

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID ROBINSON

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Kurt Piehler: This begins an interview with Mr. David Robinson on December 7, 1994, with Kurt Piehler and ...

Jim Bongi: Jim Bongi.

KP: At Rutgers University in New Brunswick. I would like to begin by asking you a few questions about your parents, beginning with your father. Your father immigrated from Russia.

David Robinson: ... It was Russia. I believe it was Poland. ... Russia and Poland changed every few years. Yes, he came over in 1905, when he was seventeen years old.

KP: Did the pogroms influence his decision?

DR: ... It wasn't a good place to be Jewish in those days, and, also, if that didn't hurt, ... you were drafted into the Russian Army, and he wanted no part of that either, so, he took off, ... the first of his family to come over.

KP: He came over alone, without his family?

DR: He came over alone.

KP: Did his family join him eventually?

DR: Not the whole family. ... I take it back. His father had died. He brought his mother over, he brought his sister over, he brought some of my mother's family over, and this is, eventually, 1939. ... I was working in New York. I used to run to HIAS to get the proper papers, but, then came the war. That was the end of that.

KP: You had family in Poland that you could not bring to the United States?

DR: After the war started. They disappeared in the war. We found a niece down in Israel after the war. That was the only one who survived.

KP: How many family members did you lose?

DR: Oh, I really don't know, because, of course, I don't know these people. My grandmother had eleven children. About four of them died, somewhere along the line. ... So, by that time, in the 1930s, they had grown. I, being the youngest in America, was twenty-one at the time, so, I don't know. My father rarely spoke about it. I just don't know.

KP: How large was the family in Poland?

DR: Well, that's the point, I just don't know. ... No, there were several brothers and sisters and they had families.

KP: Your mother came from Latvia.

DR: Yeah, she came in 1907. ... They met here, in New Jersey. In fact, they met in Perth Amboy. Why did she come? Latvia was a good country, but, it was America. I don't have to tell you. Just go over to the Statue of Liberty there and you'll know what I mean. It was America, and they met in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, courted and married, and that's where ... I grew up.

KP: When your father first arrived in the United States, did he settle in Perth Amboy?

DR: No. ... You know, I said he was the first one over, that's not so. He had a sister and there was a brother-in-law there, too, but, he never settled down, and left, and went out, and got a job. He never went to school, my dad. He just worked. He was a trolley car collector. He learned to be a butcher down on 9th Avenue, Hell's Kitchen, and that became his trade, pretty much. He was very proud to be able to handle meat, but, he was a grocer/butcher through his working days.

KP: Was he a kosher butcher?

DR: No, no, no, no. He had a store in Port Reading, on the property of the Reading Railroad. He was a tenant and he serviced the boats. ... When I was a kid, in the '20s, I remember three or four-masted schooners coming in there, loading up coal that came down from Pennsylvania, and going along the coast. After the schooners disappeared, it became a barg, you know, [like in] that famous play by Anna Christie. They were his customers. It was not an easy living. ...

KP: You spent a good part of your childhood in Port Reading.

DR: No, no, we lived in Perth Amboy.

KP: You lived in Perth Amboy?

DR: My dad commuted, drove six miles, back and forth, everyday, to the store. ...

KP: Which was in Port Reading?

DR: Which was in Port Reading, right on the water. In fact, his first store was a house boat, [which] burned down after three years, and he put up a shack. You had to see it to believe it. Now, it's all Hess Oil property, but, it was, I can't say romantic, but, it was interesting. As a kid, I used to ride on the tugs, the Reading tugs, and it was a very hard living. My dad worked very hard.

KP: How many days a week did he work?

DR: Six-and-a-half.

KP: How long was his workday?

DR: He'd leave the house [at] seven o'clock in the morning, do some shopping in Perth Amboy, picking up supplies, and he'd close the store at five-thirty, quarter to six.

KP: How often did you see him during the week?

DR: We saw him every evening. ... They lived in a small apartment in Perth Amboy, and, when I was born, the third child, he bought a house on Madison Avenue, right across from John Toolan, Senator John Toolan. Perth Amboy was a good city in those days, and then, after ten years, we didn't want to live there anymore. We moved into an apartment a couple a blocks away, if I may say, right across the street from David Wilentzs. That has no bearing. It doesn't matter. It was a nice neighborhood. Do you know what a *shtetl* is?

KP: I have heard the term.

DR: A *shtetl* is a small, Jewish town. *Fiddler on the Roof*, he lived in a *shtetl*. In the southern part of Perth Amboy, ... a nice part, is where the Jewish people drifted from New York, to all avenues down there, and there were many intermarriages in Perth Amboy. I married the girl down the street. It was a great place to grow up in. Unfortunately, it's not that good a town any longer. It is coming back.

KP: You are not the only one to say that about Perth Amboy. It had sizable retail sections.

DR: The same thing happened in New Brunswick, the same thing happened to Plainfield, so, it's not Perth Amboy alone. It's the shopping centers.

KP: How was your father affected by the Great Depression?

DR: Well, we had food on the table all the time, because he was a grocer/butcher, but, it was very difficult. ... I remember him coming home, saying, "I only took in five dollars today," but, he persevered. ... My old man was tough, I'll tell you.

KP: He remained at the grocery store.

DR: He wanted to get out. He had the chance to get out, possibly. My mother said, "You know, Gershon, what you have now, you don't know what you're going into." So, he remained there. It was a living. The store burned down in 1951, when a hurricane came, and the water came up, and short-circuited [the wiring], and he semi-retired then. ... With all this crying I'm doing about how tough things were, he built a summer house down in North Long Branch in 1976, that's below Monmouth Beach here, and that was his pride and joy, and they retired down there for several years, until he became blind, and we moved them up to Metuchen, down the street from me. I had a good childhood. I'm not crying the blues.

KP: It sounds like you had some familiarity with the sea, through your father's business.

DR: Familiarity with the ... water? No, that had no bearing on it. We'll get to why I joined the Navy a little further [on], but, that had no bearing.

KP: What about riding the tugboats?

DR: Reading R.R. tugs. ... It was an adventure.

KP: You mentioned that Perth Amboy was a very nice community. I have heard various stories about Perth Amboy, that it was a very divided community, that there were a number of different ethnic groups in the community and they all had separate communities.

DR: Well, we were a melting pot, Perth Amboy, a little bit like Brooklyn. We had Polish, Ukrainian, you know. The factories, they brought them over from [Europe]. ... Johnson and Johnson brought all the Hungarians to work in the plant here, cheap labor, but, we got along, when I was in high school, during the Depression. Oh, we had fights for one thing or another and we had to hold on to each other. ... Nobody had anything, except for a fellow name Reesy Polk. He had the Buick, Cadillac, his father did. That's beside the point and we had a reunion. Perth Amboy was a great town for high school reunions, every five years, and I have my sixtieth coming up next year. ... It was wonderful. Most high schools [hold reunions] as you're getting older. Grammar schools, grade schools is something else, but, it was adventuresome, not an adventure. ... Let's just go back to what I said in the beginning, we got along.

KP: Did you expect to go to college?

DR: Oh, yes. My brother, Larry, was the Class of '30. My sister, Zelda, went to Trenton State, it was known then as Trenton Normal, and I came to Rutgers. I commuted [for] the first two years. We couldn't afford to keep me here, but, don't forget, the tuition was one hundred dollars in those days and the general fee was sixty-six dollars, which was not big money. ... Getting into college, you know, that's what we're talking about. You have to have a college education. I'm not saying just the Jewish people, but, education with the Jewish people, back [in] those days, was a big thing. So, if you had to make some sacrifices, you made some sacrifices, but, ... we never thought of going to the University of Wisconsin, or Mississippi, or anything, because Rutgers was here, it was reasonable, and it was a good school.

KP: You knew from the beginning that it was very important to your mother and father.

DR: Oh, yes, oh, yes.

KP: Do you know who did and who did not go on to college from your high school class in Perth Amboy?

DR: Well, I can't say. I know who went to college. I can't say who didn't. ... There were families who couldn't afford it. They went out and they got jobs in industry. ... I only find these things out at reunions. What percentage went to college? maybe twenty percent, twenty-five percent. That's an estimate.

KP: When you were in college, what did you think you wanted as a career?

DR: I didn't know. That was my problem, I didn't know. I went to get an education. I was a pretty good math student. My brother majored in economics and he worked for Arthur Burns, who ... was a professor here, you know, and became the head of the money department down in Washington. He was one hell of a guy. I took a course with Burns. ... My brother worked for the National Bureau of Research, for Arthur. I graduated. ... There was no thought of graduate school. I wound up, because of my selling life insurance, in New York, down at 217 Broadway. This is what led me into the Navy. ... Well, I'm getting ahead of the game. I say the mistake I made, I made any number of mistakes, but, I don't regret them, I learned sometimes. When I came out of the Navy in 1945, I was twenty-seven. I thought my life was over, that I want to get married, I want to get a family. ... I had no thoughts of going on to graduate school. I wish I did, but, had I done that, then, maybe, I never would have married my neighbor, and my life would have been completely different and not as good.

JB: Did your father ever voice his opinion on the Russian Revolution?

DR: ... My father didn't talk very much and we'll get to that a little bit later. It will amaze you, how little he talked about what I did, until one day, in the hospital, he thought he was dying, and then, he spilled his guts on what I did. That's a story for later. ... I was born in 1918. I thought you were going to ask me, was my father in the service at all? He had two children, the third on the way. He wasn't drafted. Had he been, he would have gone, I guess, but, they didn't draft married people in World War I, I don't think. ...

KP: What were your father's political beliefs or inclinations?

DR: Well, my dad had a liberal outlook. ... We never discussed [politics]. Well, yes, he was for Hoover. He didn't want the Pope in the White House. [laughter] You heard that before. ... Al Smith, when he lost, sent the Pope a telegram, one word, "Unpack." [laughter] That's an old joke. ... That was Hoover, in '28. Oh, he became a strong Roosevelt man. Everybody was a Roosevelt man in those days. I later voted for Wendell Wilkie, but, ... I mention that in the story. I was brainwashed down at 217 Broadway. He was a good man, Wilkie.

KP: What did your father think of World War I? Did he ever discuss that with you?

DR: ... No, no. Look, I was small at that time, but, he could have mentioned it in 1928, 1930. No, there was no discussion. The war was a thing of the past. You hoped there were no more wars and my dad was a good citizen. I can't say he was a "Yankee Doodle Dandy," ... [he] just wasn't.

KP: Was your father interested in the Zionist movement?

DR: Yes, not as an ardent Zionist. ... Well, we had the YMHA, we had the temple, we had UJA. He became a big Israel man when he found his niece. Well, we would have anyway. After the

war, he made several trips to Israel. I can't say he was not. If he was a Zionist, he was not an ardent Zionist.

KP: Before the war?

DR: Before, yeah, yeah.

KP: You hardly explained why you came to Rutgers. Had you considered any other schools?

DR: No, no. ... I don't think we could have afforded any other school. ... My dad gave me five dollars a week to live on and I took my laundry home every weekend, not every weekend. There was a bus [that ran] from here to Perth Amboy and I think the family ties were such that I didn't want to get ... a distance away. We had a close-knit family and Rutgers was a good school. Why the hell would I go somewhere else? I commuted for two years. I lived in Wessells in my junior and senior year.

KP: What led you to major in economics?

DR: Because [of] my brother, Larry, majoring in it and knowing Arthur Burns. ... He set an example. I was a math minor. They said, in those days, "A major in economics and a minor in math is a wonderful combination." Well, I figured [that]. In economics, I got a 1 from Arthur Burns in statistics and business cycles. Math, I wasn't that good [at]. On graduation, a fellow named Perk Armstine, [who] had an orchestra up in North Jersey, he used to play at dances down here. He worked for New England Life, at 217 Broadway, and he was interviewing down here, and it sounded pretty good. It sounded good, it didn't work out too well. Like, I was lost in New York. ... I was based there, but, I worked in New Jersey, but, I guess I didn't like selling insurance too much.

KP: You mentioned that Henry George was your favorite professor. What do you remember about him?

DR: Well, he was damn good. ... No, he was a political science professor. I'm sure you've heard of him. He ran for Congress about 1947. ... He came down to Perth Amboy to talk and I had dessert with him afterwards. He was a North Carolina boy who, as they say, is a liberal. He was a cracker. He used to kid the hell out of the wealthy boys from North Jersey. He was a Democrat. ... He taught you to think, and he taught you to take part in politics, and he was the most popular professor, despite Richard Reager, [who] always wanted to be, [who] taught public speaking. George was the most popular professor on the campus. He died sometime in the '50s, I think.

KP: Did you ever consider joining a fraternity?

DR: No, no, no. ... I didn't have that kind of money, for one thing. ... We built a house on the corner in 1938. They made it the student union building. ... Well, I lived in the dorms the last

two years. I had a number of friends who were not [in fraternities], my roommate wasn't [in a] fraternity, and you don't need a fraternity. There are some very nice people in the fraternities. ...

KP: You just never felt so inclined.

DR: No, no. I was never invited, to tell you the truth.

KP: Did you try out for any of the athletic teams?

DR: Well, as a commuter, I just ... didn't have time for it. If anything, I wanted to. I think I went out for basketball [in] my junior year, but, I was cut by Frank Hill, [who] was a character, you know. They had guys here on Upson Scholarships who were good. They had other fellows. Football, I never considered. ... Baseball, I didn't play either. Basketball was my game, but, I got cut ... in high school. I think I went here, in college, too. ...

KP: Were you active in any clubs?

DR: I think I was a member of the Liberal Club. Of course, they were called communists after a while. ... [laughter] I think I did, I'm not sure, and, ... in respect to the house down on the corner, the student union, we had a group. ... No, I'm trying to remember. I didn't join the French Club, or the English Club, or all the others. I was probably a pretty dull tool at school.

KP: Did you work while you were going to school?

DR: No, no, I didn't. I applied for a job with Eddie Hyde. Eddie Hyde was director of bureau placement and all the guys got jobs, babysitting jobs, all that, through him. My sister was out of college and I was the other one in college. There was no need for me to work to get money, money was there, but, there was no reason why I shouldn't have, either.

KP: You did not have to work during your school years.

DR: No, no. Well, while I was commuting, you couldn't.

KP: How did you commute?

DR: Well, three of us in a car, George Pollak, myself, and Harold Singer.

KP: Whose car did you drive in?

DR: Well, Singer had a car, and then, Pollak and I had a small wreck. Pollak had a car, and so, we commuted in his car. George lives in Metuchen, where I do. He's very sick. Both of them were in ... Perth Amboy High School. It was a twenty, twenty-five minute ride in those days. Park the car over there and you went to class.

KP: You mentioned that you felt as if you had missed quite a bit of the college experience by commuting. What do you think you missed?

DR: Well, let's put it this way, living at school is nicer than commuting to school. Just [to] give you a broad statement, "What did I miss?" I probably didn't miss a hell of a lot, but, [you] say, "Did I join any clubs?" this and that. I might have, in those first two years, had I not been commuting. I mean, a lot of guys commuted by train from Elizabeth, Newark. There's a big commuter group in those days.

KP: You also moved on campus after two years of commuting. Do you think that the commuters were ever looked down upon by the on-campus students?

DR: No, no, no, I don't think so. This was still the Depression. ...

KP: Did you see any divisions at Rutgers among the student body?

DR: Well, [there were] the big money boys from Morristown and Madison, your part of the country. There were Dekes, DUs, and all that, and, yet, they had some of the poor boys in there, too, Delta Phi, over there. You always felt that they felt they were a little better, because they were in the big fraternities. You always find that feeling on campus in the fraternity, maybe not anymore, but, it was [in] those days, the Zeta Psi. There were three Jewish fraternities on campus and Phi Ep was the wealthy one, [with] Sonny Werblin and others. Now, Sonny was out of school at that time. ... Yeah, my friend was chairman of the board of directors in the college, because he was a Phi Ep. He's a nice guy from Highland Park.

KP: Did you attend chapel?

DR: No. ... As a commuter, it wasn't mandatory. ... I was in the choir chorus in Perth Amboy High School. I was in the first All-State chorus in '34. I wanted to sing in the Glee Club, but, then, you had to be in chapel. I don't think there were any Jewish boys in the Glee Club in those days. It was a problem there, with chapel, and then, I was not about to start going to chapel, and then, maybe, my voice wasn't that good, either, but, that's the one club I would have liked to have joined and it just didn't work.

KP: That was because of the issue of chapel?

DR: Basically, the issue was chapel, yeah, not any anti-Semitism or that, no. ... It was the issue of chapel. Chapel was mandatory in those days, but, for a commuter, you didn't have to. ...

KP: You mentioned that you ended up selling life insurance. How did that come about?

DR: Yeah. ... It was Perk Armstine, this orchestra leader who knew Rutgers, and I guess I met him, and he was a broker at 217 Broadway, for New England Life, and he interviewed me, and I didn't have any other job, and he made a pretty picture out of it, and I joined. They weren't paying me anything. I was strictly on commission. So, they didn't care how many people they

had. I tried to sell insurance to people I knew in New Jersey. New York City, it was too tough, but, I wasn't successful.

KP: We really were not out of the Depression yet.

DR: No, not quite. The Depression ended when all the armaments ... started, in '39, '40, you know. Well, it was still not good ... times, yeah.

KP: Did you consider doing anything else?

DR: You mean, during that year?

KP: Yes.

DR: No, I didn't do anything. ... I was living with my parents in Perth Amboy. ... It's a period that's a little blank in my mind, to tell you the truth. [laughter]

KP: Did you ever have to deal with Dean Metzger?

DR: Yeah. ... [He] damn near threw us out of school the night before graduation. We were raising hell. I knew Carl very well, his son, and Carl's mayor of our town, a number of years ago. Carl's the Class of '33. His brother, Russ, I didn't know. ... Well, he was a minister and he was a dean, both, and he ran for governor of Vermont on the Bull Moose ticket, with Teddy Roosevelt. He wasn't too well-liked. He wasn't. We had a wonderful president in those days, Clothier. Everybody liked President Clothier.

KP: You graduated just before the war began in Europe. During your time at Rutgers, Adolph Hitler's Germany was growing in strength and size.

DR: ... Oh, since 1933, from *Kristallnacht*. Christ, if a Jew didn't know what the hell was going on over there, nobody knew what was going on over there.

KP: Do you think that only the Jewish students were aware of what was going on?

DR: No, no, but, they were the ones who were concerned, I think.

KP: I have interviewed a number of members of the Class of 1942 and many of them have said that they did not read the newspapers or follow the news.

DR: ... I had a copy of the *New York Times* magazine section, my father-in-law saved copies, it's beautiful, in good shape, saying what was going on in Germany, by (Tolassis?). Oliver Tolassis was a big writer for the *Times* in those days. He spelled it out. People are calling Roosevelt anti-Semitic. This is a fight that's going on now and I may be part of it. ... I don't think he was, but, that's beside the point. The steamer, the *St. Louis*, is a terrible thing. ... You know what I'm talking about, yeah. Anti-Semitism is an easy thing to throw around. You don't like somebody,

he's an anti-Semitic. You know, it's been going on for centuries. Nothing's changed. [laughter] Not too much has changed, you know. Things are better, but, when he came [in], in '33, the same time Roosevelt got in, and they start marching around, ... there were no concentration camps that day, but, they were tearing down the houses. I don't have to tell you. You're a history major, I'm not.

KP: You believe that the Jewish students had a sense of what was happening. Did any other students express any concerns?

DR: Well, we had a big thing on campus, ... you probably know about it, a German professor ... was labeled a Nazi, and he fought it, and he finally quit and went back to Germany. Things were getting hot and heavy [around] '38, '39. On that note, thanks for reminding me, on that count, I was taking German with Professor Bayerschmidt. Well, ... he was a German, he sounded German, but, I couldn't call him a Nazi or anything, but, the other guy was, and there was a big stink about it, and it lasted for years.

KP: How do you think most students felt about that controversy?

DR: Most students ... probably didn't give a damn. You're going to college to learn something. You worry about the world when you get out into it. It was different in those days, [for] the average student. ...

KP: Were there any student activists, for example, New Dealers?

DR: Well, ... I'm a nice guy, ... there wasn't too much political activity on campus, as I recall. In those days, it wasn't hot and heavy. Oh, those ones up there, they hated Roosevelt, ... and that's because their parents told them to hate Roosevelt.

KP: Do you mean the fraternity people?

DR: The fraternity, yeah, yeah. Maybe we made it sound worse than it was, you know. It's easy to call them names.

KP: Were there any communists or communist sympathizers at Rutgers?

DR: Well, I think there was. ... Among the Liberal Club, they were tagged, but, it was not overt, it was just more talk. Nobody came out preaching communism. ... Maybe their parents did, but, well, you got some real liberal fellows that thought that communism was great, but, I don't recall signs of it on the campus. You know, by that time, Fritz Kuhn, with the *Bund*, up there in North Jersey, we were worrying about the Nazis, not the communists.

KP: I have heard reports that there were actually some Nazi sympathizers at Rutgers. Did you have any knowledge about that?

DR: No, no, not to my knowledge.

KP: What about the *Bund*? Did you know anyone in Perth Amboy who was a *Bund* member?

DR: Yeah. No, no, I don't know about members, but, the thing was in the papers all the time. He had his camp up there in North Jersey. Then, they came down to Madison Square Garden. They almost had a riot. ... The man I admired so much, Charley Lindbergh, he's my hero, he went off the deep end. That was later, America First, but, that was 1940, '41.

KP: Yes. That was a disappointment to you?

DR: Yes, it was, because I had looked up to this man. ... I was aviation nuts when I was a kid, and I never knew that I'd be flying, but, he was my hero.

KP: You enjoyed aviation. Did you go to Newark Airport often?

DR: No, I went to Hadley Field, out here. That was a big event. You [would] go out there on a Sunday and watch them fly. Newark was just ... [like] a garbage dump in those days, but, the man I worked for as real estate broker, part time, he and his cousin, Kane, owned part the land, Newark Airport, Port Newark, Port Elizabeth. That's another story. That brings you up to 1970, a man from Elizabeth named Grassman.

KP: Had you been seeing anyone while you were at Rutgers? Had you done any dating at NJC?

DR: ... Not really. I was dating at home. I wasn't dating a hell of a lot. Girls weren't a big factor in those days. You couldn't afford to take them out on a date. [laughter]

KP: It sounds like there were several reasons why you enlisted in the Navy, career-wise.

DR: Because I thought we should be in the war. ... A career? No, I never thought of that. I just thought we should be in the war. War broke out September 1st, 1939, Labor Day. I can remember it. Down the Shore, it was raining, and then, we heard the *Athenia* was sunk, and we were so, not upset, just feeling so horrible, ... and then, I don't have to tell you how the first year of the war went, and they start bombing London and everything else, and Hitler sweeping through Europe, as you saw. "Was he going to get to the United States?" I don't know. I didn't care, but, I felt, "That son of a bitch." ... I wanted to be in the war, that's why I joined up, and the Navy ... promised me a commission, which was a factor, too.

KP: Was the Navy your first choice?

DR: No. I'll tell you ... just how it came about. I read in the paper, in July, that they started this V-7 program. ... You had to have two years of college, a one month cruise, three months of training, and you're commissioned, but, you didn't have to go on active duty. [You] could be deferred, which was great for the guys who were still in college. I read it in the paper. I start thinking about it. ... My mother starts singing, "I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier." [laughter] I wanted [it] to be ... with her knowledge and permission, [but], I was going to do it no matter

what. ... In fact, the Nazi [element] and everything was working on my side with her, but, then, we read that, ... he's a big lawyer in New York now, ... Secretary of the Treasury Morgenthau, his son was in the first class. It was in the *New York Times* that time. He went on this cruise just when I'm working on my mother. ... "[If] Henry Morgenthau, a good Jewish man, essentially, ... joined, maybe then it's all right. You want to do it, do it."

KP: It sounds like your mother really opposed your enlistment.

DR: No, no, she didn't oppose it, no. She just didn't want me to get killed, that's all, you know.
...

KP: How did your father feel about it?

DR: He took no part in the conversation. I had more rapport with my mother than I did [with] my father. He knew what was going on, but, he didn't say, "You can't," or, "You can." "You're going to do it, do it."

KP: Did your mother ever work outside of the home?

DR: No. Well, no, not after she got married. She worked in the shirt waist [factory] in New York. She remembers the Triangle [Shirt factory] fire, my mom. She lived with her uncle on the East Side.

KP: She remembered the ...

DR: Triangle fire, yeah. She saw it. She was there when it happened. She wasn't in the building. ...

KP: She was in the area.

DR: Yeah. ... Everybody was in the area, sure, Eastside. My uncle had five children, and the nieces and nephews kept coming, another one, another one, [and he] took them in. That's America.

KP: You joined the Navy because they offered you a commission.

DR: Well, that was part of it, certainly. If I had to be a sailor or something, maybe I would think twice about it, but, I wanted to be in the Armed Forces. I preferred the Navy to the Army, certainly. If I wanted the Army, I should have taken four years of ROTC, which I didn't. It sounded a little romantic, a month's cruise down to Panama, and I was unhappy with my work. That's the sum total of the whole thing, I think.

KP: Had you considered the Army Air Force?

DR: No, no, not at all. ...

KP: You had gone through the mandatory ROTC training at Rutgers. What did you think of that training?

DR: I had to do it. I had to do it, but, I didn't go into the four year program. I stayed with just the two year [program]. It was mandatory, two years.

KP: A lot of people have told me that that two year training program had more to do why they tried to avoid the infantry at all costs than anything else.

DR: Well, I can relate to that. They based you at Camp Drum in the summertime and they didn't have any guns or anything. They had sticks [that] they were shooting with. No, well, ... if you said, "Will you go to join the Army or the Navy?" I'd say, "The Navy." It's more romantic, it's cleaner, it's better food, and ... there are many factors. I didn't know what was going to happen, you know. ... I volunteered and, the story of my life in the Navy, I had my choice of several things. I didn't always get my choice, but, I wound up with the second, or possibly the third, choice, [and it] turned out better than if I had gotten the first choice, but, I'll explain that later. I was into flying, but, you know.

JB: Where were you sworn into the Navy?

DR: Corner of West 136th Street and Broadway, not Broadway, it was the old Battleship *Illinois*, tied up [at] West 136th Street. ... They took the superstructure over, and they made the ROTC Navy there, and it's not now ROTC, it's the Reserves. They drove there every Monday. ... The working one, they made a school out of it, a midshipman school. We had five hundred midshipmen. I was in the second class. We slept in cots. We had no hot water. ... There was a bar down on 125th Street. Everyday, we sort of [ended up there]. ... That's where I had my training. Then, at the same time, they opened up Chicago, Evanston, second school?

KP: Northwestern.

DR: Northwestern had a class, and then, after [that], ... they went down to the Academy, and then, the war came. ... The New York operation expanded to Columbia University and ... it was a big operation. ...

KP: What kind of ship did you want to be assigned to?

DR: All right, let's back up a little bit. I spent three months in midshipman's school. There were about ... eighteen divisions. We were five hundred men. Our division was the only one [that] didn't lose anybody through flunking. We were quite proud of that. I was commissioned on February 28th, 1941, in a snow storm. Oh, boy, an admiral [commissioned us], ... he had been head man in the Pacific, had a white goatee, but, before that, we had a choice of what we wanted, what kind of ship you want, what ocean. I asked for a heavy cruiser. I didn't want a battleship, because ... I had been on a battleship, Battleship *New York*. It's too big. I didn't want a carrier, because of the takeoffs on the carrier. You're working for the aviators all the time. I couldn't

take a destroyer. My stomach couldn't take it. So, I asked for a heavy cruiser, Pacific, and the guys were pretty much getting what they wanted. ...

In several days, several weeks, I was still waiting for my orders. [They] finally came in, to proceed to, in the next month, ... San Francisco, there, to report in[to] the Eleventh Naval District, and go to Hawaii on this transport, which happened to a lot of the guys, and join the *Augusta* in the Pacific area. I had a couple of weeks leave, but, ... [I was] the first friend of my group of friends to go. [We had] a big dinner up at (Rod's?) up there, and, the next day, [I was] flying out from La Guardia in the first four engine transport, a Boeing. They only made four, because they had to stop after they turned it over to the service. It had cots on it, and berths, and the black basketball team was on there, the Harlem ... Globetrotters. Our first stop was North Philadelphia. [laughter] The next stop was supposed to be Pittsburgh, but, it was snowing and we couldn't stop. We went on to Chicago. They let me sleep in a berth. I didn't pay for a berth. Then, [we flew] down to Wichita, and, there, we left that, and we went on, it was DC-3s and DC-2s, every three hundred miles, and I'd start throwing up every time we come down. I was so sick. ... The last stop was across the bay from San Francisco, where the university [is]. They just had their thirty year celebration of the uprising, [the] University of California, and the next one was ... San Francisco. They flew across the bay.

I was so sick, but, a friend from Philadelphia was in school with us, he was with me, Dick Waldemate. We go to the service hotel, the big one up on Nob Hill, I can't think of the name right now. [For] two bucks, we had a room like half the size of this floor. Well, we stayed there three days, and then, my brother had loaned me, he gave me, twenty bucks to get out there. We were paid seventy-five bucks a month, but, we had to buy our uniforms and everything. ... My parents had taken the boat from New York down to Miami when I said good-bye to them. I wanted to send them a telegram. I left the hotel, I started walking down this hill, Powell Street. I rolled down Powell Street, down to the telegraph office, and then, I caught one of them trolleys coming up the hill. It was great. [laughter] We stayed there three days, and, when the money ran out, we went down to the YMCA. We had to report into the Eleventh Naval District after a couple of days.

Oh, when I got my orders, back in New York, I said, "USS *Augusta*? The *Panay* incident." She was flagship of the Asiatic Fleet, the *Augusta* was, and [after] the *Panay* incident, they put the two bodies on the ship, and, also, a sailor had been killed, when she was anchored in Shanghai, by an errant bomb, or the shrapnel. I didn't ask for the Asiatic Fleet, I asked for the Pacific Fleet. I go to the skipper. "Robinson, orders is orders," he said. ... So, I guess I'm going out to the Philippines. She'd been flagship for six years. Well, I go down to the Eleventh Naval District headquarters, some guy looks at my orders, "Robinson," he says, "something's screwed up here." I said, "What's the matter?" He says, "The *Augusta*'s up here in Mare Island. She's just back from the Philippines. She's been there two months and [she's got] another month to go. You better get these orders endorsed and get aboard her." I got my orders endorsed. I ran down, got my uniforms from the post office, took a bus, I had forty cents in my pocket when I ... walked down the street in Vallejo, reported aboard, and was taken care of. I got ... one hundred and thirty-five dollars, a month's pay. I went back to San Francisco after all. [laughter] We stayed

there a month and I got the word [that] we're going to be flagship of the Atlantic Fleet. She was a complete overhaul.

At end, towards the end, of the four months, we went out a couple of times on exercises, and I was throwing up again, but, we got squared away, and we came around to the Atlantic to pick up the flag from Ernie King, who had been aboard the *Texas*. Now, this was Atlantic Squadron, which has just been labeled the Atlantic Fleet, no more ships, the old tin cans, some cruisers, the three old battleships, the *New York*, the *Texas*, the *Arkansas*. They were starting to fight the undeclared war. They were escorting ships on the QT.

JB: Convoys?

DR: Yeah, convoys, English convoys, too. We didn't, because we were the flagship. Ernie King came aboard. He was the kind of sailor [that] had to have a deck under his feet. Now, he's down in Washington half the time and we're moored to a buoy telephoned to Washington. We did a number of things, but, maybe, ... I'm running too far ahead of the game. ...

KP: No, that is fine.

DR: Okay, okay. ... We went down to Bermuda once. We took Secretary Knox down there, he was Secretary of the Navy, and we had a wonderful summer in Newport. It's a lovely town, and they have a tennis court over there, and it was very social. ... I couldn't get in there standing on my head, in the bar they had there, and club, the meeting room. If I was Jesus Christ himself, I couldn't get in there. I say that in jest.

KP: Why not?

DR: I don't even think they had any Jewish members there, but, a uniform could [get in], and they treated us very nice on Thanksgiving, invited [us] in. Ships started coming in from the Pacific, (the backdoor three?) the *Idaho*, the *Mississippi*, and the *New Mexico*, several cruisers, the *Yorktown*, because things were happening in the Atlantic. They weren't happening in the [Pacific]. ... The Nazis were [active]. I was reading Admiral Morison. Do you read his books at all?

KP: I have read one of his books.

DR: Well, I've read most of them, but, he has charts of the number of ships sunk in the Atlantic. ... We were down in Bermuda, ... this is still '41, ... before the Fall of '41, and a classmate of mine, from high school in Perth Amboy, was there on the *Ranger*. He's a flier. I'd seen him the year before, when I was an apprentice seaman in Norfolk. I got a message from him, "Dave, I know you're on the guest list. Let's get together on the beach tomorrow." "Sure." Tomorrow morning, there goes the carrier, there goes the battleships, back to the Pacific. He got off and became a Flying Tiger and he got killed, John Petach. ... We didn't do a hell of a lot. Well, of course, ... this should be a separate talk from your Atlantic Charter meeting, which I'm very willing to go to, but, let me take you to the end of my time on the *Augusta*, which comes up soon.

War broke out. We were anchored in Newport. I was listening to the radio in the ward room, listening to the football game, and then, the announcement came over the radio, and then, there was a broadcast over the loud speaker, and our ship went sky high. Pierre Charbonnet, he was Navy Academy and an ensign, he retired four years ago as a vice-admiral, he went crazy, because they'd been out in China during the Japs' bombing of the Chinese. ... There's the Italian Fleet, there was a German Fleet, yeah, because it before (Italy was part of the?) war, but, they were told at the Academy, "We're going to fight the Japs, we're going to fight the Japs." I and my divisional, Frank Zimansky, from Brooklyn, he's a Polish ... boy, I'm Jewish. In Brooklyn, there's a lot of Jews. Down in Perth Amboy, there's a lot of Polish. We used to fight in the ward room. This is before the war. "This is our war, this is our war." "No, no, we're going to fight the Japs." The whole damn ward room, "We're going to fight the Japs." Well, that's a story, it's a true story, but, anyway, I had the mid-watch after Pearl Harbor. Pearl Harbor was in the afternoon. We got [news of] it in the afternoon. I had the 000 to 0400 as officer of the deck. About ten minutes after midnight, Stan Lanman, Admiral King's flag lieutenant, came out and said, "Robby, call the barge. The Admiral's going ashore." We had a darkened ship [for] the first time ever and I didn't see a light on a ship until three weeks after the surrender, when we got back to the States. I got the barge manned and ready, and out of the passageway comes Ernest Joseph King, and he was a tough son of a bitch.

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

DR: ... All you could see, he's dressed in blue, of course, [was] his pale face coming out. He came over and saluted me, requested permission to go ashore. That's the Navy regs. "Permission granted." I wanted to say to him, "Good luck." [laughter] I knew where he was going, but, ... I kept my mouth shut. [laughter] ... [He] drove up to (Quanset Points and flew to Washington DC. He became *Cominch*. ... The President wanted him to be *Cominch*. See, he changed the name from CINCUS, C-I-N-C-U-S, Commander-in-Chief, US Fleet, that's bad, to *Cominch*. ... So, you want me to take it from there? ...

KP: Actually, I would like to back up a little bit.

DR: All right, sure, sure.

KP: Did you go through midshipman's training in New York?

DR: Oh, yeah, yeah three months in New York City.

KP: Were you there for the entire time?

DR: Yeah, three months.

KP: How well did the training go?

DR: Oh, very good. ... We got Naval officers, but, our classrooms, we had to go across the street to the New York Central Building, [which was] just a switching office. ... It was a little rugged. ... You had off twelve hours a week. I used to run home and run back. ... It was a little difficult. It was seamanship, navigation, and gunnery, they were the three basic things, but, a bunch of nice guys from all over the country. We had a lot of friends, and we made out, and, as I say, we were commissioned. Some guys flunked out. That happens.

KP: You mentioned that no one flunked out in your class.

DR: Not in my class, my division. ... No, we had three divisions and ... there were about twenty guys in the line. There's a name for it, I can't think of it. What's the difference? We were quite proud of that.

KP: You mentioned that there were people there from all over the country. Are there any people that stand out in your mind?

DR: No, it's been so long. I ran into a couple in the Navy, but, it's been so long. I still have the book home. We had a graduation book. I look at it, once in a while, but, Christ, we're talking about fifty some years.

KP: One of the things that many Naval Reservists have told me is that they quickly learned the importance of the brass ring.

DR: The big ring, yes and no. Look, when I was a civilian, you [would] see Jimmy Stewart playing football at the Academy. I thought, "These guys at the Academy," or West Point, "are the greatest in the world, jeez, the competitive exams," and, "Wow." They're just average guys, like at college. Most of them are political appointees. The best men were one hundred men [who] were taken from the fleet each year by competitive exams, not proctors. ... It was tough, and they were made officers, but, ... they had been enlisted men. They, I think, were the best officers, but, this one, Dick Pratt, the quarterback, he was just the finest Naval officer I ever knew. He made a Naval officer out of me. They were typical American boys. ... You know, I was lucky. I say I never ran into anti-Semitism in the Navy, because, on that level, ... you weren't as down. In the ranks, you were. The Army was bad. Just one son of a bitch, though I disregarded him.

KP: You had one incident?

DR: No, no incident. ... We had a steward who made our food for the ward room. We were waited on by black waiters. That killed me, you know. That's the Navy. So, here's the story. ... His name was Robertson. ... A guy from Maryland insisted [on] calling him Robby and me Robby, which is all right, too. So, I start calling the steward, "Stew." That took care of that. [laughter] I don't know whatever happened to him, but, if that was ... the only incident I had, and I really think so, [I was okay]. ... [There] were only two Jewish officers on the *Augusta*, out of ninety-five officers, why? I don't know, and I was the only Jewish one in my squadron, and [there were only] two of us in the air group, and I was exec in the squadron. I was second in

command. ... These were kids. [They] were twenty-two. I was twenty-seven when I saw [them]. I was the old man.

JB: How were the black stewards treated aboard ship?

DR: The Academy men ... treated those black kids something awful, calling them names, one thing and another. That's what I had ... against the Academy and against the Navy, too. I got along. ... It went against my grain. ... Aboard the *Augusta*, the blacks lived all the way down in the hold. They did the laundry. The nicer ones ... served the meals and ... the man who cooked [was black]. That was the *Augusta*. Aboard the *Essex*, the carrier's so big, you can't have service in the ward room like that. We had cafeteria style. We had the boys around to make things go, and, again, they did the laundry. I said we had cafeteria style, lieutenants and below. I made lieutenant commander a month before July, '45. Then, I sat up at the head table with the lieutenant commanders and commanders, which I wasn't really happy about, ... because I wanted to eat with my good friends. Why did I bring that up, though?

The *Essex*, before I came aboard, about four months [prior], down in the Philippines, she took a kamikaze, the only kamikaze that nailed the *Essex*. They had given a .40 mm mount to the black boys. ... They're hearing from back home, a little democracy. I wasn't there. I heard the story. This kamikaze came in, it was heading right for their mount, and crashed there, and killed just about every one of them, about twenty of them. They didn't run. That's the point I was trying to make. So many people say, "They'd run away." I'm not sure what I'd do in the same position, but, that's the only indication I could give you about how conditions were for blacks in the old Navy. It's a lot different now, of course. ...

KP: You were a "ninety day wonder" in a Navy full of Annapolis graduates.

DR: A ninety day wonder. ... We were a minority aboard the *Augusta*, because ninety percent of them were Academy, at that time.

KP: Did you think about making the Navy into a career?

DR: No, no. I joined up to fight the war.

KP: To fight the war, even though war had not been declared yet?

DR: No, I knew it was ... going to be a war.

KP: I have read in Naval officers' accounts that the flag is a very tense ship to be on.

DR: You mean a flag ship? Not necessarily, if you were attached to the flag, attached to King, and he had any number of Academy boys aboard, ensigns, whom I [out]ranked and all that, and King was a tough cookie. I never ran into trouble. [Do] you know what it means, "Going into hack?" If you run afoul of the skipper or something, [or you were] somebody that he didn't like, you went into your room and counted ribbons for three, four days. That was hack, and it

happened to any number of Academy boys, for reasons that are silly these days, but, there was Ernie King. I was JO of the First Division, responsible for his [forecastle?]. That's where he walked his forecastle and I never went into hack. So, it seems a little stupid, sometimes, but, that's the way it was. I think it was more before the war than after the war started.

JB: Why did you switch to Naval aviation?

DR: Now, you're getting way ahead of the story. ... It wasn't pay-and-a-half, either. [laughter]

KP: How much navigation did you learn in training?

DR: Oh, I loved navigation. I was in gunnery for nine months with Dick Pratt. He would spot one (about a for miss?), I [was] spot two, back, and we controlled the firing. If he got shot or whatever, I took over. ... I was also assistant chart officer in chart [room?] number one, but, it was never when they fired, just in the drill. It was interesting. It's not what I would have chosen, and, come January, right after Pearl Harbor, ... the assistant navigator was transferred to a cruiser, another cruiser, and Commander Becker, who was navigator, who was a bit of an old (loony?), he said, "Robby, I'm drafting you to be assistant navigator." Well, I may not have liked him too much, but, I loved [navigating]. ... The next nine months, I was assistant navigator. It's lovely work. It's taking sights up on the forecastle, being up on the bridge with the skipper. I'm the navigator, pretty much. This is where the scuttlebutt starts, all the time. You don't have to stand watches under way. You do in port. It was interesting work. ... Those nine months were probably the most interesting time in the Navy. We went over to Africa twice and we'll get to that. That's when I decided to become an aviator. ... Yeah, so, that's what I did aboard the *Augusta*.

KP: When you first enlisted, we were involved in an undeclared war, but, in many ways, it was still a peacetime Navy.

DR: That's right, that's right.

KP: What were some of the differences you noticed between the peacetime Navy and the wartime Navy?

DR: Well, I'll tell you, ... maybe the wartime Navy, we, as flagship, didn't do a hell of a lot. The guys on the other cruisers, the battleships, the [tin] cans, were all out. I was never on escort at all. We used [to run] ... escort up to the bay, Casco Bay, [Maine], and then, the nearest we came to operations, in January, ... we shifted to Casco Bay, the coldest place in the world, and then, we went down to Bermuda, looking for a Nazi sub. ... We were looking for the *Milch*, the *Milch Cow*, and it was a nice deal, in and out of Bermuda, you know. ... They had no visitors there, but, they had five hundred WRENS, they were women, [laughter] and we went looking for the subs in March, April, possibly, when we got word, "They have space in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Return to the yard." So, we turned around. ...

This is a wonderful story. We're heading for the yard and we haven't had a star sight in a day or two. We don't have a sun line, we're running on dead reckoning, and we have to pick up a buoy, seven miles off Asbury Park. This is a mark for the entrance to the Swept Channel. You hit the buoy, you'd steer 2-8-6, or something, and it's the Swept Channel. ... We fix to come off the shore about daybreak, but, we don't know ... quite where we are, but, there's the Jersey Shore over there, and I'm on the chart with the navigator. The quartermasters are out on the (alladays?), the *Polaris*. That's the compass that you take sights [on]. The skipper is looking around, "Got a fix?" "No, sir, not yet." I said, "Commander Becker, let me get out there." "Robby, if you can do anything, go." I get out and I look over, and there's this fog hanging over the Jersey Shore, but, above the fog, I can see the top of the Berkeley Carteret, in Asbury Park. I take an azimuth. Then, I go down the coast and I get the ... "hooligan Navy," the Coast Guard, ... their tower down there at Monmouth Beach, and they tell you [your spot]. Now, we got a spot, but, we need a third one, you know, to fix it. ... I go down, I get the church right across the street from our house in West Long Branch. We got a fix, we run in, we plot it. "Captain, course 2-8-9, five miles, 2-8-9, five miles," and there's the buoy. Those kids could have done it, if they knew [the area]. ... [It was] only because I lived there, you know. The skipper turns around, Captain Wright, he got his cap blown off from the storm, "All right, Robby, how come?" I said, "Skipper, I live there." [laughter] That was a very interesting time. We'll get to the aviation part. ...

KP: You mentioned that ninety percent of the officers on the *Augusta* were ...

DR: Academy, yeah, sure.

KP: What was the range?

DR: Well, from ensigns up to lieutenant commanders. The exec was a commander. The skipper was a captain, of course.

KP: I meant to say, what was the range of their ages?

DR: I thought they were very old, at the time, but, looking back, it wasn't so old. I was twenty-two. Well, the Academy men coming out with me were twenty-two, twenty-three, and the JGs, it took you seven years to make JG from ensign, in those days, and maybe after [the] mid-thirties or forties, I thought they were old people. [laughter] They were nice guys. ... Except [for] this one bastard, I have nothing against them.

KP: You felt accepted by your fellow officers.

DR: Oh, yes, very much so. They were glad to see us and they helped us. They trained us. This Dick Pratt, he was like a father to me.

KP: How much of your training was "on the job?"

DR: It's [mostly] on the job training. The gunnery, I knew very little about, but, when your hands are there, [it came easily]. Navigation, we just did it on paper. ... You go like this, you're doing it, and seamanship, well, I was very involved in seamanship, because ... I was part of the special sea detail, whenever we anchored, or I was up on the special sea detail. ... I didn't run the thing, but, my men were there. I say, "My men," ... again, I was JO of the division, and, when the divisional officer was there, I took over, but, he was the boss of the division. We all worked together.

KP: What did the sea detail consist of?

DR: A special sea detail? Anchoring, getting under way, raising the anchor, or mooring to a buoy, which is a very ticklish thing, and we always moored to a buoy in Newport, because he had a telephone to Washington, and the paravane, and that's a very important story, though, about Fala, how we almost lost Fala, [President Roosevelt's dog]. [laughter] ... It was because of special circumstances. ... I could have wound up in Portsmouth

KP: What was your relationship with the petty officers?

DR: Fine. They were the warrants, just below the officers, and the chiefs, and then, the various grades of petty officer, coxswain on up. Good men, good men, these were. They're down in China, we still had a lot of China sailors, and they loved the Navy. They joined it in the Depression, because they couldn't get jobs. ... I could wisecrack about officers with them, or Academy men. ... So, we had more in common. [laughter]

KP: You thought that you had more in common with the petty officers?

DR: I think so. It's a matter of the grades.

KP: What do you recall about the sailors under your direct command?

DR: Well, they were good kids. They had joined the Navy a short time before. [They were] anywheres from age eighteen up to twenty-two. They came mostly from the Midwest. ... You didn't get too friendly with the enlisted men, you know. Once, one wanted to borrow money from me. I just couldn't do it. I'd get in trouble, you know. Maintain your, not rank, I'm thinking of a different word, with the enlisted men, don't get too friendly, yeah, same thing in the Army.

JB: While you were cruising along the coast?

DR: Yeah. Well, we weren't cruising along the coast. We were coming from Bermuda. ...

JB: I remember that there were a few Nazi sub sightings reported.

DR: Yes, yes, yes. It had just started about [then]. Well, we were looking [for] the *Milch Cow*, out there in Bermuda, you know. I was just looking at the book last night, *The Battle of the*

Atlantic, Morison's book, and he has plotted all the sinkings over different periods. They were just starting to sink ships. They started down around Florida, but, then, they moved up to New Jersey.

JB: Did you see any?

DR: No, no, we never saw any ships [go down]. I never saw [one]. So much happened in the North Atlantic, so many men were lost, and I was no part of that. The destroyers were out there helping, and ... other ships. They sunk a number of subs on the Jersey Coast. They could see them from the coast. They could see them burning. They said, "Put out all the lights." They put up the Virginia Beach awnings, not awnings, things, so there'll be no reflection. They turned off all the lights on the shore, because ... ships were silhouetted, and they weren't in convoys at that time. They hadn't started convoys. They didn't have the aerial protection. They lost a lot of ships along the shore. ... The subs were very, very effective, but, I didn't see any of that action.

KP: Being on the flag, did you have a better sense of the nature of the Battle of the Atlantic?

DR: No, no. ... We only got scuttlebutt, the flag. The biggest thing that happened was when they sunk the *Bismarck* and, out there in the Pacific, the big [news came] when they sunk those three, four Japanese carriers, Midway. Well, of course, that was common knowledge, all that, and we were buoyed by that, but, what went on up in flag headquarters, even the lousy ensigns who worked up there, they kept their mouth shut.

KP: Before Pearl Harbor, you had no notion of what the Battle of the Atlantic would be like.

DR: ... Well, we read the newspapers in New York. We had wonderful newspapers from Providence, Rhode Island. They had a wonderful paper [that] we had aboard every [day]. We knew, but, we didn't get it officially. Of course, [there was] the scuttlebutt, whispering. ...

KP: From a historical standpoint, how accurate was the scuttlebutt?

DR: Pretty accurate, I think. [Do] you know how the word scuttlebutt got started, what it means? [Do] you know what it means?

KP: Yes.

DR: [Do] you know how it got started?

KP: No.

DR: In the old sailing ships, they had these big tanks of water and spigots, and the sailors would line up. On the Battleship *New York*, that's how I got water. ... Latrine rumors is what it was, and this thing is called a scuttlebutt, and so, all of the rumors that got started there were called "scuttlebutt." Latrine rumors is what they were. I remember, coming up from Panama, when I was an apprentice seaman, [coming] into Norfolk, [there was] a new cruiser, the *Helena*,

beautiful cruiser. She got sunk. I went aboard to see this new cruiser. I'm on this old, 1912 battleship. "I'm thirsty," I said, "Where's the scuttlebutt?" "The scuttlebutt? I don't know what you mean." ... "I want a drink." "Oh, the water fountain's over there." ... [laughter]

KP: Before Pearl Harbor, the most memorable event in your Naval career was probably the Churchill-Roosevelt meeting.

DR: Oh, I think so. ... I try to equate it by my flying experience. There's only one Roosevelt, there's only one Churchill, and, as I said before, why [was] a twenty-two-year-[old] kid from Perth Amboy, New Jersey, Jewish, and that has no bearing on it, but, I can say it, ... standing behind Roosevelt while he's fishing, and shaking hands with Churchill, and talking to him? [There were] 135 million people in this country. Why me, why me? Even aboard ship, very few guys had met Churchill as I did or stood behind the President. ... I was behind the President because we were winding up ... our gear, our paravanes. ... I'm getting ahead of the story.

King and the others were fishing. They're not catching anything. I just came down from the bridge. I had just taken, ... two hours before, the President's chart down to Captain Beardall, his Naval aide. I said, "I'm going to see FDR," but, he took it and took it into FDR, but, they're there, and I looked down the passageway, and out of the passageway, in a wheelchair, is being wheeled, (over the comby?), Franklin Delano Roosevelt, portside. Oh, it's open and he's being wheeled right towards me. "Holy God," I said. I'm the only officer there, my boys are there, "Attention on deck. Good morning, Mr. President." He just kind of waved, no salute. Franklin Roosevelt didn't salute like these jerks, the last few Presidents, did. I read that somewhere. [laughter]

Anyway, they switched him around, I'm standing there, like that, and he picks up his fishing rod, and he casts his line. There was a cartoon in the newspaper at that time of Roosevelt in a row boat. He says, "My friends," and all the fish come jumping into the boat. He has a strike the moment it hits. Holy Jesus, he reels it in and it's a big, ugly dogfish, a small head, a big body. Roosevelt says, "It belongs in the Smithsonian Museum," and then, he says, ... "It looks like Cotton Ed Smith." They had it misspelled in the book. Who was Cotton Ed Smith? a son of a bitch, a senator, worse than Strom Thurmond down there. He did have a heavy beard, a dark complexion. He kissed Jean Harlow on the steps of the capitol. He hated Roosevelt and Roosevelt didn't like him. It did look like Cotton Ed Smith, but, then, Prexy says, "It reminds me of a number of senators I know, all mouth and no brains."

Well, I voted for Wendell Wilkie in 1940, but, Roosevelt looked awful. He looked like he looked at Yalta. His face was drawn. I looked for the shoulders. He was wearing this old sweatshirt and a soft hat, and his whole body, his gut, is like this, and I looked at his thighs, and they were flat on the chair. There were no legs there ... and his lower leg just dangled in the breeze. ... I was appalled. "I shouldn't see this. This is my President," even though I voted for Wilkie. I turned to Mike Reilly, who was the head of the Secret Service, guarding the President, hell of a nice guy. He lived in the JO bunkroom with us. I said, "Mike, should we get the hell out of here?" He said, "Robby, finish up your work. The President doesn't want to disturb you." That was my meeting with Roosevelt. I saw him several times after that, but, how that man

accomplished what he did in that physical condition, I'll tell you, just read this book that that lady wrote, Doris Kearns Goodwin. He was tremendous.

KP: Were you surprised at how weak he was?

DR: Oh, he didn't seem weak. He didn't seem weak. Now, he was [sitting there], cigarette holder there, like this, and he's fishing, ... Ding Darling was a famous cartoonist back in World War II and he used to draw pictures of Roosevelt, and he's talking. ... She writes this book that, one moment, he could look like hell, and, two minutes later, in conversation, he looks great. Good one in the book. You read it, and then, six days later, when we're breaking up, he's sitting up there, and Churchill's just leaving on [the] *Prince of Wales*, FDR with his fedora, and his brown, two breasted suit, and a tie. "Happy days are here again." He looked like the champ. "My God," I said, "How could that man look [so good]?" but, she points it out in her book, he had been with Churchill for four days. He had been at sea. ... He loved the Navy, and [he was] a different man, and I'm ahead of the story, but, I'm going to cut it short, right now.

Churchill had just left the ship and, as he went past, he waved his hat and [gave the] "V" for victory. What a tremendous man. He went over to the *Prince of Wales*. We remained at anchor. Roosevelt's sitting there, and, about fifteen minutes later, the *Prince of Wales* draws past us, close to where port bow [is], and there's Churchill on the fantail, by himself, but, the band is in back of him waving to each other. I looked down, I see our band is up in the forecandle. I look back and there's Roosevelt, like this, and Churchill, like this. He's drawing away and the bands broke into *Auld Lang Syne*. I didn't cry, but, I was damn close to it. It was very moving. ... I [have] never seen a picture of that, you couldn't have taken a picture, and not too many of us saw it, just those of us up in the forecandle, and, believe me, I don't have to tell you, every word I say is true. I get worked up about it, but, ... it was even better than I thought. ... Why me?

KP: This meeting was very important.

DR: Well, Churchill came for help. Hitler was threatening to invade, and [then, the] ... jackass went up into Russia. That took the heat off, but, he lost all [of] his equipment up at Dunkirk. Churchill was rearming and he came to Roosevelt to say, "Look, we appreciate the help you're giving [us]." He wanted to bring America into the war, but, he knew he couldn't do that, but, "If we don't get help, we may go down," and, what the hell, Arthur Schlesinger, twice up there, the other day, "What if? What if the Nazis had invaded England? What if the invasion failed, June 6th? What if we never got out of the hedgerows? What if, the Bulge, they won? What if?" Everybody thought we won the goddamn war ... like [it was] nothing. A hell of a lot of people got killed and it wasn't a sure thing. Well, it looked better as we went along, but, ... look, am I going to argue with Schlesinger? What if? He's writing his memoirs, right now. Yeah, okay, don't get me started.

KP: I read in your memoirs that you also had an encounter with Winston Churchill.

DR: Well, I shook his hand and I talked to him. ... Well, you read about those two thousand boxes, and, go ahead, go ahead, I'm interrupting.

KP: No, not at all. From your memoirs, it sounds like you were very impressed with him.

DR: Oh, my God, if there's going to be the Man of the Century, I'd like to see them both be named, but, it's got to be Winston Churchill. He took that country from Chamberlain. ... These things, you know, I don't have to tell you, but, when I was in charge of a working party of forty men, we put up two thousand boxes, each box containing a half pound of cheese, a carton of cigarettes, and three apples. We put them up in the morning. Churchill came aboard. I came up to watch him come aboard. It was like out of the movies, the band, the *God Save the King*, the piping, and, oh, God Almighty. ...

We put up these boxes. "We'd like to take them over to the *Prince of Wales*." "Sure, Robby, sure," so, after lunch, Churchill had had lunch on the *Augusta*, he went back. We're on the *Prince of Wales* [with] two motor launches, stuff piled high. You read, the President's right there, how funny it looked, and we came alongside the port quarter, which is where their quarterdeck is, and [I] went up to the officer of the deck. I got two side boys. As an ensign, I rated two side boys. I tell him about the boxes. "Oh," he says, "fine. We'll get our own working party and we'll work together." This was the first cooperation between the British and Americans, I think. ... So, we got them up the gangway there [and] put them on the deck.

Out of the crowd on the fantail comes Winston Spencer Churchill, with that hat, you know. He wasn't using his cane. Nobody [was] paying any attention to me. ... Roosevelt, because he's so crippled, we kept the deck clear and all that. [Churchill was] walking straight towards me. I said, "My God, yesterday, the President, now, Churchill, tomorrow, God," but, I didn't get to the church service. I watched it from the *Tuscaloosa*. [He was] walking right towards me. I can't call, "Attention on deck." It's not my ship. "Good afternoon, Mr. Prime Minister." "Good afternoon," [he] sticks out his hand and we shake hands. "What have we got here? What have we got here?" I showed him. I opened up the box and showed him. There's a card there from the President of the United States. ... You know what Churchill's doing, why he came over. All [of] Europe is gone, he's gone into Russia, and he's practically in Moscow already. Things don't look good and this guy has his finger in the dike, Churchill. "We'll fight on the beaches. We'll fight in the streets. We shall never surrender." He sold them a bill of goods. He didn't have anything in his pocket. What did he say? He said, "This will make Mrs. Churchill very happy." Well, that was a big love affair.

Well, I was stooging around for time, apologizing [for] the boxes, the shape of the boxes. ... "This is fine, fine, fine, fine," and that's when my supply officer, my boss, came running up, you know. So, I got dragged down to the ward room. My men drank grog and I had scotch and water without ice, which is like medicine. I came up. I found out [that] Churchill had taken a picture with my boys. I wasn't there. [laughter] I got the picture. It's been printed many times. So, I remember [the] three destroyers, they were four pipers, that we gave [the British] in 1940, in exchange for the bases. They were lousy ships. They were rusty and everything. Some of them never got out of Boston. ... They were flush deck. They were manned by the Royal Canadian Navy. ... We left [at] 1700. There, we had to take one hundred to each ship. So, we come to the first ship.

I told this story in Quebec the other day. We had a panel, the men, you know, answering questions from the students from McGill. ... It got a little quiet. I just said, "What the hell?" I do these things. I raised my hand. I know what I said, "I just want to say something." You know what goes on in Quebec, with the separatism and all that. I said, "Several people in this room know I met Churchill. I delivered these boxes," and I emphasized a little bit. "Then, we went to the three destroyers, went aboard the destroyer, and I went down to the ward room. My men went back for grog and the skipper's there, a young guy, a Canadian. Now, they had a rough trip over, the ship and the storm, and I'm 10,000 feet high. I said, 'I just met your Prime Minister. I just shook hands with your Prime Minister.' He looks at me. He says, 'How's our President.'" [laughter] I told the story there. I got a big laugh out everybody and it's a true story. Where [are] we at? This is going to sound crazier than that thing from Hyde Park. [My first interview in July 1991.]

KP: Did you realize what was going on, the negotiation for the Atlantic Charter?

DR: We knew what was going on. Sumner Wells and the British undersecretary were working on it. They [would] go back to the battleship, the *Arkansas*, work on it, come over, and talk to Churchill. It did not go smoothly. ... Churchill didn't want the empires torn apart, Roosevelt did, and it came down to the last point, just before the breakup. Roosevelt did not want a peace keeping nation, now. He didn't want the United Nations. They didn't call it the United Nations then. Sumner Wells made that up. Why? "I can't take this back to Congress. They'd laugh me out of the place, after what happened with the League of Nations." Churchill says, "We've got to state ourselves." They finally compromised. This story was told by Sumner Wells's son, who I saw the other day, three years ago. Ben Wells ... was a reporter for the *New York Times*. They compromised and that's when it was first mentioned. I guess you read it, it's in a couple of things, the first mention of a peace keeping [body]. ... It was typed up [on] paper, no parchment, no nothing. Churchill took it to Parliament and they adopted it. Roosevelt never took it to Congress. He'd be laughed out of the place, with the America Firsters and everybody in there.

So, it was a statement of aims, a wonderful statement of aims, some of which haven't changed, and nothing ever happened, but, out of it, we convoyed more. ... Harry Hopkins was talking about munitions and everything else. We convoyed two-thirds of the way now, we're still not in the war, instead of one-third, and it was our first meeting, which was very important. They had all this correspondence before then. Our professor here, Warren, did a tremendous job on that book. I've never seen it, but, I know he's admired for it, for the correspondence, Warren Kimball. ... It was a time, you know, when I spoke, it's on the cassette there, ... three years ago. ... They cut out some of the things I said, I don't know why, but, that's all right. I said enough, but, ... I was talking impromptu, because I wasn't scheduled, you see, but, [when] I saw that movie, I went bongo. I shall always be proud for ... the year-and-a-half of my service aboard the *USS Augusta*. ... I got more applause than all of the professors. [laughter] You'll see it on the thing. Oh, my wife gives me a bad time every time I bring this up.

KP: On the *Augusta*, what did you think of your captain?

DR: ... Oh, Captain Wright was a wonderful man. We were very friendly. He was the one who said to me, "How come, Robby?" "I live there." See, I was assistant navigator, later, not then, and I was up in the chart room with the captain and the navigator. The navigator was a bit of a schmuck, but, the captain was a hell of a [nice guy]. I used to bring books from the library, the assistant navigator has to run the library, too, and he'd sit there. ... See, he lived off the chart room, in the emergency cabin. He had his cabin down below, but, we got along just fine. He left the ship about March or April of '42, went out and took a cruiser, and got his bow blown off at Guadalcanal, wound up as commandant of the Eleventh Naval District when the whole goddamn Port Chicago blew up, killed three hundred black men. You know what I'm talking about. I had hoped I'd see him some time. I mean, he's gone. Carlton Wright ... had to be in [one of] the classes of the late '20s in the Academy.

KP: You mentioned in your memoirs that you had Marines on board.

DR: Oh, yeah. We always had a division of Marines.

KP: How large was this division?

DR: Oh, I'd say about thirty-six men, I would say two officers, and Marines [were on] all Navy ships, not destroyers, cruisers, battleships, you know.

KP: What were the Marines' responsibilities?

DR: Well, they manned one or two of the guns, antiaircraft guns. They didn't keep order or anything, they didn't run the brig, or, maybe, they did. [laughter] The skipper, boy, he was a wonderful guy, got shot to hell out there in the islands. ...

KP: Did you know the Marine officers?

DR: Oh, yeah, sure, sure.

KP: What were their duties?

DR: I'm not sure, except the gunnery, and I guess there's Navy regs out, "There should be Marines aboard. If there should be an uprising or something, you might need them." [laughter] ... I never thought about it.

KP: A Marine officer told me that, when the ship was in port, he used to take watch along with the Navy officers. Did that happen on the *Augusta*?

DR: Did they stand watch? They didn't stand watch on the bridge.

KP: When the ship was in port.

DR: Not to my knowledge.

KP: Maybe it was later.

DR: ... In port, we just had the officer of the deck and the junior officer of the deck on watch. Underway, we had them manning the guns, the antiaircraft guns, yeah.

KP: You spent a lot of time in Newport and you were berthed close to port. In terms of battle readiness, how prepared was the *Augusta*?

DR: Oh, I would think we were ready. It just came out of the Navy Yard, three months out there. We went out on gunnery practice. Yes, we did that. I got an E on our turret. We got eighteen out of eighteen. I was spot two. ... That wasn't my turf. I spotted it, "Boom, boom, boom, boom," all eighteen, right through it, two thousand yards. ... No, we had drills. We were in good shape. It wasn't war. We weren't fighting or anything. Of course, the boys out in the North Atlantic, they were maybe not fighting, but, they were doing a hell of a lot more than we did, and it's only because Ernie King wanted [it that way]. Oh, we went out, we did things, but, we did nothing. I never saw a convoy under way. ... One of the reasons why I did flying, after a year-and-a-half, I put in for the *Ranger*. She carried one hundred P-40s and flew off to Africa to stop Rommel. We did that twice. I had seen depth charges go off in the North Atlantic. I never saw a submarine come up. I had joined up two years before. I hadn't seen a shot fired in anger, except the goddamn depth charges. [Do] you know what I mean? "Mr. Robinson, the war is passing me by." ...

So, I got the skipper. He didn't want to let me go. I took my flight [physical] up in Argentina, after the first trip. I went over there and took my flight physical. ... This is a new skipper now. He said, "Robby, what the hell? You want to fly?" "I think so." "You don't know what you want to do," ... he said, "none of you young guys." He says, "I only knew one man who knew what he wanted to do, a classmate of mine in the Academy. His name was Donald Douglas. He wanted to build planes." [laughter] This was a nice guy, too, but, he signed it, and it took four months for me to get my answer, after the second trip over to Africa. That's ... the goddamn part of it. I was anxious. ... For a year-and-a-half after that, I wanted to get in the action, but, if I hadn't gotten flight orders, I would have been a skipper of an LST. The guys who were with me, with the same experience, wound up skippers. I'm glad I had flight orders. ... [I am] Mr. Lucky, I'll tell you. ...

Of course, we get around to the flying, it was hairy, but, there are three times that I knew that, within a minute, I don't have to worry anymore, ... because I'll be dead or I'll still be going. It happened three distinct times. We'll get to that later on. ... Look, it happened to eleven million guys, too. ... I'm no example. I'm no maven. I'm just another guy, but, maybe, I had something on the ball. I'm not sure.

JB: When you came back from your second trip to Africa, did you put into port in Newport?

DR: No, Norfolk. We went into Norfolk.

JB: Where did you go after that?

DR: Well, I went to New Orleans first, then, Pensacola, Jacksonville, De Land, Atlantic City, Massachusetts, Hawaii, and, finally, on March the 18th, we sortied from Ulithi. I was finally in the war. ... That's after four years, mind you. You'd go where they tell you to. You volunteer, you get it, you don't get it, but, you don't screw around.

KP: On the *Augusta*, you saw very little action, even after we were in the war.

DR: Very little action, very little action. It was a very nice cruise, over to Africa and back, with, you know, the P-40s, the Curtiss-Warhawks. ... They didn't have to land on the carrier. They just took off, each time, a hundred [planes], a hundred people, and then, we were refueling. The second time, I'm assistant navigator and we're on a course that's going to take us to, it's latitude zero, longitude zero, the goddamn big pole's gonna be up there. We got so many miles [that] after those six, we turned around. We got our fueling course. ... [laughter]

KP: How did the crew, particularly the officers, of the *Augusta* feel about the coming of war in 1941?

DR: Well, ... I can only tell [you about] the ward room, but, I'll tell you, Zimansky and myself thought we should be fighting the war in Europe. These guys, Pearl Harbor hadn't come yet, but, the Academy officers, they're going to fight the Japs. They never thought they'd be fighting the Germans, but, that's partly their training and partly their feelings.

KP: What were their feelings towards Roosevelt, since the Navy was the first branch to fight against Germany, even before war was declared?

DR: Yeah, I suppose.

KP: How did they feel about the undeclared war?

DR: They were all for it, you know, and they thought we should be doing it. That's what they were trained for, but, it wasn't the *Augusta*, it was all the other ships.

KP: Was there any opposition?

DR: No, no, no. ... Those are arguments in the ward room. Nobody got mad at one another. I'm glad I wasn't alone, you know, 'cause Zimansky was with me. I found him, after forty-seven years, out in California, Frank. ...

KP: You said that there were people who disagreed with Roosevelt's policies.

DR: Well, I think so. What the hell, you know? You're an officer, you're a human being, you have to have your thoughts. On the other hand, orders are orders.

KP: The *Augusta* took part in two cross-channel invasions of North Africa.

DR: Just one, to my knowledge.

KP: Just one?

DR: She's a flagship in North Africa, she's a flagship at Normandy, she's a flagship at Sicily, see, because they had flag quarters. That's why we went to the meeting. We had flag quarters. We had more room for people. ... The *Indianapolis*, which got sunk out there, they're about eight ships, five of them, three of them were flagships, the *Indianapolis*, the *Houston*, and the *Houston* was lost at the beginning of the war, the Japanese sunk her, ... but, they had flag quarters.

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

KP: This continues an interview with Mr. David Robinson on December 7th, 1994, at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Kurt Piehler and ...

JB: Jim Bongie.

KP: When did you leave the *Augusta*?

DR: September or October. We came back from Africa, the second time. We were going up Chesapeake Bay, firing [at] nighttime on, this is indicative, Solomon's Island. We were firing. They were practicing for the landing at Guadalcanal. We didn't know that. [We were] night firing in September, October, '42. I'm sitting there, reading *Victory Through Air Power* by Siversky, I got it from the library, when the yeoman walks in, "Mr. Robinson, I got orders for you," my flight orders, [while] I'm reading Seversky's book. ... I got about seven, eight, nine days leave. I came home. I had come home for Rosh Hashanah, in-between. Now, I'm home again. I come in the house at seven o'clock in the morning. My mother says, "What are you doing here? You just left ... last week." "Well, I got to tell you, I'm going be aviator, Mom." [Mr. Robinson imitates his mother screaming.] "Why?" "Mom, I'm going to be ashore at least a year." "Oh, that's good." [laughter] Oh, my mother.

KP: Do you have any memories of the trip to North Africa for the invasion?

DR: No. I wasn't aboard her. That came after I left. I left her in September. We were practicing for Guadalcanal. ... They were building LSTs, the first LSTs in Norfolk. ...

KP: No?

DR: No. What do I know about it? very little. I wasn't there, of course. No, I was off the ship. I was down in New Orleans, eating good food.

KP: You did not serve on the *Augusta* after that?

DR: No, she fired [on] the *John Bart*, a French battleship. She almost got hit. I've seen the guy since then. I went aboard her in Philadelphia, in '44, and then, they had the big Navy Day in '45. I went aboard her and talked to the guys. I saw very little of the fellows I knew from the *Augusta* after that.

KP: Do you have any regrets that you were not aboard the *Augusta* for the invasion?

DR: No, no, I don't think so. I don't know. I never really thought about it, to tell you the truth. I got what I wanted, and they were flight orders, and I don't think I may have been aboard the *Augusta* for the invasions. I was slated to be skipper of an LST, the guys [in the] Reserves, like myself, ... and I was glad I had flight orders.

JB: Do you think that you perhaps got your flight orders because you were serving aboard the *Augusta*?

DR: No, no, no, they came through routinely. I passed the physical and ... they needed rank. They had all these kids who joined up, not even ensigns, ... aviation cadets, and they had a lot of ensigns and no lieutenants JGs and lieutenants. ... They were looking for rank. I went. I made JG on the *Augusta* in Spring of '42 and I made lieutenant down in New Orleans, in October. Now, that's about six, seven months. The brown shoe boys got promoted a little faster, and, as they say, we didn't make more money, we just made it quicker. That's a little joke. ... Then, I remained a lieutenant until, one month before the end of the war, I made lieutenant commander. I could have stayed in, and, with that jump that I had, done well, but, the war was over. I didn't even join the active Reserves. I didn't want to fly weekends, as weekend warriors, and, as an older person, I started to agree with my mother. I'm making jokes now.

KP: What was your flight training like?

DR: Well, it was nice. I went to E base in New Orleans and those old biplanes, the first three times I went up in the airplane, up and down in the heat, I threw up. We were coming down, five hundred feet, to land in New Orleans there and the plane's going like this, at noon time. It's going like this and, luckily, I didn't have to clean up the plane. Some poor mech had to do that. Then, we went on, and then, we got into stunts, and I used to get sick, but, I got past that phase. Then, we went on and we got into inverted positions, with the hood over your head. [laughter] I threw up, and then, I got my wings, and I never did a damn thing to make myself sick again. When I got sick, somebody else was at the stick, all the time. I almost thought of quitting a couple of times. ...

KP: You had also gotten seasick, initially.

DR: Yeah. ... My mother's stomach, I have. [laughter] I could never have served on a destroyer. I never could have.

KP: I interviewed someone who washed out of navigator training because of air sickness. Did you have any concerns?

DR: I had thoughts about it, but, nobody said I had to, and I didn't tell too many people about it. [laughter] I didn't want to go back to sea duty. ...

JB: How was your first solo flight?

DR: I mean, sea duty, I would have gone back. I didn't want [to go] back. ... My first solo-flight? I had eleven hours. I have ... my log book [at] home, eleven hours, this is New Orleans. The only race track open in the United States was the race track outside of New Orleans. ... There's a name to it. It doesn't matter. The guys used to put money on a horse, and fly around, [laughter] watch their horse. Oh, it was crazy down in New Orleans. We had a bunch of Academy men there. It was lovely duty, I'll tell you. I wish I had been doing better in my flying. I would had enjoyed the town more. ...

KP: It sounds like you enjoyed yourself.

DR: Eating at Arno's, a steak for a buck-and-a-half, and shrimp, oh, God. ... Well, from there, I went to Pensacola. I had my wings. ... I asked for multiengine, first, fighters, second, third, dive-bombers. I got dive-bombers. So, I'm flying this old SB2U. They made a movie, in 1940, of Errol Flynn flying this damn plane, the Vought Sikorsky Vindicator, still had canvas on the side, and I got through there. Let's see, when did I get my wings? I got my wings in Pensacola, in May 1943, yeah, and then, I went to Jacksonville. From there, we went up to Chicago, to qualify on those wooden carriers up there. They had two. They had been used in the old time for recreation, where they put a wooden deck on [a ship's deck]. ... They needed all the carriers they had, but, anyway, I came back to Jacksonville, and I instructed, and then, I went to De Land, Florida, which was lovely duty, about twenty miles from Daytona Beach, nice town, and twenty miles away, [at] Daytona Beach, they had 10,000 WACS in training. [laughter] Well, they had ... a dive-bombing base over there. Those guys' fatality experience was about ten times ours. They couldn't pull out in their dive-bombing. ... You [would] walk in a bar and see all these khakis. I make fun about this. I still wanted to get out to the fleet. I joined up, went up to Norfolk, went to Atlantic City, I told you about that. Oh, yeah, thank God they cut down on the dive-bombers. They brought in the SB-2C, the Beast, a lousy plane. The SBD was nice, but, they needed fighter pilots. I'm a fighter pilot. We flew a fighter syllabus in an SBD down in Florida. The squadron formed in Atlantic City, went to Massachusetts. We were fifty pilots. We had thirty-six fighters. We had thirty-six F4-Us. They cut down on the SBDs and the torepickers. We went to Hawaii. No, we didn't have F4-Us that day. We got them in Hawaii. The squadron was formed in June, May of '44. We didn't get into combat until the following March, I told you why before, and we went ... from Guam to Ulithi, and there to the whole damn Third Fleet there. They [had] just come down from the big mountain up there, where all the Marines got killed, you know, before Okinawa.

KP: Iwo Jima?

DR: Iwo Jima, okay. ... We were supposed to get the *Shangri-La*, the brand new carrier, and somebody screwed us, and they got the *Shangri-La*, Air Group 85. We got the *Essex*, the oldest carrier out there, except [for] the *Enterprise* and the *Sara* [*Saratoga*]. Oh, [when] we came aboard, the deck was all crap, holes in the deck, and, really, she'd never been back to the Navy yard. Oh, my God, ... they weren't happy to see us come aboard. They thought they were going home. Well, we sortied, and then we went to Tokyo. That was a great ship. We got along fine, once we understood each other, and they were so good. They'd been out there a long time. We operated on Okinawa [for] two to three months, flying three days, and, the fourth day, we go out ... to meet the supply fleet with ... more planes, fuel, oil, mail, bombs, the whole works. ... The first strike was Kyushu, up at Tokyo, we sortied March 18th, the end of March, the *Franklin* got ... killed. I saw her get hit. They put three carriers out of commission. The *Franklin* never got back into combat. [We] went down to Okinawa and flew around there for two-and-a-half months, went down to the Philippines for rest and vacation. We came up to Tokyo, again in July.

We're supposed to go back home [at] the beginning of August. They dropped the atomic bomb. Nobody goes home. We stick around. We were hoping the war would end. ... On August 15th, I was scheduled for the afternoon strike over Tokyo. In the morning, my three boys and I were flying at 20,000 feet above the Third Fleet, ships from all over, you know. The strike had taken off. On the radio, I heard them. ... approaching Tokyo. I got a message from the *Essex*, "Wonder One from Wonder Base, relay message to strike group. Return to base. Jettison all bombs and rockets." We had heard that the Japanese were giving up, but, Halsey says, "We keep striking." Well, they acknowledged it. I came down about an hour later. I found out the good news. I was sitting in my room that afternoon. Harry Truman had just declared V-J Day. I'm thinking, "Five years, it's over, got to get back home, got to get going with my life. I'm twenty-seven years old. My God, life's half over." I look at the calendar, there, it's August the 15th, out there. It's the 14th here. August 12th, Churchill and Roosevelt [met], ... four years before for four days. ... Some of the decisions made there, not all of them, because they talk about peacetime, the admirals, the generals, talk about war, ... at that meeting, I felt, resulted in what came V-J Day.

We hung around, locating prisoner of war camps. Oh, these poor, emaciated guys running around and, PW, I got to see it. MacArthur told us what to do. We dropped candy. We dropped cigarettes. ... At one hundred feet, we're dropping everything. Then, three days before the surrender was signed, me and my boys got word, the four of us, about two o'clock in the afternoon, to fly on a southwest course to rendezvous with ... a group of ships and fly combat air patrol over them. We fly down about one hundred miles and I could see them in the distance, ships. I can see they're battleships, but, ... they're the old battleships, the Pearl Harbor [era ships], because the new ones are with us, a group of ships. They're all flying their combat flags, but they flew new flags, now, these flags are victory flags. Three British, thirteen American. They're heading up the Sagami Bay, Tokyo Bay. We dropped down there, one thousand feet. I recognize the USS *Pennsylvania*, the *Nevada*. I knew all these from recognition. Three from sixteen is thirteen. Four of those ships were in the Atlantic. They weren't touched. The other nine were beat to hell at Pearl Harbor. They raised them from the muck. They cleaned them up. They repaired them. They modernized them. They got out in late '44. They took part in shore bombardment. Admiral Oldendorf crossed the Japanese T, down in the Philippines.

Well, we're orbiting them and ... they're heading right for Fujiyama. There's Fujiyama Mountain up there. It's beautiful. I had seen it six months before, out of my gun sight, and I was scared as hell. It looked like my calendar in kindergarten, now, the sun is sinking behind Fujiyama and the black and yellow rays are coming down. It's no longer the Rising Sun, it's ... more a big, red meatball. Well, we orbited. [On] my radio, ... I could hear Kate Smith singing *God Bless America*, the *Star Spangled Banner*, I could hear *Remember Pearl Harbor*. ... My helmet, my chin strap was so tight, because my hair was standing on end, and then, my engine started to miss. It wasn't my engine, it was my heart. I get emotional when I talk about this and every word is true.

We go back to the ship. Two days later, we shoved off. They signed the surrender up. We're back in Juan de Fuca Straits, with the big mountain up there, Mt. Olympus, in eleven days, you know. ... I told this story at the Menlo Park Soldiers' Home on Memorial Day. We got off on a destroyer, a four piper, the old four piper. It went into the dock [at] eleven o'clock at night and [there was] nobody there, but, the girls are there. They'd been there for five years. They're there, nobody else, no mayor, no bands, nothing. They don't even know we're there. That's all right. It's eleven o'clock at night. I want to call my mother in Perth Amboy, hadn't seen her in a long time, but, it's two o'clock in Perth Amboy. I can't do that. We stay up 'til four o'clock in the morning. I call. I get my mother, "Mom, mom, it's Davie." "Davie, Davie, where are you?" I said, "Mom, I'm in Seattle. The war's over." She said, "I know the war's over. ... Are you all right?" "I'm all right, mom. I'm all right." "Davie, when are you going to be home?" "Oh, mom, I got fifty fitness reports to write. I got so much paperwork, mom. A week or two, mom. I'll get there." "Davie, do me a favor?" "Sure, ma." "Take a train, don't fly." [laughter] Well, that's my story.

JB You mentioned that the *Essex* took a kamikaze hit.

DR: Yes, ... before I was aboard her.

JB: Were there any more kamikaze attacks on the *Essex*, especially when you were off Okinawa?

DR: We never got hit, but, oh, Jesus, this brings up another story. I got blamed for three hundred men being killed. You want it, I'll tell you. Oh, it was in April or May. We were off Japan and I led a fighter sweep of twelve planes over the Inland Sea, targets of opportunity. We shot a couple planes down. "I see a lot of steel mills, a lot of boats over there, wow." I go over to count the boats and they start shooting at us like crazy. We got the hell out of there, nothing happened. We come back to the ship. We're about 150 miles out from the ship. We're one hundred miles [out]. I see a column of smoke. Remember when you're in grade school and the fire engine goes past, "I hope ... it's not my house." We get there and there's the (task force?). It's not the *Essex*, it's the *Bunker Hill*, just burning like hell, just burning. It took them quite a while for the *Essex* to bring us down.

Now, I'm going to back up just a minute, because it starts the story. My wife and I were at Martha's Vineyard, where we picked the President up many years ago. Then, we went around as tourists, and we get on the boat coming back, and I'm wearing my *Essex* hat. A fellow comes up, "You're on the *Essex*?" I said, "Yeah." "I was on the *Bunker Hill*." I said, "It was my fault." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "It was my fault." So, I tell him the story I'm just telling you.

They finally bring us down. I'm the first one to land. [I] taxi all the way forward. [Over the] bull horn, [I hear], "Lieutenant Robinson, report to the admiral's office." What the hell does he want? They don't call you up to congratulate you. [laughter] I left my hat and my helmet, I went right up, and there's Admiral Fredrick Sherman sitting there in a chair, and, his chief of staff, he stood five-foot-seven. His nickname from the Academy was "Brute." Nobody liked him. "Robinson." "Yes, sir." "Did you lead a fighter sweep over the Inland Sea?" "Yes, sir." "What did you do?" "Oh, not much, targets of opportunity. We shot down a couple of planes. You wanted us to. There was no action. [When] it was time to come back, we came back." "Did you attack any airfields?" "No, sir." "Why not?" "I never thought [to]." If they said, "Attack airfields," we would have attacked airfields. ... I stood there like a jackass, I guess. "You see the *Bunker Hill* burning over there? She got hit by two kamikazes. Maybe, maybe, they came from those airfields you didn't attack."

JB: Oh, God. He said, "Maybe."

DR: It doesn't bother me. I hadn't thought of it in years, until this joker says, "I was on the *Bunker Hill*," and, automatically, I said, "It's my fault." So, that's war, three hundred killed, according to the Admiral book, and 350 injured. Okay, I'm here.

KP: When you landed on the *Essex*, there was some tension between the existing crew and your group.

DR: ... Yeah, well, they thought they were going home. They had been out there a long time, and they were overdue for the Navy yard, but, then, they decided to keep her there, and, when they saw a new air group come aboard, they knew they weren't going home, and [there were] no fights or anything, just growling. ... You couldn't blame them.

KP: How did the air crews and the ship's crew get along?

DR: ... Oh, the deck handlers [were great]. ... Once you got out there, in combat, it has to go well. ... They were a great crew, they really were, and the thing about them, they were so experienced, having been out there so long. We were very glad, as it wound up, that we got the *Essex* and not the *Shangri-La*. With these guys on the *Essex*, though, they had the training. *Shangri-La* was a brand new ship, you know. ...

JB: How many men were in your unit?

DR: Well, there's a pilot for each plane. Now, all right, we were 150 pilots. We had enlisted men who went on a unit, they called it CASU, maybe about twenty [in] all in the group, technical, well-trained men. They went with us wherever we went, but, then, there was a ship's crew of hundreds, you know, who worked along[side us]. I don't have to tell you how many different things there are on a carrier besides a flight deck. That's what they're out there for, for the flying, but, I think we were 3000 men on the ship. ...

DR: How was the food on the *Essex*, compared to the *Augusta*, which was a flagship?

DR: I can't see any [difference]. Well, on the flagship, we were getting fresh stuff, because we were in port most of the time. We ate very well. ... The *Essex*, no, I told you, we would go out every fourth day and reprovision, refuel, but, it was all refrigerated. Well, compared to the guy on the beach and compared to what he went through, we ate pretty damn good.

KP: You were the executive officer, so, you knew the squadron very well.

DR: Yeah. I wasn't when the squadron was formed. There was four guys ahead of me, but, they all disappeared, not through accident or death, thankfully, through attrition. It's a long story, but, then, finally, I worked up to number three, and the skipper was ordered over to the ... CVL whose skipper was lost and got banged up, Pug Sutherland. He went over, so, that meant the exec went up to skipper and I went to exec. ... Both of them were killed shortly after the war. Sutherland, the first skipper, was killed flying from the *FDR*. Some ensign come down on top of him, night flying, and Sampson got killed from flying a PV, flew it into North Carolina, into a hill. I don't know. They were both Academy men. They were the only Academy men. The rest of us were Reserves.

KP: Where were most of the men in your squadron from?

DR: All over. They came through the Gene Tunney program, and I was so lucky [that] I didn't have to go through that crap, and they came in as aviation cadets. I came in as a lieutenant, which [meant] I didn't have to stand watch or anything. It was beautiful. ...

KP: What were the differences in how you were treated? You mentioned that you did not have to stand watch.

DR: Well, they had to stand watch. They had the training. We didn't do a damn thing except fly, have parties. [laughter]

KP: Being a Naval officer in aviation training was quite different.

DR: Yeah, it was a lot different than being a cadet, yeah. Now, I was twenty-seven aboard the *Essex*. My kids were twenty-two. They had gone through the cadet training. [At] the reunion out in Seattle last year, I was seventy-five, they were seventy. They were still my kids, mostly Midwest kids, you know

KP: Did you feel that there was a pronounced age difference at the time?

DR: Oh, no, I didn't feel that old, no. [laughter]...

KP: You probably thought that they were very young.

DR: Well, yeah. What happened was, they'd get their wings and their commission, and they'd run and get married, everyone of them, and they'd be no goddamn good for the next six months. [laughter] I didn't have a girlfriend. [laughter] ...

KP: Since you were not going through aviation training as an cadet, that probably explains why you have such good memories of New Orleans.

DR: Well, it was good duty.

KP: Where else were you stationed?

DR: Well, Jacksonville. We were out of Cecil Field. I was out in the boondocks. I didn't have a car.

KP: What about De Land?

DR: De Land was good duty. It's a lovely little town. It's gotten to be a big city now and it's grown. The four of us ... instructing had a house. We paid seventy-five bucks a month for it. I won the master bedroom on ... shaking dice. It's the only time I won on dice. [laughter] We had a grapefruit ... and orange grove in back. We named the place Bad Manors, M-A-N-O-R-S, and three nice guys. Little by little, we all got orders. I've never seen any of the three since then. We were instructors. We were getting the ensigns who ... were being commissioned and training them in dive bombing. That's who we were training, cadets. Once they got their wings ... and commission, they were no longer cadets, good kids, ... and we lost too many ... in stupid training accidents.

KP: How dangerous was the training?

DR: ... You know, stupid accidents, mid-air collisions, diving and not pulling out, making a bad landing, I'm trying to think. By the time we got out to flight, we only lost three in combat. ... We lost guys around the carrier. I crashed on the carrier, but, I survived. All together, my squadron lost eleven. The other squadrons lost more, we were good, and we shot down 124. The Admiral ... said we should cut that by twenty percent. I'll settle for ten percent. We didn't have to verify. We had gun cameras, but, the gun camera never lasted as long as your ammunition. We carried twenty-four hundred rounds of .50 cal in six guns, but, they were kamikazes, they didn't fight back, and, if you hit them, "Boom," all over the sky. ... We had armor plate behind the seat, we had self-sealing tanks, and they were Grummans, the ones we flew, anyway, and, if any plane would bring you back, [they would]. ... My tail got shot up, I got back, but, we were taught not to get into a dog fight with Jap planes, because those Zeros, those Zekes, they turn

inside you. They turn inside you. They had no self-sealing [tanks]. They had no amour plate, ... but, [if] you hit them, wow.

... I find everybody after forty-seven years. [I found] my wingman out in Seattle, working for Boeing. I changed religions. I mean, we're talking about [the] Jewish [faith]. I changed religions. I'll tell you a story. Over Okinawa, we flew in, (checked in, Whiskey?) control, "Go out there and orbit the destroyers out there." They were taking an awful beating from kamikazes. We're out there about two, two-and-a-half hours, and it's time to get back. I get Whiskey control. [He] says, "Wonder One, can you stay on a while?" "Yeah, we can stay on a while." "Take 20,000 feet. Relieve the division of 20,000 feet." ... As we climb up, we hear, "Splash one bogey. Splash one rat." They're coming in like crazy, just where we were at. ... The kids are shaking their fists at me. [We] get up to 20,000 feet, clear day. I look over, [there are] a bunch of birds out there, but, they must be ten miles away. They can't be birds, they must be Japs, Holy Jesus. I called Whiskey control. I said, "Bunch of bogeys." "Investigate. Good luck." We came in. They were Japs [twenty-five planes]. They were coming down the island. They had filled up the radar screen down below us, all these Japs coming in down below. Nobody had these guys up there. Then, you had a grass return over land. Nobody had them on the radar. They're heading for Buckner Bay and there's one hundred, 150 ships anchored there. Holy Jesus, you had no choice.

We went busting through. I saw a couple of planes shot down. I shot down one. [They were] all over the sky. I find myself down at 12,000 feet. "Where's my wingman?" I lost him. I can't blame him. The whole thing's gone into a mess. You're supposed to stick together. I see a single Jap plane over there. Oh, my God, I got four planes. I'm not talking about being an ace, the hell with that, I want to get home, but, it's meat on the table. I got a full deflection shot on him and I stunk at gunnery. The NRA would never have me at all, I tell you. I missed him, but, [I] still had the (odds?). I came around and I missed him again. Son of a bitch, the only way I'm going to get him is [to] get behind him and shoot him down. I get around, I got the piper. I'm looking right up his anus, and my stick went like this [back and forth], and tracers [were] going past my wing. I broke another rule, never fly alone, but, it was so easy. I look in the big rearview mirror we had and there's a Jap, right on my tail, a Zeke. Oh, every time I look in the rearview mirror of a car, I see that Jap. [laughter] "Holy Jesus, the hell with shooting that guy, I got to get the hell out of here." I knew, [if] you put your nose to the ground and pull up to the port, ... they can't fire through. So, I do that. I knew my tail was hit, because my stick had gone like that [back and forth], but, ... it's a Grumman. It will work. So, now, I'm at two thousand feet. There's four Marine Corsairs. They start to make a run at me and I'm a single plane. I must be a Jap. "Go away, go away." I drop my wheels. ... I'm trying to join up on somebody, and here come my three boys, and they're pointing at my tail. ... I said, "I know, I know. Let's get back. Let's go home."

As we fly past Buckner Bay, I see ships burning, several ships burning. Some of them got through. I get back to the *Essex* and the LSO brings me in a little hot, because I got a hole in my tail. I got down. Going down to supper that night, I ran into the air group commander, Commander Utter, an Academy man, he got out of the Philippines in a black hat when the Japs came in, and we're down in the lower deck, [on] the ladder going to the ward room. "Robby,

what happened up there today?” I said, “Captain, if we stick around and tell you stories, the food’s going to be cold. I made a report topside, but, look, you want to know, I’ll tell you very succinctly.” “Yeah.” I says, “You know I’m of the Jewish faith.” “What the hell has that got to do with it?” I don’t think he knew any Jews. “Why bring that up?” I said, “It’s part of my story.” I said, “I was born of Jewish parents, of course. I was circumcised. I was bar mitzvah(ed). I believe in the Ten Commandments. We’re kicking the hell out of number six these days,” I said, “but, I believe in the Ten Commandments. Thou Shalt not kill. When I’m home, I go to the synagogue.” I said, “Skipper, they made a Christian out of me today.” [laughter] That’s when I changed. These are all true things. I couldn’t tell them if they weren’t.

KP: You changed religions because of the war?

DR: Did I? No, no. I was born Jewish, I’m still Jewish. No, it’s just, you know, [that] you get scared and you get out of it. “They made a Christian of me today.” ... [laughter] I’m really screwing you up here with these stories. ...

KP: How effectively did your squadron work together?

DR: Oh, we always worked together. ... See, in the old school of thought, Army Air Corps and stuff, they flew, boom, boom, boom, a triangle, but, it’s not maneuverable. Oh, an Academy graduate who’d been out there in the early part of the war, became an admiral, Thatch, Jimmy Thatch, he invented the Thatch Weave. Instead of having a three plane division, we have a four plane division. Now, flying like that, why do you do that? If the enemy’s coming at you, you turn into him. If you’re low ... on ammunition, in the box, you just go around, like that. ... That was the Thatch Weave, and, as we escorted the bombers, we just would weave, like this. That’s the way we worked. The bombers, they flew the same way, I think, but, we were fighters. We were supposed to protect the bombers and the TPF and it worked. ... I don’t know what the hell the Air Corps did.

... Down there, we were in Atlantic City, there’s a big P-47 base over in Delaware. The field’s still there. They have a restaurant there with all the P-47 crap in there. Over there, one day, ... a boy’s telling a story. His engine cut out at 20,000 feet [in] this P-47, and the P-47 is like a tank, and he’s got it under control. ... He’s coming around, dead stick, and making his approach, but, he lands down wind, and he goes up on his nose, and sudden stoppage, you know. He’s up in the ready room, later, and the Navy boys are talking to him. “[With] all the time you had to go and maneuver, why did you land down wind?” He said, “Oh, that Navy crap, landing into the wind.” [laughter]

KP: Landing and taking off on an aircraft carrier is a hard job.

DR: Not taking off. I was catapulted as many times as I made a deck take off. I liked the deck take off better. Thing about the catapult, you knew you had your airspeed when you were in the air, but, sometimes, the catapult didn’t work, and we lost a couple of boys. They just dropped in. ... Steam catapults, that’s what they have now. We had a compressed air catapult and we only had one catapult. All the other *Essex* class [carriers] had two. They get them off faster. We got

them off fast. A deck take off is fun. You're going down the deck and, by the time you have the end of the deck, you should have your airspeed. I would not rather make a deck take off than a catapult, because the catapult sometimes failed, no big deal. Landing was something else. You had to put your faith in that man there. If you didn't do that, if you didn't follow his directions, you shouldn't be there. ... We had one of the best LSOs. ... I spoke to him the other night. He's up in Cape Cod. He had a try out with the Red Socks before the war, hell of a guy, and this was a "Roger all the way around." If you had a Roger all the way around, if you're high, he comes like this, "Bring it down, bring it down." If you're low, "Bring it up." If you're slow, it's like that, and, boy, if you don't answer his directions, he'll give you a wave off. ... These guys were good. ...

KP: What rank were these men?

DR: Well, they're officers. They could be anything from JG on up. Most of them were aviators, not all of them. ... They don't do that anymore. They have a big, red meatball now. They do it by a light that shines. I'm talking about present day, but, they still have a man back there in [case of an] emergency. I crashed [on] my second landing aboard the *Essex*. I was following him all the way. I got my cut, and I cut my throttle, and I pulled back my stick, and I bounced, and I bounced up in the air, and I said, "Oh, here comes a barrier crash." The barriers are cables strung there, that you engage it and you get sudden stoppage of the engine, but, you have to protect the planes that are parked up there. Now, you don't worry anymore, because you have a wooden flight deck. I bounced and I said, "Here comes a barrier crash." I got pictures of this. I didn't crash a barrier. I went over the barrier and ran into the Tiller, the toiler, the big crane, and into the island, took my starboard wing off, twisted me around, broke the whole tail section off, and I chewed up the fuselage of a friend of mine, but, nobody got hurt, two complete [wrecks]. They shoved them overboard after they took the machine guns out. You can't keep them aboard. I had a safety ... belt and I had [the] shoulder straps we had. ... When you flew, ... you could lock them. You couldn't move around when you came aboard, or took off. When you're flying, you let go, so you can move around. I don't think I would have been killed, but, my face would have been smashed up. You used to be able to tell a carrier pilot by all the stitches in his face, the old ones with the telescope sight. That was a reflector sight. You don't have that. I found out what I did wrong. It was something that was never in the syllabus, but, there's no investigation or anything. You do that [in] peacetime, there is a big investigation, like this poor girl that got lost the other day. That's something altogether different.

JB: How did the rocking of the boat affect your landings?

DR: ... Pitching? Well, you just got to do what he has. He has to measure himself. He's watching the sea. [He] knows he's coming up, he's coming down. If he's coming up, it's a wave off, and, if he's going down, it's a wave off, because ... he has to catch it going up or going down, and then, it took longer, but, it had to be that way. It wasn't difficult. We had a lot of training on the beach, take off, like the Army Air Corps boys with [the] P-40s they flew, but, to land, you had to know what the hell you were doing, you know. ... I had a crash. There were other crashes. ...

JB: Did you hook the catapult on the landing?

DR: No. Catapult's just for takeoff.

JB: No, that is not what I meant.

DR: The wires? You had ten wires and they were hooked up to hydraulics things. ... Well, you wanted to catch the third wire, and [then], you just go ahead slowly and come back. They put the hook up. You catch a ninth or tenth wire, you stop like that. We had two Seafires come aboard, British planes, the Spitfire. They were lost, and they're light planes, and [we] have this [system] jacked up for our ... six ton planes, you know. These guys come aboard, it pulled the hook right out of them. They went right down the deck. [laughter] We brought those two planes right back to the States. ... We had a little whiskey then. Well, we had whiskey. The doctor gave you that.

...

KP: When would the doctor aboard the *Essex* give you whiskey?

DR: Just at the beginning. We ran out. The doctor brought it aboard, and there was a ration, but, these two British pilots ... were having a drink. "Good show, good show," he says. Aboard the *Augusta*, we had a lot of whiskey ... when Churchill and the President [met]. Of course, that was all up there, but, of course, the British had whiskey all the time.

KP: Do you have any other stories about your tour in the Pacific?

DR: ... Would you like to hear about our honeymoon? [laughter]

KP: Which honeymoon?

DR: My wife, no. [laughter] Yes, I have other stories.

KP: You were the executive officer. How many men did you lose in your squadron?

DR: Well, I wasn't exec on the beach, so, I never escorted a body home. I just couldn't do it, but, we always had somebody escort a body home. I didn't get involved, because I was an executive at that point. Aboard, when it was your roommate or something, you had to pack his gear. Luckily, it didn't happen to me. It hurt. The skipper wrote the letters to the parents. I didn't have to write that. ... I just don't know what I could do. ... I didn't try to duck out of it, but, there was no reason for me ever to do it.

I lost two men in Hawaii, one in a mid-air collision and [another in] something else, and one of them came from the State of Washington. [When] we came back, I might have gone over there. I'm sorry, I can't. War is such a lousy thing, to lose people, and after you go to talk to their parents, [it's even worse]. Some guy wrote a tremendous book after the war, ... an aviator. I think he was Air Corps. He drove around the whole country, a skipper, and visited the parents of guys who were lost. He wrote a book. I didn't read it. I don't know. It's what the hell goes on

in the world, in the State of Bosnia, with Africa, with every goddamn thing. Now, they say the United Nations is no good. ... I'm still for our president, but, what the hell's happening in Washington? I don't even want to talk about it. I don't like it.

KP: How often did you go to services?

DR: I only went when President Roosevelt died. We didn't have a Jewish chaplain aboard. They didn't have that many chaplains. We had a Catholic chaplain and a Protestant chaplain, who was wonderful. I've seen him in the Navy on television all these years, what do you call it? *Victory at Sea*, where he's down like this, praying over a body, and then, I never saw it done before, he [a pilot] crashed on landing, was killed. They left him in his plane, and pushed it overboard, and he was in that, too. ... Look, I'm seventy-six, and my dad went to ninety-eight, and my mother went to eighty-nine, and I think I'm stuck. [laughter] ...

KP: Did your men, the Catholics and Protestants, go to services?

DR: Not really. ... They only had services on Sunday, and, frankly, the Catholic was from New Jersey, from Jersey City, and he kept talking about going down to Atlantic City. You know what, "going down to Atlantic City," meant before the war, to the whorehouses down there. I didn't have much truck with him, but, that was just an individual.

KP: However, the Protestant chaplain stands out in your memory.

DR: ... He was a fine man. You want a good story? ... When did I hear about President Roosevelt died? ... They asked me that up at Hyde Park, "What happened?" ... I was sitting up [in] ... a plane on the catapult. They might need planes topside. Four of us were ready. They never did. ... Beautiful, sunny day, calm water, and the mech came up to the plane, "Mr. Robinson, ... President Roosevelt died." "Oh, God." I felt like somebody kicked me in the stomach. ... The other day, ... I read about Churchill. ... When I heard, it was like somebody gave me a body blow, which I thought was pretty good, yeah.

KP: You mentioned that you attended services for Roosevelt.

DR: Well, they were non-sectarian services. There was no reason why you shouldn't go. It took place, like I think I told [you], down in Washington, last fall, where I read From *Joshua*, and I showed you the pictures, you know. Religion is a very personal thing.

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

KP: You served aboard a cruiser and an aircraft carrier.

DR: I was on a battleship for one month, the old *New York*, when I was an apprentice seaman, yeah.

KP: I went on the *Intrepid* recently.

DR: Oh, yeah. I've been there.

KP: I also went on its sister ship, a cruiser, I think, next to it, and then, the submarine.

DR: ... It's not the *Aegis*, is it? I forget. In the summer, I didn't go aboard those two. ...

KP: I was surprised at how cramped the crew's quarters were, even for the officers.

DR: Well, the ensigns lived in the JO bunkroom, as I did, aboard the *Augusta*. The officers, they're usually two to a room. Captain's by himself. They're small. We happened to have a big one, kind of a big deal, a long story. ... My roommate, Dave Weaver, out of Kansas City, he used to carry seventy-eight RPM records with him, classical records. We used to have music hours in our room at night, because we had a pretty large room, and we had bunked with one another, Dave Weaver. He was the guy, when I came down from the plane after Roosevelt died, he came from Kansas City. ... I said, "Did you hear about it?" "Yeah, yeah," he said, "What do you think? That lousy haberdasher from my hometown's going to be president." Dave Weaver never got married. He's in Kansas City. I saw him once, about five years after [the war ended]. He never came to a reunion until San Diego, about six years ago. He walked in, he's like this. He put on weight. I hardly recognized him. "Dave." "Robby, how are you?" ... "It's good to see you, Dave," he says, "I drove over from Kansas City with my companion." I said, "Really, Dave?" ... I saw no sign of anything when he was my roommate. So, the kids are kidding me, "Hey, Dave, what the hell's going on in your room?" Oh, Jesus, his companion, right.

KP: Was he kidding?

DR: He wasn't kidding me. He drove out with his companion.

KP: Oh.

DR: He still hasn't married, not to a girl, anyway. My wife, Fredda, she always mentions the war. ... [laughter] We had some aboard the *Augusta*. We had court-martials. ...

KP: Were they officers or enlisted men?

DR: Enlisted men, but, the officers ran the court-martial.

KP: Did you run any court-martials?

DR: No, I didn't want any part of that. The Academy men did it. Aboard the carrier, I can't say. I don't know

KP: Aboard the *Augusta*, how many court-martials were there?

DR: Oh, I don't think there was more than two. Oh, it was not common. Maybe there was more going on and they didn't get caught, or [it was] after the court-martial, but, that, they tried to hush up, even in the ward room, but, the word got around.

KP: Why were they trying to hush it up?

DR: Well, it shouldn't happen in the Navy, you know. We're talking about fifty-five years ago.

JB: Was there an immediate court-martial with no questions asked?

DR: ... I wasn't involved in it. I don't know. It was pretty damn fast. We got them off the ship. I don't know. ...

KP: Are there any other memorable stories from your Navy career that we have forgotten to ask you about?

DR: My career?

KP: Yes, what you did in the Navy.

DR: I fooled around. [laughter] No, I can't think of any. There's some funny stories. Dick Pratt, I told you about Dick Pratt, Admiral Pratt. We're standing watch, down in Bermuda, and they're setting up the movies. Dick was officer of the deck. I was junior officer of the deck. Admiral King liked movies. He liked movies. Dick sends up the word, with a messenger, to Admiral King and he tells the Marine outside the door, "The movies will start at 2000." The message came back from Admiral King, "The movies will start when the Admiral gets there." Pratt, I thought he was going to jump overboard, ... the Academy men, oh, my God. ...

KP: I read in your account of the *Augusta* that you often got movies for Admiral King.

DR: Oh, he loved the movies. ...

KP: Did you get the movies that had been out for awhile?

DR: No, we got the first run movies.

KP: Other ships did not get them.

DR: Oh, they got them later. ... The day before we picked the President up, this big PT boat came roaring up with the latest movies. The President never got down to the movies, but, we sent them up for it. ...

JB: Did you meet any other famous admirals? You were talking about Admiral Halsey?

DR: I seen them. No, I never saw Halsey. I saw McCain, down in the Philippines. ... There is an admiral that came from Perth Amboy, New Jersey. We have five admirals from our hometown, because we have a waterfront there, all Academy men, and he was Halsey's chief of staff, and I can't think of him right now. I'll have to look it up in the book. I didn't know him. He damn near bilged the Academy, because he horsed around so much, but, he was brilliant. Halsey could not go to Midway, because he had a skin condition. He was in the hospital. He called Spruance in, says, "Spruance, you got to take Midway, but, take my chief of staff. He's a brilliant chief of staff." He was Halsey's chief of staff. He told Spruance to take him, because Midway's coming up, see, because they're going out to Midway.

JB: Frank Jack Fletcher?

DR: No, no, not Fletcher, no, no. You won't even recognize his name. The admiral writing the book said he was the unsung hero of Midway, this man. He was in the movie, *Midway*. ... I'll see it again. I'll have the name. My wife remembers these things, I don't. So, Midway came, and the first bombing, one thing or another, but, we hadn't bombed the Jap carriers yet, but, this man from Perth Amboy, he said, "Get them out, now. They're probably changing from bombs to torpedoes. They're going to be on the deck." It turned out, then, they had to change back, again, if you read the story of Midway, but, he's the one [that] said, "Get them off the deck." The dive bomber pilot, McClusky, Butch McClusky, said, "We got the carriers in sight," and he said, "Strike, strike," and he never got any fame out of it. I never met him. I didn't know him. A neighbor of mine grew up with him. ... It doesn't matter. ...

Then, we had a vice-admiral from Perth Amboy, John Will, and it's his brother that lives on my street. He was in charge of all Naval aviation. Transport, he was in charge of transport, and I only met him in Metuchen, when my sister-in-law died, and, one night, so many years ago, my wife and I [went to the] ... Metropolitan Opera House. We didn't pay for the tickets, my in-laws did. We were going down the stairway and we see Admiral Will. He was president of American Export Lines at that time. He [had] come out of the Navy. I recognized him. "Admiral Will, how are you? Dave Robinson. Your brother is Nate." ... "Oh, yeah, yeah, how are you? sure," he said, "Is your wife with you?" I said, "Yeah." ... "Hey, you two come up." They had a very fine club up there. "You're my guests up at the club." So, I get Fredda, and we go up, get up there, and the *maitre di* is up there. They're all in tuxes. I'm in, thank God, a dark suit. "Admiral Will, this man can't [enter]. He's out of uniform." Admiral Will says, ... "He's my guest." "Can't do it." All right, so, the *maitre di* sticks [his hand] in his pocket, pulls out a black bow tie. I take off my tie. I put the black bow tie on. We go in, we have a drink.

You know, I got to know Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, Jr., at the meeting. He was on a destroyer nearby. Elliot [Roosevelt] was a putz. He sat in the ward room. He didn't talk to anybody, Elliot, but, Frank Jr.'s a nice guy. I got friendly with his fourth wife four years ago, he had died already. Wonderful woman is Churchill's daughter, Mary, who is Lady Somes. That first day, three years ago, [when] we ran the church service, I'm taking pictures, I'm not watching, and then, we go in for lunch, in the officer's club, and there's this woman standing there, wearing a hat. I said, "Who in the hell wears a hat?" nice, solid looking woman. Arthur Schlesinger, when we got in there, says, "Robby, you and Pratt were the only guys there. Tell

your story, tell your story.” I’m not drinking, and I go over, and I say, “Hello,” to her, and I say, “I was Ensign Robinson aboard the *Augusta*, fifty years ago.” “Oh, that’s nice,” she says.

KP: Was this the meeting of the International Churchill Society?

DR: No. ... This is the library. The Churchill Society is strictly Churchill. Well, anyway, I said, “I want to tell you about your Prime Minister, what a wonderful man he was,” and I start telling her, and I tell her the story about the gifts for the British sailors, how I was in charge, and she’s listening, and then, they call for lunch. She’s sitting there, I’m sitting here. After lunch, they introduce the important people, first, Lady Soame, ... oh, my God, Churchill’s daughter. I crawled over, after the introductions were over. I said, “Lady Soames, I’m so embarrassed.” “Why, Mr. Robinson?” “Talking to you like that, I didn’t know you were Winston Churchill’s daughter.” “Oh, Mr. Robinson, nothing to apologize about,” she says, “In the first place, you told the story very well.” She said, “I knew the story. You told it very well. Secondly, my father really appreciated what you did for the British sailors,” and I said, “Lady Soame, your father took a picture with my boys. I was down drinking whiskey. [When] I came up, I wasn’t in the picture.” I said, “Would you do me the honor?” I’ll bring it the next time I see you. We went out and took pictures, and we became friendly, and ... we had a correspondence, my wife and I. ... I gave her that Hopkins thing.

My wife and I were in Britain, we’d never been there before, in London, two years ago. I wrote to her and I found a letter at the hotel, “Glad to hear you’re in London with your wife. I’d like you to come to my apartment,” on such-and-such a date. “Please call to make arrangements,” and we did, and we had such a wonderful hour up there, she and my wife talking art. She’s the head of the British Theater, but, she had [amazing] stuff in that apartment, her father’s paintings, other paintings, worthwhile paintings, the King and the Queen of England with their signature, I’m not sure about the Prince of Wales, [laughter] and she was just so nice, and we had coffee, and I saw her up at Hyde Park, last year. You know, what the hell does it add up to? It adds up to, “Why me?” but, it happened to me. I’ll stop the bull. ... [laughter]

KP: You mentioned that you had not given much thought to staying in the military.

DR: Oh, I had no thought to remain in.

KP: Had you thought of using the GI Bill?

DR: Yes, but, I’m too old already. I got to get married. I got to get going.

KP: Did you have a girlfriend?

DR: I didn’t have a girlfriend until I met Fredda, who I knew for years, when she graduated Syracuse in ‘48. ... We’re anchored up in Boston Harbor in 1941, in spring, I may have told you [this], and this supply officer, who was the guy who assigned me to these boxes where I met Churchill, [said], “Robby, you see that building over there?” “Yes, sir.” “You know what it is?” “No, sir.” “It’s the Harvard Business School. The Navy just took it over. ... If you want to

change your star for a leaf, [become] a supply officer, I can get you over there for a year and you'll really get an education." "Thank you, Commander, but, no thank you. I joined up to fight the war." ... I think I came down here [and] saw Eddie Hyde, who was running the RU placement bureau. I don't remember what happened. I had a job in sight. I took the job. It turned out to be a lousy job, in the area. I think I could have gone into Harvard Business School, ... after having been a student of Burns, and they were looking for students at that time, and I could have done it on the GI Bill. I don't regret it. I never would have met Fredda. I would have been up in Boston. My life would have been completely different. I don't think I'd be sitting here. As Frank Sinatra says, "I did it my way." [laughter]

KP: What was your first job after getting out of the military?

DR: I worked for an ice cream plant in Woodbridge, owned by my French teacher and her husband. They had talked to me during the war. They're neighbors. I was ... a traffic manager and I wasn't very happy there. That's where I married Fredda. Then, they sold out to Swift and Company and I left. ... I did enough traveling in the Navy. [If] you're going to work for a big company, you have to travel. I don't want to travel anymore. I left. ... I established a shoe store in Metuchen. I sold shoes when I was in high school. I had it for fifteen years. I had to make a living. It wasn't easy. The family grew. The bank, the Metuchen Savings Bank, ... bought the building. I had to get the hell out. ... My older brother, Larry, lives in Highland Park. He was in real estate insurance, in a small office. His partner had died, his uncle, not my uncle. ... After fifteen years in the shoe business, I went with Larry for twenty years, and then, I did appraisal work.

[When it] came [time for] three kids to go to college, my wife taught school, went [back] after nineteen years [of] not working. She worked for nineteen years. She went to Kean College, and she worked in New Brunswick for three years, and, after four years, when the town blew up and damn near died, then, she got out and taught in Edison, which was much better. I got three boys. One's an actuary up there in West Hartford. He's been there eleven years. They have two boys, married a girl up there. My eldest boy went to Penn. He rowed on the varsity crew. He's a hydrologist, and he's doing well, and the [other] kid dropped out of college. He's an RN, out above Seattle. He's the happiest one of them all. [laughter] ... [Do] you know the country above Seattle, the San Juan Islands? Oh, it's beautiful. We were just out there. They finally had a girl, after we had five grandsons. Go ahead. I had nothing to do with that. [laughter]

KP: None of your sons served in the military.

DR: No. Both Alan and the two other ones, who went to Ivy League, not because [it was] Ivy League, they had draft numbers. They weren't called. Nixon, the only good thing he did was kill the draft, but, no, they didn't serve, and don't hate me for it, ... if, at that time, ... their number [had] come up and it said they wanted to go to Canada, I would have given them the money for it. That's what a father does.

KP: You had been very eager to fight.

DR: Oh, it was a different time, it was a different war. For God's sake, there was no comparison. ... If we had lost that war, where the hell would we have run an invasion from, New York City, over to England or something? You can't compare the two. I'm sorry, I don't understand. I'm a Democrat and I thought Lyndon Johnson was pretty good and Jack Kennedy. My brother worked for Somerset Importers, before his insurance business, in New York. It was Joe Kennedy's Haig and Haig. I'm just not that smart, I'm sorry. We got to solve these things without fighting, and that's what they tried to do with the United Nations, and it's worked and it hasn't worked. Wars will never end. They'll never end. I don't know.

KP: You initially enlisted because of Hitler and the war in Europe.

DR: Because I thought it was our war. ... Yes, certainly because of Hitler, and it was our war. If we didn't get in there, somehow or other, this guy could win.

KP: How did you feel about fighting in the Pacific? Did you have any regrets about being transferred from the Atlantic Theater?

DR: No, no, I went where they told me to go. ... By that time, don't forget, ... by the time I went to the Pacific, this was March of '45. The war ended over there six months later. We were sitting, the war ended, and we had steak for supper. "How did you feel?" You felt [that], ... "We still got a war here. Thank God the war's over there." ... We knew nothing about the atomic bomb or anything. Morris Marquay, who wrote for the *New Yorker*, wrote a book about the *Essex*. I have it [at] home, well done, and he describes that night when ... the European War was over. My brother was in the European War, my brother-in-law, they were both in there. The family was in there. You didn't question it in those days. "What? Did you volunteer?" I can't say, because I won't say. Anything I say might be wrong or you would hold against me, I'm sure you would, and maybe I speak ... too much, maybe I do, but, I tell it like I see it, and, if you don't like it, I'm sorry. I don't mean that personally. ...

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

Reviewed by Bojan Stefanovic 1/26/00

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 7/4/00

Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 7/7/00

Reviewed by David Robinson 7/15/02