got to go as well.

SA: They picked two hundred of us from the 29th Division to represent the American Army in Denmark. We had a dinner with the King and Queen. I was up there for about six months, and then, I got a call to come down to the armory in Copenhagen. An officer says, "Spero," was smiling and everything else, "I got good news for you." I says, "Oh, I got promoted?" All I had was the PFC.

DSA: That, I'll never understand.

SA: I says, "I got promoted?" He says, "No, Spero," he says, "you have so much time [in] combat, you're going home." "I don't want to go home." I said, "I don't want to. Is the division going home?" He says, "No, we're not going home. You're going home." They put me on a truck with a couple of guys that were on vacation in Denmark, back to Bremen. I got my duffle bag and everything else and they took me to Antwerp. From Antwerp, they put me on a cargo ship, which I was seasick--a cargo ship, oh--and I got to Boston. When I got to Boston, they shipped us to--trucks picked us up, a truck, I should say--they took us to an Army camp in Boston somewhere, I don't know where it was. They said, "You fellows go into that cafeteria there and you're going to get a good hot meal." So, we go in. I sit down, we're going to be served, and guess who was serving us? German soldiers that were captured, shipped to the United States. I said, "They're going to feed me? How do I know they're not going to poison me?" It was the Germans that were captured, shipped to the States. Then, from there ...

SSH: Did you eat the food?

SA: Yes, I ate, I was starved. [laughter] They shipped me back to Fort Dix and my sister picked me up. They gave me five dollars and I think sixteen cents carfare to go home and that's it.

SSH: Do you remember what time of the year it was when you came back?

SA: When I came home? It wasn't cold, but I think it was about, maybe, let's see, December. I guess it was about December, because my uncle died and my father and mother went up to New York State, because his brother died. It was about December I got home, December or November, somewhere around there.

SSH: When you met the Russians at the Elbe--I am going back across the water again ...

SA: They all got drunk.

SSH: They did, but you did not.

SA: I got chased across again, okay. They shipped me to Fort Dix, gave me a couple dollars to go home. My sister picked me up, right. Now, about six months later, seven months later, I'm at my father's diner and I get a telephone call. I answered it and it was my friend Cosmo. I says, "Cosmo, where are you?" "I'm at Camp Kilmer." The division went to Camp Kilmer and he says, "Why don't you come visit us? Hurry up." So, I went across and I met some of the guys that I knew that were still alive and that's where the 29th came down. I went home and Cosmo and I stayed good friends since then.

SSH: What was your reaction when you heard the news that President Roosevelt had died?

SA: Oh, it's in the book there, the town that I heard about it [in]. I cried. I really did.

DSA: You and the whole United States.

SA: I got drunk and they couldn't find me in the morning. I was in the hayloft, a German hayloft, and they found me. I cried, because I thought Roosevelt was a wonderful President. [Editor's Note: President Franklin D. Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945.]

SSH: What did you think of Truman at that point?

SA: Truman was fine.

SSH: At that point, were you sure that he was going to be okay?

SA: Truman was [fine], but he wasn't a Roosevelt, no way.

SSH: What was the reaction in your group when you heard that the war was over in Europe?

SA: Well, we were happy that we were alive and they told us that--we were still in France, and so forth--they had dances and women and everything else and I didn't have any of that. I'm too young. I was young. [Editor's Note: V-E Day was declared on May 8, 1945.]

SSH: You were not even twenty yet.

SA: But, [when] I left the division, I felt bad. They put me on that cargo ship.

SSH: Was there any kind of celebration when the war was completely over, V-J Day?

SA: I'll tell you exactly what I said, "I made it, I'm alive." That's what I said. I was alive. [Editor's Note: V-J Day was declared on August 14, 1945, in the United States and August 15, 1945, in the Pacific.]

SSH: Had you heard from your family? Were you able to write letters back and forth?

SA: Nothing.

SSH: Not from your brothers or anybody?

SA: No. My sister, yes. I wrote letters to my sister, when I was in combat in France and when I was in England, and so forth. My father, he was from the old school--work, work, work--and we didn't get along too well when I come home. Things were different.

SSH: When you came home, did you have any plans for what you were going to do next?

SA: No, I didn't, no, but what happened, I went to the University of Maryland.

SSH: You used your GI Bill. [Editor's Note: The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the GI Bill of Rights, offered funding for college or vocational education, as well as one year of unemployment and loans to buy homes, to returning World War II veterans.]

SA: And I stayed at Maryland and I didn't like the English teacher. I don't care about Frost, I don't care about any of those, [laughter] and they forced me to take the course. Well, naturally, I was called into her office and says, "Spero, you've got to do something." I said, "I don't like it and I'm not going to." So, I took criminology, which I passed, and I took a course about Russia and the countries there, which I enjoyed thoroughly. English, she couldn't give me anything.

SSH: Did you play football at Maryland?

SA: No, here's what happened. I got a call from my sister and says, "Spero, you have to come home. Pop had a heart attack." My two brothers, Sam's in North Carolina, he ain't coming up, and my other brother had a decent business. So, I came home. I threw all my papers in the garbage and I never finished. I come home, worked the diner, which I hated, and then, my father got well. He says to me, "Spero, I want you here at seven o'clock at night and you stay until five o'clock in the morning when I come in." That's how I lived for a while and I says, "I've got to do

something." So, I met my wife and I became a truck driver, Canada Dry Soda, and all the work I did in school went for nothing.

DSA: It was a shame.

SA: Went into the garbage.

DSA: I couldn't convince him to go back when we got married.

SA: I felt bad.

DSA: He was so angry about everything.

SA: I never graduated.

SSH: You were there three years.

SA: I was in Maryland a good three years. I played football a little bit.

DSA: He didn't have much to do to get his degree.

SA: No, but I couldn't finish, because I had to come home. I had to take care of the family business, which I hated, and I worked from seven at night until five in the morning. That was rough. It was rough. So, finally, he sells it and what do I do now? It just so happened that some of the guys from Canada Dry would stop with their trucks and have something, lunch or something. They says, "Spero, don't worry about it. You come up to Orange and we'll get you a job," and I went up there and I got a job and I met Dita.

SSH: Dita was working at Canada Dry.

SA: Yes, she was working at Canada Dry.

DSA: Yes, I was then an assistant manager up in the office.

SA: She was working in the office, good-looking girl. [laughter] If I show you a picture, you'll say yes.

SSH: I think we can tell. [laughter]

DSA: Long time ago, honey.

SA: We've got three daughters, no sons.

DSA: Seven grandchildren, got grandsons.

SA: I feel bad that I never finished Maryland. I really did.

SSH: So close.

SA: Because I didn't want no restaurant business, but, sometimes, if no one helps the family, you have to do it. It was what I did.

DSA: And he was so damned mad, because I told him, "We'll hold off on having children. You go back to college, if you want to finish." He only had a half a year, at most a year, if they forced him to go another year.

SSH: Were any of your grandparents here in this country?

SA: My grandparents come to the country? Well, Aunt Anna was.

DSA: Really, I was very angry at his father for pulling that.

SA: I would say there was a group came and they settled, most of them settled, in Elizabeth, Elizabeth and Newark, when Newark was a normal town. [laughter]

SSH: Mrs. Arbes, would you like to tell us a little bit about what you remember of World War II?

DSA: Not too much, honey.

SSH: I know you are younger than him.

DSA: I was young, five years.

SSH: You would have been in high school.

DSA: I was in high school. I was a teenager and I really didn't pay much attention, to be honest with you. I was too busy being a teenager.

SSH: Where were you growing up?

DSA: Orange.

SSH: Did you have any brothers that served?

DSA: My one brother went in the Navy, but that wasn't during the war, was it?

SA: Who?

DSA: Eddie.

SA: He wasn't in no war.

DSA: Not during the war, that was much later, and my other brother, that was much later, too--so, no, not during the war, actually, no.

SSH: Do you remember any of the war-related activities, like bond drives?

DSA: Yes, those I do, rationing.

SSH: How did that affect you?

DSA: It didn't, really.

SSH: What did your family do during the war?

DSA: My mom worked in a factory in Newark, something about airplanes or something, and my dad worked in the Navy. To this day, I don't know actually what he did. It was all secret.

MG: You said your father was of German descent.

DSA: Yes, he was.

MG: Was there any discrimination against you?

DSA: Oh, against us because of that? I don't think so. I think my dad did, vaguely, but I myself, no. They didn't bother the kids, but I think my dad felt something. There was such a thing as the *Bunds*, called the *Bunds* at that time, and they affiliated my dad with that, which, of course, he wasn't. Then, he went to work with the Navy on secret [work]; I don't know what the hell he was doing. So, that all stopped after a while. It really used to tick my mother off and my mother was English, English and a little smattering of French, actually. She was a foster child.

SSH: Was she?

DSA: Yes, so, she was raised by an Englishwoman in New York City. I don't think she ever really knew her mother, but it was a touchy subject. I never went into too much of it with my mother, because I knew it hurt her, but, other than that, she was a great mom. She really was. I even talk to her and I know she's gone.

SSH: She was working like a "Rosie the Riveter" in that plant.

DSA: Yes, but I don't think she riveted, but she was working on something to do with airplanes during the war. Very patriotic woman--oh, boy, you couldn't say anything against the flag or anything against the United States, because she would lay you out. [laughter] That's how my mother was, so, no-no, and she was very proud of Daddy, the work he did. She might've known what he did; we never did. While he was away, she raised five of us herself and, sometimes, I knew it was very, very hard for her. I had a brother that was "el beast," there's no other word for him, but she did a good job.

SSH: Where did you fit in your family?

DSA: I was the oldest. It was me, my sister, then, my first brother, oh, goodness, me, Paula, Eddie, Dolly, and then, the youngest, the baby; we called him the baby. He was "el surprise," but he was the best of the lot.

SSH: Did you also participate in the USO or Red Cross?

DSA: I didn't know, because I was kind of young, really. My mom wanted me to stay home, especially when she was working, said I should be home when the kids came home from school, and so on. That's how I helped.

SSH: Did you take family vacations at all during the war?

DSA: I don't think so. Gas was rationed. I think my father had a "C" card, which is the lowest you could have, so, we didn't go anywhere.

SSH: Do you remember when the soldiers started coming back from Europe?

DSA: I just remember the day that they said the war was over. In fact, a good friend of my father's came in and was jumping up and down all around the house, telling Paul, "The war is over, the Japs surrendered. Everything's over," and there was a lot of people out in the streets celebrating. That's all I remember.

SSH: Were people trying to get jobs or find housing?

DSA: Yes, that was hard. Yes, it was hard.

SSH: Why did you pick the University of Maryland, Mr. Arbes?

SA: Oh, okay, my brother Sam, from North Carolina, played football for North Carolina. The coach of the football team when he was there [Jim Tatum] went to the University of Maryland. My brother came up as an assistant and that's how I got to Maryland. The school was wonderful. We were down there last week.

DSA: Yes, we went to Washington.

SA: Our older daughter, which is Debbie, and her husband, they have a twenty-eight-foot--it wasn't a motor home, because he had a truck in the front. We [went to a] campground right by University of Maryland, because I told them, "I want to go and see if I can find the dorms that I was in," and so forth, and so on. We rode through the whole university and I don't remember anything.

DSA: It's grown so much.

SA: The football field was across the highway, Ritchie Hall, where we had the boxing matches, the basketball, wasn't a big place, and the football stadium was there. When we were riding around, I saw this football field now, it's like Yankee Stadium, that's how big it is.

DSA: Yes, it's huge.

SA: It's huge, looked like you could walk up to the sky and it's the university today. It's entirely different. I couldn't find my dorm, I couldn't find anything. I couldn't even find the library, but I did remember one thing.

DSA: Where he sat to watch the girls, typical male. [laughter]

SA: There's a brick wall, from the highway, there was a red wall there and there was an entrance in. We used to sit on top of the wall, tease the girls, but things all changed. Everything is changed there.

DSA: We went down to see the World War II Memorial, yes. That's something.

SSH: What did you think of it?

SA: Oh, what?

DSA: The World War II memorial. That was something. I thought it was great myself.

SA: It's all right. I'm not going to say great, no, I'm not going to say great, but it's something for the veterans that are still alive. A lot of them were there last week, guys with canes, and so forth.

DSA: Yes, there were a lot of them there.

SA: But, it was all right. It's not like I expected. I mean, they had one [column]--like, there's a refrigerator, maybe twice its size--and it says, "World War II," but it doesn't say divisions or anything like that and I thought it was kind of odd. You'd think they would have 29th Division, and so forth, and so on. There's a lot of divisions and a lot of veterans were there. Some of them were older than me.

SSH: It is because you were such a kid.

SA: Yes, but we walked and walked and walked.

DSA: And the hottest day, oh, my God, so hot.

SA: A couple people came up to me. They knew I was [a veteran], because I had my hat on. I had the 29th Division hat on.

DSA: Yes, I told him, "Make sure you wear it."

SA: And shook my hand and stuff like that.

DSA: That's nice.

SA: And I met, what was the Congressman? Dole.

DSA: Senator Dole.

SA: She told you?

SSH: No.

DSA: She saw the picture.

SA: I thought he was from New Jersey, I've got to be honest. I thought he was from New Jersey and I find out he's from North Carolina. [Editor's Note: Former Republican US Senator Robert Dole represented Kansas in the US House of Representatives (1961-1969), then, in the US Senate (1969-1996) and was the Republican candidate in the 1996 Presidential Election. He suffered severe wounds from German machine-gun fire while serving as an infantry officer in the Tenth Mountain Division in World War II.]

SSH: Where did you run into him?

DSA: In Washington.

SSH: Was he there at the memorial or did you have a meeting with him?

SA: He was at the memorial, yes, just like the rest of us, and I found out later, from Debbie's husband, that he was a fighter pilot.

DSA: Yes, he has no use of his one arm.

SA: Because, when I shook his hand, his hand was not his strong hand and that's when I found out that he was injured, tall fellow. That's all I know about him. He's a North Carolina man.

SSH: When you went to the University of Maryland, was there any interaction between the veterans and the young eighteen-year-olds coming in?

SA: No, no, because most of the people there were my age. Let's see, how old was I then?

SSH: Twenty-one?

SA: Maybe twenty-two years old, about twenty-two.

SSH: When you heard about Pearl Harbor being attacked, what do you remember about that?

SA: I was happy that I was going.

SSH: Really?

SA: I was in the diner. My father had a habit of, "Take care of the business--I'm going home, get my nap." My father slept, every day, one o'clock, come back at four or five. I had the radio on and I heard about the war, what happened. [Editor's Note: Japanese forces attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, thrusting the United States into the Second World War.]

SSH: Pearl Harbor.

SA: Pearl Harbor, right, and I said to myself, "This is my out." So help me God, that's what I said.

SSH: What was the conversation in the diner like among the people there after hearing that news on the radio?

SA: A lot of the people couldn't understand it. The customers come in, I'd tell them what happened and it was like, "So what?" Of course, they didn't realize we're going to have a war. It was very odd, but, when they kept the radio on, I says, "This is my out," and it was.

DSA: Yes, joined up.

SA: I wanted to get away.

SSH: It sounds like it.

SA: I wanted to get away. I played football for Westfield High. I was supposed to get the state honor and I go--I broke this.

SSH: Your collarbone.

SA: The whole team of Millburn jumped on top of me and broke my bone [laughter] and they put me in the hospital.

MG: What position did you play?

SA: I was a fullback. I was going to get the New Jersey State, what do you call it?

SSH: All-State?

SA: Not with this. [laughter] Coach (Friedman?) was my coach. He was a good coach.

SSH: Did you think you would go play football in college before the war?

SA: Before the war? I really wasn't giving it too much thought, because my brother's coach, down in North Carolina, got in touch with me while I was still playing ball for Westfield High and he wanted me to go to Appalachian State. Why? I don't know.

SSH: Division II, probably, toughen up, get bigger.

SA: Appalachian is over there by Roanoke, isn't it? So, they must've had some kind of [arrangement] and they wanted me to go there. Well, the war broke out and I didn't go anywhere.

SSH: The broken collarbone did not keep you out of the Army, either.

SA: No, that was well hidden. No, it didn't hurt me, it wasn't hurting me, but they kept me in the hospital for six, seven weeks. The whole team of Millburn jumped on me, because they knew who I was, and so forth, because I was a very good football player.

SSH: It sounds like it. Is there anything we forgot to ask you about?

SA: No, not really.

DSA: Think you covered everything, just about, yes.

SA: There were times when Cosmo and I would dig a hole, and so forth, and he'd fall asleep or something and I thought about the guys that we did have that were no longer there with us. It gives you a little feeling, that maybe you're next, but it never happened.

DSA: Thank God.

SSH: When you came back, you maintained your friendship with Cosmo. Do you think that helped, to be able to talk with Cosmo?

SA: Well, when I came home, I didn't talk about it at all.

SSH: Not at all.

SA: Not at all. I became very nervous. I was very nervous when I came home. Cosmo lived in West Orange, I had no car, but we got together after I started working at Canada Dry. He got married, got divorced, got married again, but we're good friends, very good friends.

SSH: When did you first start talking about the war?

SA: I didn't talk about it, I didn't talk about it.

SSH: You made a trip back to Normandy a couple of years ago.

SA: Okay. The Sergeant Major knew and (Martha Smith?) knew, my reason for being on the tour was I wanted to go back and that's the way it was. It's a tough situation. My purpose to go back [was] to tell them I'm here. Well, anyway, Sergeant Major, I think he's still in the service this sergeant major, he gets leaves and he goes with (Martha Smith?) in tourism and he took me to the Colleville Cemetery [the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial in Colleville-sur-Mer] office. I spelt his name out and everything else and they have a computer system, and so forth, and so on. He brought a golf cart and he said, "Get in." So, me, my grandson and the Sergeant Major, he took us to the cemetery, the first row. I cried, my grandson cried; nothing you can do about it.

SSH: What was your friend's name?

SA: Francis Scrimente, Jr. [Editor's Note: Private Francis R. Scrimente was killed in action on June 18, 1944.]

SSH: Thanks, I thought we should put that on the record.

SA: He was a local boy. I didn't know him prior to that, but, being in England and St. Ives for a year, and so forth, we had a kitchen in St. Ives and right across the street was a church and we went over there a couple times together. I have pictures home, somewhere, with him, me and some of the guys I was with. It's a shame that he [died]--all that practice, all that exercise and everything else, don't even last two days, you know what I mean? Of course, they weren't there and he was--the war in the Channel was loaded with bodies. They were just floating around and we had to push them aside to get ashore. It was a mess. The Germans had the best artillery you'll ever see in an army. They were something and, I tell you, when I saw the cemetery, Pointe du Hoc, did you ever hear of that, the guys that had to climb that cliff? That was a mess. It comes to a thing where you go back and you're going to visit something and you know why you're there. That's what this is.

SSH: Thank you so much for talking to Mike and I.

SA: Yes.

SSH: I thank Mrs. Arbes as well. With this, we conclude the interview.

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Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 6/29/2015

Reviewed by Deborah Arbes-Crane 7/15/2015