

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALBERT BRUCE LUKENS

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Molly Graham: This is an interview, our second session, with Albert Bruce Lukens. We are on 337 Jamestown Road in Bridgewater, New Jersey. The date is June 26th, 2014, and I am Molly Graham.

Albert Bruce Lukens: My eighteenth birthday was in January 31st in '43, and I went to the firehouse, which was just down the street from our house. I went there and went through the physical [test], and I was declared 1-A [available for military service] and given a six-month deferment to finish high school.

I don't know whether I talked to you about this, when that draft come on, and I don't remember the year that it came, but a lot of my classmates, men, joined the service prior to being graduated, and what went through my mind was the number of them were killed in this war. In fact, the two of my friends, this George and Richard, they joined the Marines, and they were killed in South Pacific. I remember a friend of mine that did not pass the physical for the induction, and he felt terrible that he didn't do it.

We graduated, but during that senior year, the Army and the Navy came up with, the Army came up with an A-12 and the Navy came with the V-12 plan. I don't know whether you know of it, but I picked the Army. They told me when I went for this testing, this was in the school and I passed the exam, the written exam, and they said, "Well, you had go through regular induction and then from there you will be retested again and you would be sent to college." So, I picked that, and one week after I graduated, I was inducted into the service. I spent less than a month in Fort Dix. There, I was put on a train and sent to Camp Fannin in Tyler, Texas. First, they said, "You had to take basic." Well, this was [a] infantry training center. So, I had, actually, four months of training, and they did keep their word that they would test us after the four months was up, the training period was over. I again passed, and they selected--I went to Louisiana State University. I was going to be--they needed surgeons and all the technical and engineers and so forth, and I was in there for an engineer. [Editor's Note: Beginning in 1942, the U.S. Army began the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), in which applicants who met stringent requirements would complete basic training and then be sent to a college or university to complete a bachelor's degree and earn a commission in eighteen months. The Navy offered the comparable V-12 Program, in which participants would earn a commission as an officer. In early 1944, with the invasion of Europe impending, the Army announced that over 100,000 ASTP students would become soldiers in combat units.]

What was funny about this thing, I went to Louisiana State University, and I thought, "Oh, I'm going to ride out to war." I got one semester in in this university, and the new ones that just got into the system we were assembled and sent to Camp Maxey in Paris, Texas. We were now intelligent, young men that were in the infantry. In the 99th Infantry [Division], they kept all the cadre, and those that were in the ranks were shipped out and they probably went to reinforcements to these divisions that were fighting. So, we filled the ranks in Camp Maxey, but that was a time when you were with people, guys--not so much of the girls--but guys, during the school years, and lot of them enlisted into the service before being graduated. You just kind of missed them, but a lot of them didn't make it. I know this George and Richard, this Richard (Stark?)--I don't remember George's last name--but they were Marines and they got killed.

Anyway, it was a feeling of really being a comrade with everybody. You just had the feeling, but you were glad to serve. We got into the [99th Infantry Division] and we trained and we went POE [point of embarkation]. D-Day was in June [1944]. We landed in France in September, almost two or three months after [D-Day], and we took the place of the Second [Infantry] Division. We progressed up through France and into Belgium. I think I spent about fifty days on [the] line.

It was funny, I have to say this, I always laughed, why I did it. My report card in senior year, I put down what my [height and weight were]. I was five [feet], eleven [inches tall], 145 pound, and after I got done with four months of training and into Louisiana State University, I was six-foot-two, 180 pound. I really was a bloomer after that.

We just filled the ranks. The sergeant of my squad didn't particularly like me, because I didn't kiss his butt. When we went to Boston, we POE-ed out of Boston, he assigned me to be with these MPs [military police] and I had very brief training, which was really nothing. You were hooked up with a regular MP, and we rolled the buses back from Taunton, [Massachusetts] to the camp. The man, this soldier that I was with, he was a nice guy. These guys would go into town and get drunk, and they would come out. If they didn't get out of the bus before it went back through the initial stop there, he and I would pick these guys up, carry them off the bus and lay them down on the grass. This was in September. Then, we would go back through again, but we would have [a] clean bus because if we left them on there, then they would have been charged. I don't know how much penalty they would get, but they would be charged. So, I did that, and I was also the MP on this ship going across to England.

We left Boston, and we landed in Liverpool. From there, we went to just south of London, and we were there. What was surprising to me, we were in the wooded area--I can't think of the name of the town we were in or the city, but it was very clean because all these people would come in and take all the broken branches and everything else and use it for fire. So, anyway, as I say, we went POE and landed into France.

From there, we just progressed up to, getting close to the Siegfried Line. [Editor's Note: The Siegfried Line was a series of defensive fortifications built by Germany along its borders with the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and France.] We didn't have any real [problems]. The biggest problem with us was that we would dig in and set up in an area. We would patrol that whole area, and the Germans that were there were very young and ill-equipped and they were glad to surrender really. This was quite a difference from the time of December--was that the 16th--and I was in on the capture of four [German soldiers]. We were in the reserve, and all of this was the barrage that hit us. We were one of the first ones hit. I don't know how we survived, but we survived and we got through. We were assembled and sent back up to counterattack, and I was in on capture of four [German soldiers]. What a difference, the Germans that we were picking up prior to this to what I saw that day, they were as big as me and elite and camouflaged and everything else. They were really something.

I think what people really know about the [Battle of the] Bulge--and I'm trying to think and I can't recall the exact town [Bastogne]--but they were the 101st Airborne that filled this one town

that the Germans were, but we were hit two weeks prior to them. We were cut off, and we were there four or five days behind the lines. The only thing I recall, one time, we came into this small town or village, you want to call it, and it was just at crossroads like that. All houses were on this side and there was a church right at the point and the Germans were up in that church steeple and they swept. We had to try to take that, we were working, but you would just go around and the call went out to our artillery and they took that steeple right off and after that we had no problem. [Editor's Note: On December 16, 1944, Germany launched a surprise offensive in the Ardennes Forest of Belgium with the goal of reaching the port city of Antwerp and splitting Allied forces in northwestern Europe. The battle became known as the Battle of the Bulge for the salient or bulge that the German advance created in the American lines. American forces quickly responded with reinforcements, but fighting in the Ardennes lasted until January 25. The Germans suffered 100,000 casualties out of half a million men committed and lost nearly all their tanks and aircraft. American forces lost 19,000 killed, 47,500 wounded and 23,000 missing in action, making it the bloodiest battle of the war for the United States.]

MG: Do you need some water?

AL: What?

MG: Do you want a glass of water?

AL: No, no. I have allergies.

MG: Yes.

AL: It's not catching.

MG: I am not worried.

AL: It's too bad. [laughter] I not only have a deviated septum on my right side, but I have allergies to grass and trees. I like fall. Fall is my season.

MG: Well, it is just around the corner.

AL: Yes.

MG: When you encountered those four Germans who had surrendered, did that give you an indication that the war was coming to an end and the tides were turning?

AL: No, no, no, in fact, they were elite, believe me. What a difference it was to see them. This sergeant, they were talking [about] what to do with them, and this Sergeant (Schultz?) said, "Let me take them back." I thought, "That sucker is going to pick me to take them back." There was only one thing you could do was shoot them, kill them. I wasn't ready to kill anybody in cold blood, so I just slipped away. I went up, there was more action. I'm just almost sorry I did this because I damned near got killed [laughter], and somebody had me in their sights. Anyway, I

stayed there for that day, and there, after assessing that we got--everybody that we were fighting--we got them.

Then, we were cut off, and this Major Legler took us the remnant of what was of our 393rd and [39]4th. He led us and it was about four or five days we were behind the lines, and we got back into our own lines. In fact, the last time we darn near got killed by our own artillery because over there they grew all these trees, the forest, but then they would have a break, an open area, and that's where there would be more of an activity. You didn't see any tanks or anything, other than in those breaks. I always remember this one Sergeant (Brye?), he was holding us up because there was some artillery [that] came through, and there was all explosions of the shells. Then, once he felt they were taking a break or whatever you might call it, we just ran across the open area. We were stumbling over a lot of our own men, and we got back into our lines.

They put us in this big, open hall or whatever they had there. I don't even know what the town was. That's where I thought, I told you, where I had C rations. I couldn't to this day tell you what I ate, it went down so fast, but the cigarettes, I can tell you, they were Chelsea cigarettes, three in a pack, and I smoked them like crazy.

The next day, we were assembled to go back up to the front and fight. When I got up, I had no feeling from my knees on down in both legs, but I got up and I was going up with them. I stumbled, and I could not get up. I always remember this medic came along and asked me, "What was the matter?" and I told [him]. He checked my leg out, and he said, "You are not going any place." So, I was stripped of my M-1 [rifle] and ammunition, and I was put into an ambulance. From there, I went to a field hospital. I was there and then transported later on, two or three days, to Paris, France, and that was something to see, the Frenchmen without uniforms. People were just busy. It was nice, and I was in a hospital there for, oh, couple of days, and again they were pumping me full [of penicillin].

MG: That is okay. We can take break if you would like.

[TAPE PAUSED]

AL: They were pumping me full of penicillin, because I had gangrene in my left foot. After about two or three days--again, the time element I don't remember--but we were shipped over the channel into England. There I was in that hospital for, I guess, four or five months. I know this, on my birthday of '44, because I was in the hospital, they took off my four toes on my right foot and then two weeks later, which would be my sister Ethel's birthday, I lost all toes on my left foot. I was still in the hospital. [I] had to have a skin graft, and they took--oh, I would say in March, late March--they took skin off my upper leg and [transplanted it] on my left foot. It took. That's for being nineteen and healthy, so called.

Jill Hacker: Can I add a comment to that, Dad?

AL: Yes.

Jill Hacker: He is in the medical books.

MG: Yes, I remember you saying that last week. It was the first time ...

JH: A non-attached.

MG: Right.

AL: Yes.

JH: Normally, they would take like a flap from here and you hold it like here until it took and then they would cut it off. So, this was actually, taking a graft off and then putting it someplace else and, like I said, he is in the medical books.

MG: What did this skin graft do?

AL: Well, it covered this wound. As I say, they took my toes off on my left foot, but I had an open area of the whole foot there. If I had no graft, I would have been a long time with a bandage for this to grow, either that or they just would have taken my foot off. The graft took, which I was happy [about]. I was there, and then after all that was done, I was put on a ship, hospital ship, and we went back to United States. It was a long way around because they still--the Germans weren't too, shall we say, cared whether it was a hospital ship or what, they would torpedo it. We landed in Charleston, South Carolina, and from there I was further attended to and then I was shipped up to Butler, Pennsylvania, near my home. My home was only in New Jersey, but somehow I was shipped to Butler, Pennsylvania, which was ninety miles north of Pittsburgh. When I got a pass, it took twelve hours to get to my place in New Jersey. So, I was discharged, I think [at] the time that Japanese signed [the armistice]. They were conquered. So, that's just about it. [Editor's Note: V-J Day, or Victory over Japan Day, is August 15, 1945, the day that Japan unconditionally surrendered to the United States to bring World War II to an end. On September 2, 1945, the formal surrender was signed onboard the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay.]

MG: What was it like to look down and no longer see your toes there?

AL: Well, I will tell you, I went to Stevens Tech [Stevens Institute of Technology]. I always remember [that] my sister Alma took me to a shoe store, and she fitted a pair of shoes on me and we just stuffed the toe of the shoe with cotton. I was at Stevens for two years, and there was a veteran's adviser. He lined me up to go to New York, and I had [a] cast made of my feet and they made shoes, they made the sole, you know, like Dr. Scholl's you see advertised, but mine had a toe to them. So, I would get from the government supposedly two shoe pairs every year, but I didn't particularly like them because they had some steel in the sole and there was not too much of a bend. I always liked that there would be some flexibility, but, anyway, that's the way it went and that was it for me. I went two years to Stevens, as I say, and there were all [students attending on the] GI Bill. Again, I probably told you, we were all GIs and we did a little too

much of this [drinking]. [Editor's Note: The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 or GI Bill was a law providing benefits for the returning veterans of World War II].

MG: Drinking.

AL: My third year was coming up, and I said to myself, "I'm never going to make this." So, I left and worked at Purolator. I worked less than a year there, and somehow I heard about Fairleigh Dickinson [University]. I went to Fairleigh Dickinson [University] that was in Rutherford, New Jersey. They accepted me, and I had the last two years with them. I graduated with honors for the fact that I wasn't living with a bunch of my buddies. I was home, commuting back and forth. I didn't live over there, and I made the honor roll. I made pretty good marks. In fact, I was offered a fellowship to go to Temple University after I graduated. I always remember my dad, my father, I told him about it, and I said, "I don't have enough money to do all this." He said, "You already have a degree," and that was the end.

I was working, before I graduated, [at] Walter Kidde. From Walter Kidde, I went and worked for Johns-Manville. Would you believe that I ran a production line where I made siding, asbestos siding and roofing, and I did that for thirty years? This young lady [Jill]--I was married to my wife--and we would go Friday nights to YMCA, and she says, "Daddy, let's race across the pool." My little girl beat me, and I'm hanging on to the pool and that was it. I said, "That was the end of my smoking." I think that's why I come through thirty years with Johns-Manville, no problem.

MG: What do you think would have happened if you had not gotten frostbite and left?

AL: What do you mean?

MG: Where do you think you would have headed next?

AL: Oh, if I never got frostbite, I would still be fighting over there, and I don't know whether I would have lasted because there was some pretty hefty fighting going on. So, I can't tell you; that would be strictly speculation as to what would happen.

MG: What has it been like to have a daily reminder of your war experience looking down? Do you think about the Battle of the Bulge every time you put your socks on?

AL: No. It's a problem with me now. As you see, I'm with this walker, but prior to [this, I was fine]. I was working, and I retired in the early '80s. My wife and I went up to New England in New Hampshire in Lake Pawtuckaway. I took a camp that my father-in-law built, and I made it into an all-year-round house. The only one time I do remember I had to watch it [was when] I had shoes and I just had my toes put in, and I remember Joanie and I [were] putting up the ladder and all to work on the siding. Somehow, it was just my toes, which I had nothing to hold, that I slipped through down the ladder and right into her arms and she got a hold [of] me, but that I had to watch out for. Otherwise, I did my father's house. It was two-and-half [stories], and I did that all by myself with extension ladder. I got along okay. I played tennis and golf, but I couldn't

even think of running or doing anything other than that. It limited me but not to my disappointment.

MG: How come the Army appealed to you in the first place?

AL: I didn't want to go into the Navy. I don't know, it was Army versus Navy, and I wasn't ready to be in the Navy. I chose the Army, and I can't really say that I did the wrong thing. A lot of my friends joined the Navy, and they just didn't make it because the South Pacific really was a struggle. So, I can't complain. There was D-Day, and we joined the fight in September [1944] after June and we progressed up into Germany. Primarily, we had to be careful of the artillery. That was more of an artillery duel going through. Now, because we were up in the wooded area, really I wasn't in towns. Only one town did we take, and I can tell you the name was Kalterherberg [in Germany]. It really took me--Germans were sweeping those streets with their machine gun and artillery, and took that steeple off and that was the end. That was the only town fighting I was in; the rest of it was in forest areas.

So, I can't say anything to what [happened to] these other men [who] fought in these cities and so forth. We weren't strafed or bombed with the German bombers. One time, these so called V-1 bombs, which the Germans were launching, but they were not to [close to] us because we were in a forest area. Why would they be bombing us? So, that was my life. It was more out in the open.

I think that's why [I lost my toes], because being [outside for] fifty days primarily into December where it was always snow and cold, and [you] couldn't change your shoes or socks every day. You just had to watch yourself. I always laughed when I was in the hospital, and there I would be reading these articles and the people would always say, "You had to change your socks" and so forth. Well, we were in a position where we couldn't. We didn't have socks with us. It was only what was on our foot.

I got through it, and I made some nice friends in the service. When we were on the hospital ship going back to [the] US from England, boy, those nurses there were terrific. I mean, these gals were better than any man, and they took care of a lot of problems. I have to give credit to a lot of these nurses; they were terrific. When I was in the hospital, they were good, very good.

MG: You mentioned last week that you saw the Siegfried Line. Can you explain for someone listening to this what that is and what you saw?

AL: What I saw--and I don't know how much of it I saw--but it was where they had dugouts, and this was almost like the French had the Maginot Line and the Germans had the Siegfried Line. What I saw of it was more or less a line of dugouts, not foxholes, but covered, and they would be primarily lined up with a machine gun and so forth. [There were] no tunnels, like the French had tunnels. Then, the French just had everything pointed towards Germany. They couldn't swing around, and the Germans just flew over and come up behind them and that Maginot Line went to nothing. So, I don't know how much of the line I saw, but we were up against where there were dugouts, where they were all spaced over this whole area. They just

swept this whole area where we were with machine-gun fire. That was the time, did I tell you when I saved a man?

MG: Yes, (Kay?).

AL: They just swept that whole area where we were with machine-gun fire, then hit us with mortars. I have to say this. This is where I found God, believe it or not. I felt that I was going to die, and the mortars were coming toward me. I said, "Father, take my soul." I wasn't screaming. I just felt I was going to die, and just to the point where the next one [artillery shell] would have been in my back pocket, it went overhead and they just traversed back. Imagine somebody sweating in that cold weather. Well, that was me. I laid there until everything was quiet, and I got up and went up to where I thought was this (Kay?) was. So, I was just calling his name softly, and I heard just a snuffling. He couldn't speak. So, I laid my M-1 down and all that, picked him up, and I carried him toward the tree line. There were other soldiers there, and they grabbed him. I went back and got his equipment. I picked up his helmet, and there was a hole in his helmet. I figured he wasn't going to make it. That was around the 12th and 13th of December. Prior to the 16th, I heard that the [medical battalion] saved his life, which I was very pleased.

That was where my friend, Mr. Sergeant (Schultz?) had assigned me because we used to have a recon outfit in front of us, but they weren't there at that time. I was out there, and I come back and I said, "I saw him." I said, "Thank you for coming out and looking for us." This is what happened when the 16th [December 1944] came and we were assembled, we were reserved. We come back to fight, and we [had captured] four Germans. They were talking, and he says, "Let me take them back." I figured, "That sucker is going to call on me." So, that's where I just slipped off and went way up to do some other fighting.

It was funny. I can't tell you whether I killed anybody; I doubt it. Primarily, we were always being struck by artillery or machine-gun fire or mortars all the time, and we would be in foxholes. One time, we were set up in this area outside of this little town, and we took the machine gun off the kitchen truck and set up the machine gun with ammunition. I remember his name, (Austin?), and myself were handling that machine gun. He was a tremendous guy. We were set up, and we got the word that the Germans were breaking in at this other point. He picked up the whole damn machine gun, and I grabbed all the ammunition. We ran like hell to the point where they were supposed to be coming through, but they never did. As I say, we would fire the machine gun. I can't tell you whether we killed anybody. What happened when we were just moving up we would have to watch very early in the morning. I remember the one time these two Germans, young men, came up waving a white flag, and we took them in.

That was the surprise when the Germans hit us with that Battle at the Bulge. My God, they were the elite. They figured that they could take us in nothing flat, but I remember after I was in the hospital, and I read where the [101st] Airborne defended this one Belgium town and they did a tremendous job. I could see when I was in the hospital, you'd see the wounded [101st Airborne] man, he was a powerhouse. I never thought I was a powerhouse, I might have been, but, boy,

they were. I can imagine you had to have guts to jump out of a plane and fight. That wasn't up to me yet. I would rather be on the ground, period.

MG: It sounds like you still had a lot of guts.

AL: Well.

MG: I am curious after that day with (Kay?) if your belief or relationship with God stayed with you throughout your life.

AL: Oh, yes. We were led by this Major Legler. It was either four or five days. Don't pin me down on something like that, and this (James Harden?) hooked up with me. He says, "Mind if I go with you?" You know me and my buddy, we were going with the rest. I didn't know all these people, soldiers, that were in the line just moving. At night, you would pull off the trail, and you would sleep. This one time, James and I, we looked down, and these couple of guys had--there was a dugout or foxhole--and we went down to see them. They were our soldiers, and we asked them, "Can we stay there that night?" They said, "Fine." I don't know how it happened, whether I was to take this foxhole, he would take that. We split up, he took one, I took the other with these other men, and that night we were under fire. We were being hit by what you would call a mop-up force. We were under fire that night. The next morning comes, just as soon as the sun was up, we got up to get out and the other men were there. I said, "Where is James?" They said, "He got killed last night." If I would have taken that position, I probably would have been killed. We wouldn't be talking. The Lord was good to me. I can't say anything other than that. He helped me out. So, I don't know what else you want to hear from me.

MG: I am wondering if you are able to talk about the 99th Infantry Division's strategic role in the Battle of the Bulge.

AL: We were one of the first ones hit, and we were out in the wooded area. Again, I can't tell you all what happened. All I know is that we were set up to where this business I told you about me saving this man, and that was the time my company was going to be diversionary attack and the [394th Infantry Regiment] would be the main attack. We would be in that area, and that did happen. We were a diversionary, so we weren't the main force and who we picked up, they weren't really equipped at all. These soldiers, they were almost like what you would call draftees that never wanted to be there in the first place. Anyway, I can't tell you otherwise, for if I was in the 394th Regiment and they did the primary attack, they could tell you something different. It really wasn't much of a fight on our side or our company, and we were just there and just stayed.

In fact, we set up some tents, and we were in that reserve. That's when the 16th [of December] came around and [the Germans launched the Ardennes Offensive]. Believe me, what a difference. We really got hit, and then it went past us. I assume what happened, we were cut off and we were assembled to go back up to fight and was in on the capture of the four [Germans]. I fought, but I didn't see anything. I just pretty much just held my ground. Nobody got passed me. After that 16th was over, this Major Legler--we were cut off and that was obvious--he just led us the best he could and he did a good job. I have a book that David gave me on the 99th Infantry,

and I just read up to the point to where this Major Legler brought us back into our own lines. From there, I didn't know anything else about the 99th. So, I was in enough fighting to get killed, but I survived.

MG: In between the fighting, can you describe a typical day or what you did once you woke up to going to bed?

AL: Well, when the 16th came on, we did nothing but just follow one another. Prior to [that], p we did the attacking at the 14th and 15th [of December 1944]. We had rations and so forth, but they were cold rations. We would have the C rations. You can see here, see my arm?

MG: Yes.

AL: They gave us a very heavy chocolate bar. I think it was a K-8 [D ration] or some damn thing and I can't tell you exactly, but it was something I ate that was to keep us alive. What I understand [was that] my body could not take all that heavy chocolate. I mean, it was concentrated. One time, I had a lump in my back, and I went to the doctor. That was the time I was married. He says, "Al." He says, "You know," and they weren't this prominent. He said, "You've got lumps all over your body." I guess my body just couldn't assimilate all that kind of rationing.

MG: What things from home did you miss the most?

AL: Pardon?

MG: What things from home did you miss the most?

AL: Oh, I missed my mother. Really, I was my mama's boy. She died when I was seventeen.

MG: I remember.

AL: My dad was a hardworking man. The first child he had was Lawrence. Then, it's Lawrence and then Alice. There is that one photo of him in the driveway of where they were in Bayonne and a photo of him, and you never saw such a smile on a man's face. Lawrence, at the age of three, got away from the family and ate grapes, which were sprayed and he died, I would imagine, very tragically. My dad was obviously very upset about the whole thing, and when I was born in Bayonne, my mother said to my father, "This is no place to raise a child," and we moved out to Roselle, New Jersey. We lived on West Eighth Avenue in a brand new house. My mother's family was wealthy. I never knew my grandparents, but my mother's father had a coal and lumberyard with a partner. They lived very well-to-do, and one day everything went up in smoke and fire. The partner was gone. My mother went from well-to-do to just poor. My father was with the name of Lukens from Lukens Steel, I think I told you.

MG: Yes.

AL: They were two poor people marrying, and I had four good sisters.

MG: Did you correspond with them while you were overseas?

AL: After I was picked up, I couldn't write for thirty days, my hands were so bad. My sister Ethel's husband Frank was in the South Pacific. My sister Alice's husband, he didn't go into service because they had the two kids, and same way with my sister Alma. They had Richard, and so they were never drafted. I was pretty much more in contact with my sister Ethel. My sister Alice and her husband Bob lived in our house in Roselle [with] my father since my mother was passed away.

When I came back, that's where I was until I got hooked up with Stevens, and I went over there to live. I was in the fraternity Sigma Nu. I studied but did too much partying. When I left, I worked for Purolator, and I got hooked up with Fairleigh Dickinson. From there, I had worked for Walter Kidde, and then from Walter Kidde, because I had to go to Belleville all the time, I didn't particularly like that. My sister Allison lived in Bridgewater. Johns-Manville was in Manville, New Jersey, and asbestos didn't bother me really. I went to work for them [as] an industrial engineer, and then from there, I went up the ranks and I was running H-building, which was the siding and roofing. Jilly, what insulation was I thinking that Johns-Manville bought? [Editor's Note: During the twentieth century, the Johns-Manville Company manufactured insulation, roofing materials and engineering products, much of which was made from asbestos. Johns-Manville filed for bankruptcy in 1982, and the company has faced many individual and class-action lawsuits based on asbestos-related health issues.]

JH: Fiber glass.

AL: Yes.

MG: There we go.

AL: I was selected to go out and run it, but we, my wife and I, tried for six years to have children. We adopted Jilly in '58, but we wanted another child. I was selected, I went out there to be interviewed, and they liked me and I liked them. I spent a couple of extra days out there in Ohio, and adoption was very difficult. Then, we came back, and I talked to my--I was kidded a lot to have given up a good job--I told Mr. [Clinton Brown] Burnett, the head of Johns-Manville that--thanked him for the selection, but we wanted a child and we stayed with the same adoption agency. We got Jilly, and I got my son. We got our son in '60. I ran an asbestos business for Johns-Manville and did it for a good thirty years there and retired. We had a good life.

MG: Can you tell me how you met your wife?

AL: Oh, it was at one of these parties.

MG: Was this a fraternity party?

AL: What?

MG: A fraternity party?

AL: No, she was brought there by this (Dick Wright?), a friend of mine, and we kind of hooked up a little bit after. We got married, and we tried to have children, tried for six years, but it just didn't happen. I couldn't have had two better children than what we have, quite frankly.

MG: Can you tell me about your wife? Why was she someone you wanted to marry?

AL: Pardon?

MG: What was she like?

AL: Oh, she'll get that; Jilly get that picture.

MG: What was her name?

AL: Joan. She was a good-looking gal and smart and intelligent. She worked over New York, and we hooked up.

MG: Can you tell me about your wedding?

AL: Yes.

MG: She is a good-looking gal [looking at the picture], and you are a good-looking guy. They look so happy.

AL: Yes, that was up there; we went to Lake Pawtuckaway in New Hampshire. That was one of our affairs. We would stay up in New Hampshire because of my feet. We would come down and see our kids, Jill and Bruce in December and we would leave them [at] New Year's, and we would stay down in Florida. My father-in-law had a mobile home down in, oh, what the heck?

JH: Bonita Springs.

AL: Bonita Springs, yes. We would be there for three months, and we would come back to New Hampshire. We were fine.

MG: Can you tell me what your first thought when you first met Jill?

AL: She was a terrific little girl. She had a lump in her forehead, [laughter] but the interim family that had her did such a terrific job. I remember the time I was working on our home in Bridgewater.

JH: Hillsborough.

AL: Hillsborough, I was working on it, and these two ladies come up with a child. They said, "This is your daughter." She was a terrific little girl. The interim family that had her did a tremendous job, because we thought, "Oh, we are going to be new to her," and she just joined right in. She was no problem, nothing at all. We got Bruce in '60, and the interim family that had him didn't do a great job. In fact, he was a sick little baby, and Dr. Sullivan, right?

JH: Yes.

AL: [He] said, "You ought to turn him back." Well, we wanted a boy so bad, we said, "No way." I have to give the credit to my wife more, she did everything possible, and we have, I have two, a boy and a girl, that are terrific, no problem. Believe me, nothing is a hundred percent, but, generally, everything went fine.

MG: We skipped over your homecoming. I wanted you to talk about what it was like to come home and how you were received by your family and the country.

AL: My dad was not a lovable man. He was a worker, and he lost a son that he really wanted. I came home, and my sisters Alice and Alma, they were married and had kids. There was Ethel and myself really. Again, I lived in Roselle in the house, but when I took the GI bill, I went to Stevens, and I commuted for a while. Then, after that, the commutation, I would have to go from Roselle into Jersey, end of the Jersey City line, take the ferry across, come back and come back with a ferry to Hoboken. So, I was asked to join this fraternity, and I took it. I lived there for two years. Well, after the third year, I said, "That's it." I had to do something. Joanie and I got married. We were married in September.

I had a terrific life, no problem. Oh, we had our ups and downs, but she was a good gal. She [came] down with Parkinson's [Disease] and she had that COPD [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease], which made [it] hard to breath, which I think I can understand because I got this allergy that makes it hard for me to breath. Her father and mother, she was a single child, they bought this camp up in New Hampshire and they lived in Massachusetts and he worked for, oh, God, Jilly?

JH: Western Electric.

AL: Yes, and they bought that place in New Hampshire, and it was a camp. He was not a builder. Somebody said about her [father] that [he] could live in a tarpaper shack as long as he had a TV. So, they did that after he retired; they lived in New Hampshire and then they went down to Florida. They had this mobile home, and my mother-in-law came down and she didn't really make it. She had a problem, and my father-in-law was funny. My mother-in-law died, his wife died, and he had her cremated but didn't keep the ashes, which surprised us. He would be down in Florida, then come up to New Hampshire when we were there. What I couldn't build I had somebody do it, and we made that into an all-year-round place. You would be amazed at the price we sold it for, but my wife wanted to get back to New Jersey and be with the kids because she knew she had this Parkinson's and all. Well, we sold the place, and it was an excellent price that we got and bought this place down in Whiting and she didn't last too long.

MG: When did she pass away?

AL: In '06. Yes, she was a terrific gal. I liked her. [laughter]

MG: I am curious about if you ever went back to Europe after the war.

AL: Pardon?

MG: I am curious about if you ever went back to Europe after the war to the places you were before.

AL: No. Joanie and I flew--her father and sisters came from Switzerland and that area--and we flew to that area and into Germany, but I didn't see any of my places. The only thing I can remember is we went there and we were there, but we didn't really didn't pick up anything. We came down and picked up a river boat that took us back to Holland, and from Holland, we stayed in the Netherlands for about two or three days and then we flew to London, England. We were there, and then we flew back to America. We did some pretty good travelling. I depended on her. She would always say that she would have everything lined up, so I never had to worry about anything. "Do you want to go?" "Yes, I'll go." So, that's what we did. She was captain of the ship; I was the driver.

MG: I am going to pause this real quick.

[TAPE PAUSED]

MG: I am curious if you went to any reunions.

AL: No.

MG: Did you stay in touch with anybody that you served with?

AL: No. I pretty much lost contact with everybody when I was in the hospital. Then, I came back to the United States, and I was up in Butler, Pennsylvania for two weeks, so there really wasn't anybody that I could contact, that I would know. No, I haven't been to any reunions.

MG: What it is like been to be a part of something that was such a major part of World War II? There are movies about it, so many books about it, but you were there.

AL: Well, I'll tell you, the patriotism we had, there was no question. There was no problem. I was assigned to do a lot of the dirty work [by] Sergeant (Schultz?), but I still did them and no problem. I admire the Air Force, the Airborne, the 101st. They were terrific guys because when I was in the hospital there for a while, there was a quite a number of them, and I would talk to them. They were terrific. I liked them, but I never had the real desire to jump out of a plane.

MG: Me neither. What advice would you give someone who is entering the service today?

AL: Pardon?

MG: What would you tell someone who is entering the service today? What advice would you give them?

AL: Well, I don't know what I would say to them, because we had a whole different atmosphere back when I was going in. We were at a war with Japan and Germany and Italy. Now, we are getting involved with these Middle East [countries] and these people, they are desperate. We have to be very careful and be on guard at all times, because they don't mind giving up their lives. There is too many of these people that drive a car right into a building or whatever and blow themselves up. So, it's a whole different atmosphere that we are fighting right now, and we just have to be very, very careful about what we do and say.

[TAPE PAUSED]

AL: Go right ahead.

MG: What else stands out to you about your family life and how it unfolded and memories that stand out to you?

AL: Well, let me put it this way, our family, growing up, as I say, we did not have a car. My father always said, "We don't need one." Well, I don't think it was the fact that we don't need one, we couldn't afford one. He was a railroad engineer, and my mother also had a pass. We would go from Roselle into Elizabeth to do shopping and come back, but it was only when my sisters married and the husband had cars that there was a car available. When I [came] out of the service, my sister Alma and my brother-in-law Joe got me to buy a 1930 Ford. That was for seventy-five dollars. That was my first purchase of a car, and I was going down with this gal Alice. This was [in] winter, and it was a convertible, so-called convertible, it had the canvas top and it couldn't come down. I drove her, and she says, "I can't take your car anymore, Al. I froze to death." I could imagine she did. [laughter]

MG: That was a deal breaker for her. [laughter]

AL: What?

MG: That was a deal breaker for her.

AL: I really went big time, and I bought a 1936 Pontiac and the engine was bigger than the passenger compartment. It would look like a regular gangster car, but I had that until--in 1950, my father and I--this was funny. My dad always treated me almost like a business partner and bought--he paid half and I did--bought a 1950 Ford, brand new. I did also the whole house. I painted the house from the top to the bottom, and I took him out to see my sister Alma out in Milwaukee. My brother-in-law was running a business out there, and we were out there and came back. That's the only reason he went in half into this with me. After that, when Joanie and I got married, we still had the 1950 Ford, and then from there, during the years, we had different

cars, second hand. Then, when I retired and she and I moved up to New Hampshire, there we started to buy brand new campers, a Dodge, and we were turning one in every four years. In fact, my daughter's driving this one, it's a 1985, but we were able to do that with no problem.

MG: What did you learn about World War II after serving? I am thinking about the Holocaust or the prisoner-of-war camps?

AL: Let me put it this way, I felt we were right. We had good people running the country. We had General Eisenhower and this Bradley [General Omar N. Bradley]. Even though I'm not a Democrat, I liked the FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt], I liked him. He was a smart man and a good man and even though he was--and not taking anything away, it was for the worker and that was good. General Ike [Dwight D. Eisenhower], I voted for him, and I even liked Jack Kennedy. I thought he was a terrific guy. Jack was a hero in my mind. He saved a man. He was in those PT boats, I think. Jack was a good man, even though I didn't particularly like his father. Mr. Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.], he was a bootlegger. Jack was a good man, no problem. Even though I didn't vote for him, I still thought he was terrific, and he was.

MG: You talked about in your career how a lot of people you worked with had asbestos-related cancer. They were getting sick.

AL: There was a few. This Stanley (Distrumsky?), he was an executive, and Stanley, he smoked. This was the problem with a lot of these guys that smoked, and I have to say I smoked up to that point where Jilly fixed it to where I didn't smoke after that. My wife smoked, and she shouldn't have been smoking either. To me, we had some good down-to-earth people working for Johns-Manville.

I was running this H-building, where I had seven foremen and a maintenance crew. I have to say this for Johns-Manville, they did everything they could do to bring down this problem of asbestos. This goes way back into the '80s. We had a million-dollar air control system. Everybody, if they were working where there would be any evidence of any dust coming, and this would be in the finishing, we made asbestos and then extrusions and there was some cutting and it went through a covered saw complex and we had everything taken out. Pretty much anybody that handled asbestos to feed into the system, it was a negative air conditioning to where there was nothing coming up into your face, and that was the one thing that I was very strict on. We wouldn't allow smoking to go on. What I remember, this one man, he insisted on smoking right in an area where he should have been wearing a dust mask, we had these minor dust masks to put on, and I told him he either did that or get out. He brought charges against me, which didn't last. There were some good friends I had that [were] lost to [asbestosis]. I made sure that when I went home at night, I had always a brush to brush myself off, if that was a problem. Nothing infected you, Jilly.

JH: No.

AL: Or Bruce or Joanie. We did well. We ran that asbestos siding until--after a while Johns-Manville had to give it up. Then, we went into asbestos cement extrusions, and we made

paneling. The only thing we had to do after we did that, there was no real problem, we had to cut it to size and so forth, because we would make paneling for, generally, these banks, all the fancy extrusions. The problem would be in sawing or cutting it into size. We had that enclosed, and we had that pretty much covered so far as no dust would be getting out into the atmosphere. There would always be a person that would forget, and we would have to be careful and charge them.

Again, as I say, I have worked for Johns-Manville, and I had no real problems with them. I would be x-rayed every year and had to take a breathing test and everything. I was pretty much clean. I didn't find too much of a problem with it. As long as you pay attention to what you're doing and you have the proper dust control setup, there would be no problem. They were even talking it about today; smoking knocks your defenses down and that's the problem.

MG: Did your wife work?

AL: She worked in the beginning. She worked in New York City. I can't tell you the outfit that she worked for, but she was a New York girl. It was funny, just like my sister Alice, when she graduated from school in New Jersey in Roselle, she went to work for Philips. They made radios and so forth, and she became a New York girl. We had it all. They were New York women.

MG: How would you describe a New York woman?

AL: Oh, they were really on top of the world. They were no namby-pamby. They were good. As I say, Joanie was a New York girl and into the business. It was fun.

MG: You were married for over fifty years.

AL: Pardon?

MG: You were married for over fifty years.

AL: Fifty-four.

MG: What is it like to be married to someone for fifty four years? What do you learn about them?

AL: We had our problems, and when we were first married, we wanted children. Then, we went into consultation about it, and sex became almost like medical. You had sex when she had this temperature and so forth and so on. It was not the greatest, but we did it for six years until finally the doctor said, "Why don't you adopt?" We said, "Fine." We got hooked up with this adoption agency, and we got Jilly, as I say, in '58 and then Bruce in '60. The people that were the interim family that she was [with], they did terrific job with this gal and not so good with Bruce, but we took care of that.

MG: How has your family expanded since? Do you have grandchildren?

AL: Oh, yes. How many grandchildren do I have?

David Hacker: Fourteen.

JH: Eight.

DH: What?

JH: Eight.

DH: That's right. I was counting great-grandchildren.

MG: You have got some great-grandchildren as well.

AL: Oh, yes.

MG: Wow.

AL: Oh, yes. In fact, two of them are around here right now, aren't they?

JH: Yes, you saw one run out here earlier.

MG: Yes, I have heard some little voices.

JH: He is the youngest.

MG: Very cute.

AL: Hey, kids are fine, no problem.

MG: Looking back on your life, what moments or memories stand out to you?

AL: My mother passing. As I say, I was a mama's boy. When we were in Roselle, we had a telephone put in a stairway here. It went up into the hallway into the bedrooms, and the phone was up there. I think we got the phone because my dad worked every day of the week, and only when he was sick, she would call in. Not everyone had a phone. I remember the one time this family [came] in and asked my mother if they could use our phone, and we said, "Yes." She was upstairs at the head of [the] stairs. She, I don't know, had a passing out or whatever. She fell down the stairs. She was taken to a doctor, and the doctor found that she had a lump in her breast. She had that removed, and then she had her breast removed. She put in about four years to where it just went throughout her whole body, and she died when I was seventeen. I was thirteen when she fell down the stairs. Whether falling down the stairs had anything to do with this cancer, I would say no, but it was something they found. I was a mama's boy, and I liked it.

MG: You talked about earlier how your first car cost seventy-five dollars, and last week you talked about having the radio in the home and that was a big deal. I am curious how else you have seen the world change.

AL: Things have happened to me to where I have this essential tremor. They used to have computers with the mouse, and I couldn't work that. Joanie handled all the computation and stuff like that. When I retired, this is where the force of these different things have limited me to doing anything really, but I just enjoy watching everybody else handle it. The whole trouble is that too many of them just get too involved in it and they are losing this feeling.

When I was young, the telephone was in the booth or in the house, but now everybody's got something out of their ear or they're texting. They are walking along; nobody talks to one another. This was the thing back when I was young. You talked with people, and you had that feeling of [community].

When I worked that one time during school, my senior year I worked for this (Jake Schwartz?) and I delivered meat. He was a butcher and everything was rationed at that time, but you would talk to people. You would get money from them. They trusted us to bring the money back. I always remember there were periods where the stamps would be just good for so long, and then you had to get more of them or whatever the period there was. The people Jake dealt with, those who had some stamps left always gave them to us. What I did that one time, that one family had seven or eight kids, and I called them up and I said, "Order meat because I have got some stamps for you." You could talk to people, there was a communication. Now, you look around, and there are people just walking along looking at this [cell phone] or listening to this. Something's missing. I can't handle any of that and I don't intend to really. I had a good shot at it. I can't quibble; I had a good shot.

MG: Is there anything else I am missing, or, Jill, are there any questions you would like to ask? We can even bring the grandkids up. If they have got a question they have always wanted to ask, they can do it now.

AL: Oh, they are too young right now to even know.

JH: No, Jeremy, he is downstairs. David, do you have any questions?

DH: No.

MG: Was there anything else you want to tell me about or anything I am missing?

AL: No, that's just about it, Molly. I think I went along with the system, and we were there at a time when our country was in real trouble. We were up against the Axis. You had to be just strong and we were, and we ended up winning. It was nice. I had a lot of faith in this country, but right now we have too many people out of work.

This is the thing, that I take you right back to where Franklin Roosevelt was president. They organized the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps]. All your parks are the result of them, and we have oil lines that could be laid and taken care of and we have bridges that could be repaired. What is he [Barrack Obama] doing? He is not putting those people to work, and they could be working and enjoying. We have too many freeloaders. Instead of having a freeloader, we have somebody going in--I remember in Roselle, we had street sweepers. Of course, you don't have street sweepers now. You have your machines to do it, but we had people that would work at that and kept the place up looking, and you would keep everything clean. We have the opportunities here as far as I'm concerned to look and see to where they could put these people to work and get something out of them. The George Washington Bridge is down all the time. Why don't we just fix it once? They're there. There are problems there that we could resolve, but we are not doing it and that's what bothers me, because I lived through a time where Franklin D. [Roosevelt], he got these people to work, Civilian Conservation Corps, and they did a good job. That's what we needed and we need that now, but nobody is doing anything about it.

MG: Is there anything else?

AL: No, no.

MG: Well, it has just been such a treat to meet you and hear about your life. Thank you for your service and the time you have spent with me.

AL: I didn't volunteer. I went into the system and the system--I thought I was going to ride out World War II down at Louisiana State University, but it just didn't make it. They needed some young boys, and we were young and no problem. [I] went there and did everything they asked. We have a good country, we just need to take better care of it. So, that's about it Molly. I don't write. I haven't written anything.

MG: Well, you have recorded over four hours with me, which is just so valuable, and we will write it up for you.

AL: Well, I hope you find it interesting.

MG: I really have. This has been such a treat. If it is all right with you, I will turn this off.

AL: All right with me.

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

Reviewed by Parikshit Pardeshi 8/18/14

Reviewed by Molly Graham 8/20/14

Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 8/3/18