Sandra Stewart Holyoak: This begins an interview on February 9, 2004, in Hilton Head, South Carolina, with Charles Ralph Landback, Jr.  Mr. Landback, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today.  To begin, could you tell me where and when you were born?

Charles R. Landback, Jr.: I was born in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, on July 5, 1918.

SH: Can you tell me your father's name and a little bit about him?

CL: Well, having displayed the "junior" at the end of my name, his name was Charles Ralph Landback, also.  He was known around Perth Amboy as Ralph Landback.  He didn’t finish high school, was intrigued with entering the workforce as a machinist, dropped out of school, went into an apprenticeship, became an accomplished machinist.  Later in his life, he sold Chevrolet automobiles and, [in] the final phase, he was working for Western Electric Company, … what was then AT&T, and held, among other things, safety inspector positions and so forth.

SH: Where did he grow up?

CL: He was born in Watsontown, Pennsylvania, but his family moved to Perth Amboy when he was a youngster.  I don’t know whether he was ten years old or eight years old, but, essentially, he grew up in Perth Amboy.

SH: Where was your mother from?  What was her background?

CL: Well, she was born in Perth Amboy.  Both of her parents were born in Denmark, immigrated separately to the States, married there, and had a relatively large family.  I think it was like seven girls and one boy, that type of thing.

SH: Did your parents ever talk about how they met?

CL: I don’t really remember.  I’m sure they did, but I don’t remember.  … I think it might have been through the church.  They were both Lutherans, at that time.  Later on, they became Presbyterians, but I think they might have met through the church activities and so on.

SH: As a young boy, you grew up in Perth Amboy.

CL: Yes, ma'am.

SH: Since you are Charles Ralph Landback, Jr., what names did you and your father go by?  You said that your father went by Ralph and, before the tape started, you said that everybody at Rutgers knew you as Ralph.  How did your mother tell which Ralph she was talking to?

CL: Well, you said that I didn’t have to admit anything that I didn’t want to, [laughter] but the obvious story is, I was "little Ralph," you know, or Ralph, Jr.

SH: Did you have any brothers or sisters?
CL: No.

SH: Since your mother came from such a large family, did they live in the area? Did you play with any cousins? Did you know your grandparents?

CL: Yes.

SH: Did they maintain any of the customs from Denmark?

CL: The only thing that I think, probably, was a custom was, we always spent Christmas Eve at my Grandmother and Grandfather Nelson’s house, along with all the other members of the family and the tree was in the center of the room and the Danes would dance around the tree.

SH: That is a wonderful custom to remember.

CL: I think most people put their tree in a corner, … but the Danes used the center. I always suspected that was something they had brought from Denmark.

SH: I am sure it is.

CL: I don’t know whether there was any of the reverse thing going on, but the various members of the family had, like, two children. … None of the children had eight children, I mean, and my mother had one and the next oldest had one and there was another one that had one.

SH: Eight children and eight grandchildren. What was it like to grow up and go to school in Perth Amboy? It is such a beautiful city.

CL: It is?

SH: Well, yes, if you look at the architecture, the buildings.

CL: Have you ever been there?

SH: Yes. I thought the houses along the water were, at one time, very lovely homes.

CL: Perth Amboy was, more or less, like a peninsula or a point. On one side was the Raritan River, emptying into Raritan Bay, and on the other side was something called the Kill Van Kull, which was a piece of water that ran between Perth Amboy and the southern part of Staten Island and it was obvious that the early settlers all settled around that waterfront area and put up those beautiful homes that … are apparently still standing and so on, and then, as expansion took place, up the Kill Van Kull and up the Raritan River, factories were built, and then, there were layers of residents, more or less working people residents and so on. So, you had, really, two or three Perth Amboys. I mean, there was the waterfront area, which was non-industrial. You couldn’t see a smokestack or anything. There was a lot of industry and a lot of immigrants. Apparently, somehow or other, people found out there were jobs available in Perth Amboy and I don’t know whether the jobs came first or the people came first, but there was a lot of Poles,
Ukrainians, a few Danes, [laughter] Italians, I mean, there were a lot of immigrants and so on. … Last night, at the dinner, [a Rutgers Club of South Carolina dinner], you talked about the GI Bill and I thought of something that maybe was worth telling you about. … I graduated from Perth Amboy High School in 1935 and approximately in 1935, it might have been a few years earlier, under one of the government programs, maybe the NYA, National Youth Administration, certainly not only the WPA, which was the Works Project Administration, and so on, there was organized, in the high school building, in the evening, something called Middlesex Junior College. I don’t know exactly where I got this burning desire to go to college. Neither one of my parents had been to college. Nobody in the family had been to college. I don’t remember anybody twisting my arm and so on, but, when I graduated from high school, I think through contact with some lifelong friends of my father’s, I got a job as what was then called a laboratory technician, or a lab boy, working for the DuPont Company, who were operating some plants that they had … acquired from … an older company called R & H Chemical Company. Anyway, I got this job for forty cents an hour, sixteen bucks a week. … I had no idea of where I wanted to go to college or what I wanted to study. I thought, maybe, mechanical engineering, because my grandfather had been in [the] machinist trade, my father was in [the] machinist trade, and so on. This company, … as I say, I give my father credit for having arranged things for me, were manufacturing colors that were used in the manufacture of ceramic wares. I mean, you could understand that ceramics are produced in a high temperature furnace and the same dye that would [be] used to dye your shirt wouldn’t work on the plates, and these were special mineral [dyes], they’re specially prepared, and so on. They were used as ceramic colors. So, I was working in a plant that had an association with the ceramic industry. I was going to school at night at the Middlesex Junior College. My supervisor was a guy by the name of Dan Koch, … who was a Rutgers graduate and said, "I hear you’re going to school at night. If you decide to go to college, I would suggest you go to Rutgers and take ceramics." … So, after two years, I entered Rutgers as a sophomore, with my half-baked Middlesex Junior College credits. They were so bad that they didn’t give me credit for freshman chemistry, because Middlesex Junior College … didn’t have a lab. It was just classroom chemistry. So, I don’t know how many other people took advantage of that government program, that they were trying to provide jobs for teachers and get kids off the street, and so on, and so forth, but … between the job that I just happened to stumble into, and then, that is a ceramic industry job, and the fact that there was that connection with Rutgers and Rutgers was close by, it all added up. Thinking about this, I brought along my savings book. [laughter] … I said I was making sixteen dollars a week. My folks said that I wouldn’t have to help support the family. There was no extra money, there was no money for college or anything special, but, if I wanted to save up some money to go to college, then, I could do that on the side and, if you look this over, I started this thing in 1935 and the account was emptied out in … early 1941, after I was out of college.

SH: It is.

CL: I think I hit a peak of eleven hundred dollars and that was [it].

SH: You closed it on July 17, 1941. You did not take much money. There are a lot more deposits than withdrawals.

CL: So, I didn’t do the GI Bill, but I did the NYA program.
SH: Was your family supportive of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal programs?

CL: He was very radical. I mean, I remember hearing my father and my uncles and so on discussing this terrible turn of events.

SH: They were Republicans.

CL: Conservatives, yes.

SH: Well, I am thankful that you took advantage of that and made it to Rutgers. It is very rare that I get to speak with ceramic engineers from the period before World War II. You began Rutgers in the fall of 1936.

CL: No, the fall of ’37.

SH: 1937, you came in as a sophomore. Did you commute or did you live on campus?

CL: Lived on campus.

SH: Where did you live?

CL: At the Alpha Chi Rho fraternity house.

SH: Why did you join the Alpha Chi Rho fraternity?

CL: I mentioned the fact that the boss over at the laboratory at the plant was this Dan Koch. Later, he hired a guy by the name of Willard Mullen, who was Class of ’36 and was … from the Ceramics Department, also, and he had been a member of this Alpha Chi Rho fraternity and they were going to have a rush weekend or … some kind of a weekend where they were trying to attract people to come to the school and to join the fraternity and so on. Anyway, I got invited to come over for the weekend and stay at the Alpha Chi Rho house. I thought that was marvelous. I mean, "Where do I sign?" you know, and that’s … when I met Dilatush and a bunch of those guys.

SH: You said, before we put the tape on, that Carleton Dilatush was your roommate.

CL: Yes.

SH: Was that in your first year at Rutgers, your sophomore year?

CL: Yes, yes.

SH: After that, did you have different roommates? Did you always live in the Alpha Chi Rho house?
CL: Yes. I don’t remember; I have a feeling that Dilatush and I weren’t together for the whole three years. I could be wrong. … There wasn’t a time when he and I had a fight or anything like that, I mean, but things were kind of loose. I mean, you moved from room-to-room. I can’t believe that, I think, it had one bathroom. We had a woman that came in and cooked meals, you know, and so on. Before a big dance or anything, I would go over to one of the dormitories, because I could take a shower there. I mean, there were no showers; there was a bathtub in this house. It wasn’t very luxurious and it wasn’t very expensive, either, you know.

SH: What are some of the activities that you remember being involved in? I assume that ceramic engineers had a very intense academic program, but what did you do for fun?

CL: One of my really great experiences at Rutgers was as a member of the crew.

SH: Did you start in your sophomore year, right away?

CL: Yes.

SH: Who did you row with? Who are the other crew members that you remember? Did you have a winning season?

CL: It was sort of like we won half and we lost half. I mean, we’d go up to Boston … and race on the Charles River against Harvard; I mean, they would beat us. We would go to the East River, New York, and row against Columbia; they would usually beat us, you know. We went up to Dartmouth and we beat them, I think. I mean, … we didn’t lose them all. We didn’t win them all, either, but it was a great experience.

SH: That is a very honest answer.

CL: … The other big activities, of course, was, the women’s college was across town and I put a lot of miles in walking over. I think back, I would walk over, pick up my date, we’d come back over to the gym and see a basketball game. Then, we’d walk her home, and then, I’d walk home again. I mean, there was a lot of walking done in those days.

SH: How intense was the ceramics course?

CL: Really, … it’s not logical that I would be able to get through it. I mean, in the sophomore year, I had calculus, qualitative analysis, chemistry and physics. I mean, these are tough courses for a kid from Perth Amboy. … I didn’t make Phi Beta Kappa, but I passed.

SH: It is amazing that you would be able to come in as a sophomore and get right into a program like that. Did you have to take extra courses during the summer to catch up or extra labs during the break? Were you able to just take right off?

CL: … That first year, I did have to take chemistry lab at night, but my summers were free to work; I mean, there were deposits made [in the savings book], you know, in the summertime.
SH: You went back to the same company in the summers.

CL: Yes.

SH: Did you have to work during the school year?

CL: They just had me for the summer, yes.

SH: Did you attend the basketball games and football games? Other than the crew, did you participate in any other activities?

CL: You probably heard about the fact that, when I was in school, they opened up what was then the new Rutgers Stadium and I had risen to the point where I was in charge of all refreshment concessions that day. I think I had a hundred kids working for me. …

SH: Had you done that the year before? Did you start working as an usher or a concessions person?

CL: Yes, there was an office where you could go and apply for extra work, I mean, so [that] you could earn some money and so on. So, I got into this refreshment thing, carrying a basket, you know, standing up in front of the crowd at Nielson Field. You ever hear of Nielson Field? That's where they were playing, … on Nielson Field. “Nuts to you,” [laughter] you know, and everybody would say, "Who’s that? Why don’t we buy some of them?” … That’s how I got the top job. I was the top salesman.

SH: How did you recruit people to work for you?

CL: A lot of people needed money in those days.

SH: Was your father able to keep working through the middle of the Great Depression?

CL: No, he got laid off.

SH: Did he?

CL: Yes.

SH: Did your mom work? Was she able to help in anyway?

CL: I think, before marriage, she was a milliner, made ladies hats, but I don’t know that she worked. My mother was the oldest in her family. The next oldest, Alfreda, my mother’s name was Christina, nickname was Tina, Alfreda married a guy that became a medical doctor. … He was from Matawan, New Jersey. You know where that is? He decided to move up to Maplewood. He got tired of dealing with the farmers and people not paying their bills and so on, just about the time my father got laid off. We moved into their house in Matawan for a year or so, a year-and-a-half, something like that, and my father was called back to work, but he was …
out collecting his brother-in-law’s bills and that was his job, I mean, collecting those bills. That was during my high school [years] and my grandparents still lived in Perth Amboy. So, as far as the school officials knew, I was living with my grandparents, continuing at Perth Amboy High.

SH: Did you have an initiation into the Alpha Chi Rho fraternity?

CL: Did I get paddled, you mean? [laughter]

SH: Yes, if that is what they did. [laughter]

CL: I don’t remember. I’m not trying … to hide anything, but I really don’t remember.

SH: After you graduated in 1940, did you have to sign up for the draft shortly thereafter? Did you consider enlisting in the service before Pearl Harbor or did you just sign up for the draft and come what may?

CL: I was sort of in a little bit of a rut. When I … graduated from college, DuPont took me back. I mean, … I didn’t get out into the job market and so on. I had a job, you know. In early 1941, DuPont asked me, twisted my arm, … to take an assignment with their military explosives plant in Barksdale, Wisconsin, way up on … the lake up there and … [it] was explained [to me] that I would be deferred from military service. I wasn’t necessarily trying to avoid military service, but it seemed like, you know, a pretty good deal and so on. So, I hi-hoed off to Barksdale, in my ’32 Chevy or something like that; … by then, it might have been a ’35 Chevy. Anyway, I was drafted on March 7, 1941. I won the draft. If it had been a lottery, I would have been a millionaire. [laughter] …

SH: Good.

CL: I was drafted in 1941.

SH: Were you already in Wisconsin?

CL: I had to come home. I explained to them, … "Here’s a copy of my draft notice. I mean, I’ve got to go." I got back in the car and went home and reported wherever it was. I think my mother’s telegram is in here someplace. [Mr. Landback looks through the files he brought to the interview]

SH: Wonderful.

CL: Anyway, in as much as I had only been at Rutgers three years, I wasn’t able to take the four-year military science thing.

SH: Did you take two years of ROTC?

CL: Two years, and all my friends were brand-new second lieutenants. I was a private. I mean, that was hurting me. I went around and got myself transferred to the headquarters of I Corps. …
After I was drafted, I was sent to Fort Jackson, Columbia, South Carolina. The headquarters for I Corps were in Columbia, South Carolina, and I got a job in the Chemical Warfare Section. In due time, [in] the mail that came into the Chemical Warfare Section at headquarters, there was an announcement of the first Officer's Candidate School. I applied for that; I got selected. … So, I reported, … January 5th, to Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland and did this "ninety-day wonder" Officer's Candidate School.

SH: You were in the military in Columbia when Pearl Harbor happened in December of 1941.

CL: [Yes].

SH: Did the attack come as a shock? Had the possibility of hostile action by the Japanese been discussed? I know that everyone was focused on Europe, but had there been any talk about what was going on in the Far East?

CL: One of the things that I thought about was, along those lines, … the fact that after graduation, in June of 1940, a handful of us men, boys, men, went down to someplace like Point Pleasant, at the Jersey Shore, … for a week and, while we were down there, word came that France fell. It was like, "Wow, I wonder what [that means]," you know. "Well, it certainly doesn't have anything to do with us," you know, that type [of] thing. We were kind of removed from that thing. By the time that we were wearing a uniform and being in the whole military thing, the Pearl Harbor thing was a huge shock, but I wasn’t quite as innocent, quite as unconcerned, … than when we heard about, … "What does it mean?" when France fell, you know. …

SH: When Hitler invaded Poland, you were starting your senior year. Was there any discussion about Hitler at Rutgers? Did anybody make any comments? Were there discussions about whether we should go to war? I know that there were America First demonstrations and so forth. Do you remember any of those debates?

CL: I tried to pull a few things together for this session with you. One of the things I couldn’t find was, … I probably can still find it somewhere, but the president of Rutgers at that time was Clothier and, in his commencement address, he warned us that the … United States was going to be drawn into this war, that we were facing, you know, a wartime situation, and so on. I didn’t hear it that day, but, you know, some years later, I read it. … If we’re going to correspond or something like that, I might find that address and it really was [prescient], but I didn’t remember him saying that. I mean, "I’m graduating today; my parents are here, my aunt and uncle are here." …

SH: Who was your favorite professor at Rutgers?

CL: I put down Larry Kane. He was, like, an Englishman who taught one of the ceramics courses. There was another guy, his name I really don’t remember. I didn’t work hard to find it. I mentioned the fact that, as a sophomore, I walked into calculus, physics and qualitative analysis. We later had to take quantitative analysis. This was the first course, qualitative
analysis, and I had no idea what was going on. I went to him after class one day and I said, "I bought the book." I mean, he helped me get [it].

SH: Did he help you? That is wonderful.

CL: I mean, I had no idea what was going on. I didn’t even know how to do my homework. I didn’t know what to read. I mean, somehow or other, I was missing the whole thing; you know, I was supposed to read page fifty through seventy-five, something like that. I mean, I missed that. I was stumbling around, but he helped me.

SH: Were there other professors that were helpful like that? Did you have anyone who was, say, unhelpful?

CL: … Nothing that sticks out in my [mind]. … There’s still a Ceramics Department and, … if we were taking five courses, maybe we would have two in the Ceramics Department and one of them might be English composition, one of them might be chemistry, another one might be geology. So, … you did get to talk to, get to experience, a lot of different teachers, … but none of them quite fits [into the same category of] that professor that bailed me out of the chemistry course. I mean, that one sticks in my mind.

SH: Did you ever take an elective? As a sophomore transferring in, was your schedule set?

CL: I think they were pretty well set.

SH: At that time, chapel was mandatory. Did you attend? Do you remember any of the guest speakers?

CL: I used to collect tickets. [laughter]

SH: You were the collector.

CL: I spent a lot of time at that employment office, you know, trying to [find work], and I’d be paid a dollar, I think, for being at the door and collecting the tickets and so on.

SH: Did anyone ever try to get you to put them as present, even if they were not?

CL: Nobody that wasn’t a fraternity brother. [laughter]

SH: Do you remember any of the speakers?

CL: No.

SH: Do you have any Dean Metzger stories to tell?

CL: I have fond memories of him. …
SH: Was he visible on campus and accessible for students?

CL: [Yes].

SH: Was he the one they called; no, it was Demarest they called "Whistling Willie."

CL: "Whistling Willie," yes; he was a former president of the University. Metzger was the Dean of Men.

SH: Is there anything that I forgot to ask about your days at Rutgers?

CL: Wow, maybe you'd better push the button.

[TAPE PAUSED]

Mother’s younger sister had just one child and we saw a lot of one another. That was the cousin that was closest to me and she belonged to a gang of girls. They called it a sorority; I mean, it was [in] high school. … Anyway, one of the girls in … my cousin’s group went to NJC. The group was (Moochie?) Wright, her stage name was Teresa Wright, you remember, the movie star?

SH: No.

CL: Another one went to NJC and my cousin said, "Look out after her." …

SH: You met your wife at NJC.

CL: Yes.

SH: She was part of your cousin’s group of friends.

CL: She was Class of ’42.

SH: Her name was Mildred McDonald.

CL: Yes.

SH: Did she have any brothers that had gone to Rutgers or was she the first to go to college as well? Was she from Perth Amboy?

CL: No, she was from South Orange. South Orange and Maplewood had a common high school in those days, Columbia High.

SH: Had you met her before you met her at NJC?

CL: Oh, yes.
SH: Where had you met her?

CL: At my cousin’s house.

SH: Really? Was this the cousin whose father was the doctor?

CL: Yes.

SH: Oh, great.

CL: Oh, I must have confused you. The doctor took his family up to Maplewood and … my family would visit back and forth a lot and my cousin was three years younger than I am. She had these girls around. …

SH: In other words, Mildred came to NJC the same year that you came to Rutgers?

CL: No, she was Class of ’38 out of high school. So, she showed up in the fall of ’38. By then, I was a junior or something.

SH: What was her degree in from NJC?

CL: … She was a music major, liberal arts.

SH: You obviously started dating right after she came to NJC.

CL: Yes. …

SH: When you went up to Wisconsin, she was still at NJC.

CL: [Yes].

SH: What year did you marry?

CL: ’42.

SH: Right after you were drafted?

CL: Right after she got out of college.

SH: Where were you married?

CL: South Orange.

SH: I am looking at this chronology you put together; you would have just finished Officer’s Candidate School.
CL: [Yes].

SH: You had been assigned to the Eighth Battalion by then.

CL: 81st Chemical Warfare Battalion in Marfa, Texas. I flew home to get married.

SH: Really?

CL: I didn’t pilot the plane; I was a passenger.

SH: I know, but most people talk about only being able to travel on trains and how difficult that was.

CL: I flew home, but we went back by train.

SH: You took her back with you.

CL: Oh, yes.

SH: Okay, when we left off with your military experience, you were going to Chemical Warfare Officer’s Candidate School. Where was that?

CL: Edgewood Arsenal, Maryland.

SH: Did you go home often from there? Did you get furloughs or weekend passes to come home?

CL: During the three months at Officer’s Candidate School? No.

SH: Mr. Landback has just handed me the Western Union telegram that he received. It was sent from Westfield, New Jersey. It says, "To: C. R. Landback, Jr., the DuPont Company in Barksdale, Wisconsin. Got notice this morning that you are to appear for service in Army, 7:05 AM, the 7th of March. No mention of deferment, Mother." It is wonderful that you kept this for all these years.

CL: Well, at some point, I was cleaning up and I got this envelope out and I just put "Army" and stuck things in there, you know.

SH: It is a treasure trove. We spoke earlier about the pay book you have here.

CL: … Shall we talk about this?
SH: Yes, let us talk about OCS. Since you were in the first class, did you feel that they were really organized and ready to teach such a course or did you feel like guinea pigs?

CL: Well, there were twenty of us picked, you know, for this first class. The leader was a regular Army major, Milton Hankins … was his name, and we had three months of, like, technical training, military training. I used to laugh about social training. There were things, like, we were ordered to buy garters. … Officers didn’t have their socks falling down around their ankles. We got cards; we were taught how, … when you got invited to the … post commander’s home for a cocktail or dinner or something like that, you’d bring your card and you'd leave your card in the tray, you know, all these little social amenities of an officer and a gentleman, you know. So, it was a broad perspective of military, technical stuff, how to behave. [laughter] You wait until the hostess picks up her fork, you know, that type of thing. I think … there actually were dinner parties where we were, you know, taught how to act, you know.

SH: Really?

CL: Yes. It was a brand new experience for me, and so, … I didn’t have anything to compare it with. I couldn’t say this wasn’t as good as it used to be, because I’d never been there before, you know.

SH: It sounds like they were very prepared.

CL: We went into Baltimore, … were fitted up for our new officer’s uniforms and things like that.

SH: Did you have enough money? Were they paying you enough to outfit yourselves properly?

CL: I guess so.

SH: After the ninety days, were you then sent to Texas?

CL: Yes.

SH: What were you doing there with the 81st?

CL: Sometime between the wars, World War I and World War II, some person, some officer, in the Chemical Warfare Service, invented a mortar that was better than other mortars. … Armies had been using mortars for thousands of years, I think. This mortar was rifled and … you dropped the shell into the mouth of the mortar. It would shoot out and go in a spiral, which meant it was more accurate. … The base of the shell was like a clamshell thing. When the propellant charge went off, the thing would flatten out and it would engage the rifling on the inside of the barrel of the mortar. I don’t know whether there were any fights, you know, in Washington or something, but it appeared to me as if the Chemical Warfare Service said, "We invented this mortar, we’ll use it. If you want … the mortar, we'll send you a battalion of them." So, there were these chemical warfare mortar battalions. We were equipped, I’m sure, in some warehouse someplace, there were poison gasses and mustard gas and so on, but we never
experienced anything like that. We had high explosive fillings for shells and white phosphorous, which made smoke. So, we could lay down a smoke screen or we could drop high explosives in on the enemy. … Every bit of our assignment, we were attached to an infantry group, … maybe because of these jealousies between the services; … I mean, this was a chemical warfare mortar, you know. … "If you want the mortar, we’ll get some guys, we’ll train them up and we’ll attach them to your unit," and so on, but, all the service that we had was in support of infantry. The same way as artillery is in support of [infantry].

SH: Were you near the artillery? Where was your position in the line?

CL: Well, the normal extent of the range was, like, a mile-and-a-half. I mean, artillery can shoot five miles, ten miles, you know, that type of thing. So, we were closer and in closer support. Anyway, … in April of 1941, there had been some of these mortar battalions formed earlier, but this was one of the early staffing of a battalion, which meant, you know, about a thousand people who were organized and trained to shoot this mortar. I mean, each company had three platoons and each platoon had, like, four mortars. So, I wound up as a company commander. I had like twelve mortars [under me].

SH: How many men were under you? You say you had twelve mortars.

CL: Twelve different squads. It was one mortar per squad, like eight people in the squad, something like that, a company, roughly two hundred people, maybe. Anyway, I was … one of the original, they called them cadre, that started the 81st Chemical Mortar Battalion. I was transferred to help get the 89th Chemical Mortar Battalion started later, which really, probably, saved my life. The 81st Chemical Mortar Battalion went in on D-Day. They didn’t lose everybody, but they lost a bunch and the 89th didn’t get there for another six months.

SH: You were still forming and training.

CL: Yes.

SH: Was that in Texas?

CL: No, … this 89th Chemical [Mortar] Battalion was out in Camp Roberts, … which, then, was halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, on the West Coast. …. That’s a soldier there. [Mr. Landback is referring to a photograph.]

SH: That is a handsome man. That is a great shot.

CL: That's in Colorado.

SH: That is great.

CL: Doesn't it just jump out at you. [laughter]

SH: It looks like you are on the prairie, it is so flat. Where was Camp Carson in Colorado near?
CL: Colorado Springs.

SH: Was that the closest town?

CL: Yes.

SH: Was Mrs. Landback able to come to Colorado with you?

CL: [Yes].

SH: Was it difficult to find a place to live near these Army bases and training facilities?

CL: Well, we were younger and more flexible. [laughter] You shared ... houses with people, you know. So, anyway, as I say, the 89th didn’t get over to England until, ... like, Christmastime in ‘44 and it took us a while to get across the Channel. We arrived in Le Havre on February 15th and the big operation that I was involved in was this Rhine River crossing. The Rhine River, you know, was sort of a barrier. You had to get over that barrier. ... In your reading or your memory, you remember the Remagen Bridge incident; well, that sort of stole our thunder. The Ninth US Army and the British Second Army put together this massive effort to cross the Rhine River, relatively north; you go from the North Sea, the Baltic Sea, down to the Mediterranean, it was relatively up in the north side. Some crazy German forgot to blow up the bridge and some very alert Americans ran across it, you know, and got a toehold and I think that took some of the pressure off us, but this was by far the biggest operation in the 89th Chemical Mortar Battalion history. ... I was interested in glancing through this thing. [Mr. Landback is referring to a document.] "The period from March 11th to March 27, 1945, was the most eventful in the whole war for the battalion." This is all about the Rhine River crossing. These mortars were brought in right, literally, like, on the banks of the river and at the point of H-hour, midnight or something, all hell broke loose and ... we shot about twenty-five thousand mortar rounds over there. There were tank destroyers, artillery, and then, the troops started ... crossing over. That was the biggest [operation]; we did a lot of small things, but [that was the biggest].

SH: What was Ralph Landback doing at that point?

CL: Trying to stay out of the way. [laughter] In other words, as company commander, ... I had two platoons from A Company, I think, attached to me, so, I had, like, five platoons, helping, you know, get everything organized, and then, it was a case of, "Get out of the way;" I mean, let the men do the job.

SH: This took place in March of 1945, just one month after you landed at Le Havre. You covered a lot of territory in one month to get to the Rhine. How were you transported? Were you on trucks or were you on armored personnel carriers?

CL: I forgot to mention that we had jeeps and trailers. We were motorized.

SH: Did someone drive for you or did you drive yourself?
CL: There were these little trailers, I don’t think they were quite as big as that bed, I mean, but you could get a mortar in there, you could get a lot of ammunition in there, but we were motorized. … We had wheels.

SH: Would you travel in convoy or alone?

CL: The battalion, the company or me?

SH: You and your company.

CL: Well, first of all, the company or the battalion or a platoon would have to get from point A to point B and so on, and it was against the rules, it was a sin, to be all clustered up, because you might be attacked and, if you’re all in one big traffic jam and so on, … there’d be a lot of casualties and so on. So, we didn’t get into a line of cars. There was, like, spacing, like a hundred yards spacing between vehicles, that type of thing. I did a lot of traveling around. If we were going to go from this end of the island [Hilton Head] up to the other end of the island, I’d go up there and check things out, make sure that everything was the way they said it was going to be, or satisfactory. I might go up there by myself, just in my own jeep with my own driver, and maybe one young man with a radio or something like that. … Quite often, I mentioned the fact that we would be attached to an Army unit, the regimental commander would say, "I’m going to have a meeting tonight at eight o’clock in my headquarters, be there," you know.

SH: How long did the Rhine crossing operation last? How many hours were you involved in this huge barrage? When was it safe to cross the Rhine?

CL: … I really don’t remember. … The barrage was like two hours or three hours. It wasn’t longer than that and it was something like two o’clock in the morning or eleven o’clock at night, or some weird thing like that, and then, the following morning, … I went across the river to what they call reconnoiter, you know, see whether they wanted the mortars moved over, you know, and so on, but I believe that, in the darkness, infantry people, … after the barrage, were going over in small boats and so on. It was very impressive; we had gone up there and reconnoitered, looked over the situation, decided where we’re going to put the mortars and so on, and then, when the time came, we did all that under the cover of darkness, and so, they were moving boats up to the river and so on. All of this is in the period, like, from, let’s say it got dark at seven o’clock, in the seven to ten period, I mean, the boats were being moved up and all those kind of things.

SH: Was there a town that you transported all of this material through?

CL: They put a sketch in here. These initials indicate C Company. We were by a village called Milchplatz and … these were the targets that we have.

SH: Look at that sketch.

CL: There was another group here.
SH: Is this Orsoy?

CL: Yes.

SH: Was there a bridge for you to cross? Did they build a pontoon bridge?

CL: Yes. First, we went over in small boats, but, then, a bridge was laid down. … Here’s the bridge over the Rhine, but this is what this mortar looked like. Here's a fellow putting a shell into it.

SH: How much did this whole contraption weigh?

CL: Two or three hundred pounds. This man is holding a shell. Here’s the mortar.

SH: That was too heavy for anyone to carry. That was why you had the trailers.

CL: Yes, those vehicles.

SH: How much did a shell weigh?

CL: Eight pounds or something like that, pretty heavy.

SH: How rapidly could the mortars be fired? How many could you fire in, say, a minute? Could you fire more than one?

CL: The reason I’m hesitating is, you might have to stop and check and make sure that the gun is properly aimed. …

SH: Did you have spotters? How did you aim?

CL: We had … maps and compasses and they would actually set up what they called aiming stakes … and there was a gun sight that you put on the top of the mortar and you could aim the gun [sight] and you'd aim it this way or that way.

SH: You went across the Rhine on the bridge pictured here. How long did it take them to build this bridge?

CL: A day? I don’t know.

SH: You said that approximately twenty-five thousand rounds were fired during the crossing operation. How was your hearing after that?

CL: Well, I've talked to some of those guys and they did have some hearing loss. I wasn’t up there with the gun, you know. This is a map that they drew. This is the Rhine River, this is the famous Elbe River, and we got all the way up there to Schwerin, up in here.
SH: Near Mecklenburg and Weimar.

CL: Yes.

SH: You made a few turns here.

CL: That was the Ruhr, the industrial section of Germany, and that’s where Düsseldorf is and all of those places.

SH: Mulheim, Essen and Dinslaken in the middle.

CL: … After the war ended, we had to get out of Schwerin, because that was part of the area that Russia was supposed to take care of, so, … a week later, we had to pull back. The Russians moved in.

SH: Did you meet any of the Russians when you were there?

CL: Some of the guys did. I didn’t personally meet any of them. Here’s Berlin.

SH: Where did you pull back?

CL: Well, this is the route home; all the arrows are going this way.

SH: You came back this way. What kind of destruction did you see as you made your way back? You did not come back until after V-E Day, correct?

CL: … Because we were late getting to Europe, we were scheduled to go to the Pacific, so, we got to return to the States early. We entered New York Harbor on my birthday, July 5, 1945, and, you know, I got like a two-week leave, and then, we’re back to work and … we were training to go to the Pacific when the atom bomb was dropped and Japan finally surrendered.

SH: Where were you training for the invasion of Japan?

CL: You wouldn’t believe this, back to Fort Jackson. That’s where I was discharged from. I mean, that was my entry point and that’s where [I was discharged].

SH: You crossed the Rhine in March. You later saw the atrocities that were committed in …

CL: Gardelegen; that was in April.

SH: A month later. This was at the end of the war.

CL: The war ended, like, in May, I think.
SH: Can you tell me about what you saw at Gardelegen? [Mr. Landback takes out a newspaper.] Look, *Stars and Stripes*; I have never seen this one before, May 8, 1945, the Paris Edition. "Prayers, Tears, Laughter, The World Celebrates," that is a great headline. Where were you on May 8th? Were you with your battalion?

CL: I'm not going to tell. [laughter] The war ended and we got an allotment of Paris passes and, somehow or other, I won a Paris pass. Literally, I was in Paris on V-E Day, yes.

SH: What kind of celebrations did you witness or participate in?

CL: We're not going to discuss that. [laughter]

SH: Okay, I can take a hint.

CL: This battalion [photo], that was taken some years ago, but they’re still having reunions. I’ve got a postcard on my desk right now that I’ve got to respond to. This year, I’m not going to go. I mean, it’s down to just a handful of people, I mean.

SH: Where is it this year?

CL: I forget, some strange place, like Canton, Ohio. … Somebody lives in Canton and they said, "Well, where are going to have it next year?" and he says, "How about Canton?" you know.

SH: Since we cannot talk about V-E Day in Paris, can you tell me how you came upon the atrocities in Gardelegen?

CL: Well, you know, it’s been a whole bunch of years and I don’t remember the details. I was reminded, recently, … by my first sergeant, that he had told me about this thing and I had organized a group to go see it. How he found out about it, I don’t know. …

SH: Was that the first that you had seen or heard of these kinds of atrocities?

CL: [Yes].

SH: You mentioned that you received the Middle Eastern Campaign Ribbon. Where were you that it was considered the Middle East?

CL: Well, the medals that I have, they had one medal for the Europe-Middle East-Mediterranean Area.

SH: Okay.

CL: … It included Africa, [the European-African-Middle Eastern Theater Medal/Ribbon].

SH: I thought I had missed some of the places that you had gone.
CL: … I've got five medals. I mean, there's the Bronze Star, which is a keeper, there's this one with two Battle Stars on it for the European Theater, African-European-Middle East Theater, and the other ones are, like, for being there. I mean, it was the Victory Medal. … Everybody got a Victory Medal and one of my sons mounted the medal for me and I've got it hanging on the wall. …

SH: Do you remember the action that you received the Bronze Star for?

CL: … That was in connection with the Rhine River crossing.

SH: Okay.

CL: This was the … commendation that the company got.

SH: For the crossing of the Rhine.

CL: See, this didn't come through until later on. … You probably want to take this home and put it up on your wall. [laughter] …

SH: Well, I would; it is a great picture. Do you know where this was taken?

CL: That's before I went to Officer’s Candidate School. That was … when I was in that corps headquarters, Chemical Warfare Section, and my Uncle Doc, the medical doctor, was also a photography bug and I think he took that picture.

SH: He did a great job.

CL: This is on one of my visits home.

SH: Your Bronze Star citation says that you, "Exhibited unusual ingenuity and sound judgment in your execution of assigned functions, which contributed greatly to the effective combat operations of the unit. The initiative and devotion of duty displayed by Captain Landback reflect great credit on the Armed Forces of the United States," and it says you entered military service from New Jersey. "Larry (Sievers?), Chief of Staff." Where were you on V-J Day? How did you celebrate?

CL: Back at Fort Jackson, Columbia, South Carolina. … I just remember my wife and I, living and sharing a house somewhere in Columbia, … were out at the officer's club, having a few drinks or something like that, and the word came through that, you know, the war was over and I didn’t get near as drunk that night as I did in Paris. [laughter]

SH: Did you consider staying in the military?

CL: I had been in so long; … I think I got home before the 9th of December. …

SH: "Date of Separation, 9 December 1945."
CL: I think I got home before that, but I had some leave coming, and so, they maybe sent me home in October and I was still getting paid until December or something like that. My wife said that she really didn’t … want me to stay in the regular Army because, if I did, we’d have to move around a lot. So, what I decided to do was go into industry and move around a lot, [laughter] but she got her way. …

SH: However, you still moved around a lot.

CL: Yes.

SH: Where did you live?

CL: After the war, once again, Johnny One-Note, I went back to DuPont and they now had a big job for me as a salesman in the area of East Liverpool, Ohio, which was a pottery center then, maybe still is, I don’t know, and one of … my customers offered me a job for about twice as much as DuPont were … [offering], so, I quit. I went to work for a company called Taylor, Smith and Taylor. Did you ever hear of LuRay Pastel Dinnerware? You're probably not old enough. This was earthenware; it wasn’t china. We had, like, eleven hundred employees, made a lot of cups and saucers and plates and so on. I stayed there for ten years. I joined up as the chief ceramic engineer and I wound up as a plant manager. I was hired by Carborundum as sales engineer, … chiefly known for making abrasives, like sandpaper, grinding wheels. The founder of the Carborundum Company had invented a process for making silicon carbide. Silicon carbide is a man-made mineral that is second only to the diamond in hardness and I had a twenty-five year career with Carborundum. I became a plant manager, and then, a division manufacturing manager, and then, a division manager, and then, the group vice-president. The last two years I was president of the company.

SH: Pretty good for a kid from Perth Amboy.

CL: That used to be … one of the lines I used to use in my talks, as I moved around. I’d say, "I’m probably the first person that you've talked to, you’ve seen today, who was born in Perth Amboy," would be a little jittery laughter, "and who is willing to admit it," loud laughter then. [laughter] I don’t hear good things about Perth Amboy. I mean, I don’t hear much about Perth Amboy, but, anytime I hear about it, supposedly, it’s gone downhill, … I don’t know. … Down [in] that prime section, that, apparently, you've seen, there was something called the Raritan Yacht Club and a junior membership was five dollars a year. … My father helped me build a Comet-class sailboat. I used to sail down at the Raritan Yacht Club and so on. … I have, you know, a lot of pleasant memories, but … my parents finally got out of Perth Amboy and they lived in Westfield and, mostly, I say I’m from Westfield, New Jersey. [laughter] That’s a little bit classier.

SH: You mentioned that you worked in Ohio. Where else in the country did you work?

CL: Can you read that one?
SH: Okay.

CL: That’s the actual draft notice.

SH: "You have been notified that you are a selected man for the next delivery date. Notify your employer immediately as there is a possibility of last minute rejection at the induction station. You may be able to return to your former position and your employer will not lose your services. To advise him whether you are accepted or rejected, carry a postcard with you on the day of delivery addressed to your employer and mail it that day informing him of your status. If you follow this suggestion, you may be able to leave a way open for returning to your job, should you not be finally accepted for training." This is from the local draft board, McKinley School, First Street, Westfield, very serious stuff.

CL: Yes. I flunked.

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

SH: Can you tell me about the displaced persons you saw as you made your way back from the Russian occupied zone?

CL: Well, not just in the case of our return, after having been across the Elbe River and so on, but throughout all of our travels in … Europe, there were people trudging along the sides of the road, carrying all their belongings, pulling carts, pulling trailers and so on, carrying babies. Generally, the people were, you know, fleeing. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

We imagined that, in some cases, we were seeing people that were fleeing the Russians, getting over in the American occupied territory in favor of being in the Russian occupied territory. The other significant experience we had with the local people was people who would come and ask to work in our kitchens and so on. We had people … who scrubbed all our pots and pans and … kept everything neat about the mess truck just in return for being fed. People were looking for a way to survive and catching a job with a US Army outfit, I guess, was … better than nothing. I think there were rules about [it], you weren’t allowed to do that, but we had a lot of local people scrubbing pots and pans, but, generally speaking, on that general subject, the number of nights that we slept in our pup tents … probably could be counted on one hand. I mean, … if we saw a house, we moved into it and the people had left. I mean, they had gotten out of town trying to avoid the battle, avoid whatever bad things might happen to them, so, we ate some of their food and slept in their beds, and then, moved on the next day. … We didn’t put up our tents very often, during the war that is.

SH: Did you do a lot of scavenging, trying to find fresh food?

CL: Definitely, yes.

SH: Did you have men in your company who were really good at this, or better than others?
CL: Not that I know of. I think one of the German Army rations was sardines. Every once in a while, we’d have sardines. … That was kind of a special treat, but there were a lot of instances where the farmhouse had, you know, canned peaches or home canned peaches, you know, down in the basement and so on. In thinking about this interview and thinking about some of the things that we experienced, it made me think of what’s going on in Iraq now [the occupation of Iraq following Operation: Iraqi Freedom in 2003]. We didn’t worry that somebody had put poison in the canned peaches. We ate them and people didn’t put poison in canned peaches in those days. … Yes, we did some scavenging, but nobody got caught and nobody … died from it.

SH: What is your most memorable experience from World War II?

CL: I hadn’t really thought about that, so, this is one off the top of the head; I think, maybe, returning to New York on July 5th. We got the welcome that … the early people got, I mean, you know, fireboats were out, blimps over the ship, playing tunes, just up there like a hundred feet. … We had a big, big welcome, you know, in the New York Harbor.

SH: Do you remember the name of the ship you came back on?

CL: I think it was the George Washington and it was a hospital ship and I think they wanted to get us home early for the Pacific War and, also, they needed somebody to act as the crew, because it was a hospital ship and we were the people that, you know, washed the pots and pans, … but I think it was the George Washington and we took the southern route, which is warm weather, and we were still out at sea on the 4th of July, and … I think it’s mentioned in the history, and I think it happened to … more than just me. We were so used to reacting to gunfire in Europe that on the 4th of July, when they started to shoot guns, a whole bunch of us got down on the deck, … just an automatic reflex; you got down. … The next day, we came into New York Harbor and that was a memorable moment.

SH: Did your family come to meet you in New York Harbor?

CL: Communications were such that, no, … nobody met us.

SH: Did you get a lot of mail? Did you send a lot of mail?

CL: I lived through the period when slides were the hot thing. I mean, you come over and see, "We just got back from Europe. Would you like to see our slides?" and so on. I’ve got two things that I don’t know whether I’ll ever do anything about. One of them is slides and the other one is the letters that I wrote home and my wife saved [them] all. I don’t know whether to just throw them away or what to do with them.

SH: That is wonderful.

CL: I guess the idea [was], you know, "He might not come back, so, … I ought to save these letters," you know, and so on. So, I got a couple of shoeboxes full of old letters.
SH: Thank you so much for a wonderful interview and for talking about things that are not always easy to talk about. I appreciate you making the effort. Thank you.

CL: I’ve enjoyed being with you. I’m sorry I broke up a couple of times.

SH: Please, do not apologize.

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

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 6/24/04
Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 6/27/04
Reviewed by Charles Landback, Jr. 8/2/04