

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ELMER ETHAN WAGNER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

DECEMBER 11, 2009

TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Elmer Ethan Wagner in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on December 11, 2009, which Shaun Illingworth, and also present are ...

Joan Wagner: ... Joan Wagner.

Bonnie Wagner Westbrook: ... Bonnie Wagner Westbrook.

SI: Thank you all for coming in today, and thank you, Dr. Wagner Westbrook, for bringing in your father and mother.

BW: ... And thank you, Shaun.

SI: Thank you. To begin, sir, could you tell me where and when you were born?

Elmer Ethan Wagner: I was born in Rochester, New York, in 1922.

SI: What were your parents' names?

EW: Elmer Wagner and Mildred Smith-Wagner.

SI: Okay. Both of them were from that area originally.

EW: Yes.

SI: Okay. Starting with your father's family, what do you know about his family history? Do you know if his family emigrated from anywhere?

EW: They came from Germany, and my grandmother and my aunt and uncles, ... many of them from Germany.

SI: Okay. Your grandmother was actually born in Germany.

EW: She was born in Germany.

SI: Okay. Do you know what attracted his family to the Rochester area?

EW: Haven't the faintest. [laughter]

BW: They liked snow a lot.

SI: I would imagine. What about your mother's side of the family? What do you know about her background?

EW: Well, she was a big, buxom woman and a typical German. ... When she was going to do something, she was going to do it and she was steady at it and always did a complete job.

SI: Her family was also German.

EW: She was German, yes.

SI: Okay. Were her parents born in Germany or born in the US?

EW: In the US.

SI: Okay. Again, do you have any idea why their family came to Rochester?

EW: No, no.

SI: What did your father do for a living?

EW: Well, he had various occupations; [I will] try to think of all of them. He was a millwright, for one thing, and he worked for Rochester Art and Button Company. They made buttons. ...

JW: RG&E [Rochester Gas and Electric].

EW: He also, before he got through, ... was a stationary engineer in a school, and that means, in fancy language, they take care of the heating. [laughter]

SI: Okay, like a custodial type job.

BW: No, buildings engineer, a buildings engineer.

EW: Yes, yes.

JW: In those days, they called them superintendents.

BW: He also was a stockroom manager at Rochester Gas and Electric.

SI: What about your mother? Did she ever work outside of the home?

EW: Yes, my mother worked, let me see, yes, worked for Rochester Art and Button Company, and she made buttons, and [let me] see if there's any other things that she did.

SI: Was that before she got married or while she was married?

EW: I guess before she got married to my dad.

SI: Okay. When she was married and raising a family, she did not work outside the home.

EW: She worked for awhile after she was, yes, married, yes.

SI: Do you have any idea how your parents met?

EW: None.

SI: Okay. Do you know if it had anything to do with the button company, or do you suspect that?

EW: I don't know. I don't believe so.

SI: Okay. Which area of Rochester were they living in when you were born, when they were bringing up your family?

EW: Now, when you mean what area, how do you want it described?

SI: Was it like a neighborhood or a ward?

EW: Neighborhood.

SI: Neighborhood, okay. It was a part of Rochester, though.

EW: Yes, this definitely was.

SI: Did the neighborhood have a name, anything like that, anything that described it as a neighborhood? Was it known as "the German area?" Did it have any particular characteristics?

EW: No, I don't think so. I think it was pretty much integrated where they were, yes.

BW: It was a mixed cultural kind of area. There were Italian families, German families, all kinds of ethnicities.

EW: Yes.

SI: Can you describe your earliest memories of growing up there and what the neighborhood was like?

EW: Well, I didn't stay there too long before I went to school, and I don't think there was anything special that brings me back to my childhood memories, at that stage. Oh, when I went to school, I went to [Public School Number] 14 School. ... It was a normal school. Now, a normal school meant that it was a teaching school. They taught new teachers.

SI: Your teachers would be people who were getting their degree in education. Is that what it was?

JW: They were teachers in training, right?

EW: Teachers in training, oh, yes, definitely.

JW: Yes.

SI: You mentioned on your survey that you did a lot of outdoor activity.

EW: I fished a lot. I always was a fisherman, and I also played with airplanes, [laughter] was crazy about that, and I played tennis a lot. I was a real tennis player.

JW: Talk about your flight, about your airplane flight through the kitchen window?

EW: Oh, no, I wouldn't tell about that. [laughter]

SI: How old were you when that happened? [laughter]

BW: Too old. [laughter] ...

EW: We used to practice combat and you shoot the other guy's plane down on fire. Well, the fire got too close to the window shade and it burned it up. [laughter] ... My dad burned my rear-end up, too. [laughter]

SI: When you were growing up, did you live in an apartment or a two-family home?

EW: Well, we lived in an apartment. I always lived in an apartment.

SI: Okay. Was it a very residential area? Were there other apartment buildings?

EW: Yes, it was. Yes, it was a residential area.

SI: How far would you have to go to get to a good fishing spot or a good hunting spot?

JW: The White Waters was one of them.

BW: Irondequoit Bay, you went to Irondequoit Bay to fish.

EW: Yes, oh, yes; to fish at Sodus Bay, forty miles away.

JW: And you rode your bicycle over to the White Waters, which wasn't too far.

EW: Oh, yes, I used to fish at night, used to do everything.

SI: Would you walk over there or would you ride a bike there?

EW: Oh, I'd ride a bike and I'd fish at night, because it wasn't allowed, [laughter] and the fish bit better. I used to catch a lot of fish, a lot of fish.

SI: Would you go out there with family or would you have friends that you would go fish with?

EW: Oh, no, I'd just sneak over with another friend, yes. We did it ourselves. ...

SI: Were the people in your neighborhood, and your friends, a mixture of people, different ethnicities and religions?

EW: I would say definitely a mixture, yes.

SI: How did all the different groups get along? Did people seem to get along?

EW: Very good, very well.

JW: Yes, good neighborhoods.

SI: In your own home, were there any traditions kept up that you would say were kind of held over from Germany, any Germanic traditions?

EW: Well, Christmas was always a big tradition and they brought over a great many [decorations]. Well, they brought everything they could bring and they brought a lot of Christmas lights over. ... They had lights like you don't see around now. [laughter]

JW: Beautiful ornaments.

EW: Yes, beautiful, big ornaments.

BW: Metal, actually metal ornaments.

EW: ... They're kind of fading ... out now, because they're old, but we've still got them. [laughter]

SI: Are they from Dresden?

EW: I don't know. I don't know the city, no.

SI: Were they ornaments or were they candles that you put on the tree?

BW: Ornaments. They're very large and very heavy.

EW: Yes. ...

SI: What about in food or language? Was German ever spoken in the home or taught to you at all?

EW: No. They stayed away from German. I guess they didn't want to get the kids into speaking German. They'd rather have us speak English, and we all spoke English.

SI: Did your family ever say if they had a hard time during the First World War because they were German, German-American?

EW: No, I don't remember this, don't remember very much conversation about that.

SI: What about food? Did you eat any German foods or was it mostly American food that you ate?

EW: Mostly American, when they got going.

SI: Was there anything that was kind of a German tradition kept up on the table?

EW: No.

BW: Grandma used to cook sauerkraut.

EW: Oh, they used to cook the old [dishes], you know, a lot of the old dishes.

BW: Beef tongue.

EW: Yes. [If] you never had a beef tongue, you really never eaten anything that was really good. [laughter]

JW: It doesn't sound good, but it really is. They cook it, and then, they make a tomato sauce. They slice it very thin and make a tomato sauce, and it is excellent.

EW: And, of course, what's the other thing?

JW: I didn't eat it. I tried it and, ... when they said what it was, ... I went, "Ah."

EW: Sauerkraut, that was what it was, sauer ...

JW: Sauerbraten, too

EW: Yes.

BW: Sauerbraten, and they made *kuchens*. They made a lot of *kuchens*.

EW: Oh, they were great cooks, yes, and they could cook, I don't know what you would call it, but it's fancy. They made all that stuff, but they were specialists in *kuchens*. They made wonderful *kuchens*.

BW: Daddy, what about the stuff that you went hunting for and fishing for? Didn't your mother cook the fish for you?

EW: Well, when I got old enough, I think I pretty much cooked my own.

BW: When you went hunting, didn't you bring ducks home?

EW: I'd cook almost all my own.

BW: So, Grandma and Grandpa didn't have any.

EW: ... I was quite a duck hunter, too.

SI: Did you have any siblings, brothers or sisters?

JW: ... He had a brother that died. He died at birth.

SI: Growing up, did you have a lot of family nearby, cousins or uncles or aunts?

EW: Oh, I had a real bunch of uncles, and they were all Dutch. Their name was Van Duser. Van Duser, yes, and they were terrific friends for me. They used to take me fishing all the time [laughter] and they were all business people. One was a real estate agent.

JW: Had his own business.

EW: One had a couple of pretty big jobs in Rochester. They all did well, every one of them.

SI: How did the Great Depression affect your family and your neighborhood?

EW: They did everything they could to cheer you up. Yes, in fact, my uncle, toward the end of the line, when it was getting real tough, he used to cut ... my hair. Yes, he'd come over to the house and cut my hair and do things like that.

JW: And they used to walk the railroad tracks and pick up any coal that would fall off it.

EW: Oh, yes.

SI: Do you remember doing that? Do you remember picking up coal?

EW: Yes, yes.

JW: Everybody wanted to survive.

SI: Would you have to gather firewood or anything like that, collect wood?

EW: My uncles did, some of them, ... but not a lot of firewood. Yes, we didn't cut our own or anything like that.

SI: What about other sources of food? Would you ever grow your own food? You were in an apartment, so, you probably did not have any place to grow a garden.

JW: Only after we had our home in Pittsford, New York, about 1963. He had a garden in the back of our house.

EW: The ducks and fish and frogs, you know, we cooked all that kind of thing. [laughter]

SI: How important was the stuff that you caught to your diet? Would you say that there were times when you would not eat if you did not catch something?

EW: No, I wouldn't say that, but I would say it might increase the value of it if we caught it ourselves.

SI: If you did not have those other sources of food, would you eat more basic food?

EW: Well, ... we never were hungry. The other thing they made was a lot of soup, and it was very good soup. So, I mean, by-and-by, I think they were good cooks, and we didn't live too far from what they called the Public Market, and that was where the farmers all came in on the weekend and sold their wares. So, you could get good buys there on good food, and they used to sell a lot of chickens and things like that.

SI: Was your father ever unemployed during the Depression?

EW: Oh, yes, my Dad was off for a little while, not too long. He was very fortunate. He had a friend that worked for a big corporation and who knew my dad for years and years and he liked him. ... He gave my dad a job as a night watchman and that fixed us up pretty good. ...

JW: There were times when he worked three and four jobs.

EW: Yes, well, he did. He did. He worked more than one job. ...

JW: It was hard times.

EW: He was a hard-working guy.

SI: Did you have to go out and get part-time jobs to help with the family?

EW: No, I was just a kid then; I guess not. I don't remember ever doing anything. There were some things he did that I did get a chance at, and it didn't pay very much, but it did pay and I did make some money. [laughter]

SI: What kind of things do you remember doing?

EW: Well, it ... had to do with house heating equipment. ... There was a part that wasn't fabricated. I could make that part and install it in that machinery. I used to get a fair amount. It was a heater.

BW: Like a furnace?

EW: I guess that's what you'd call it, yes.

SI: Would you do that in your home or would you go someplace to do that?

EW: Right at the home, right down [in the] cellar, yes, when we were living ... at the Frenches' apartment, which was [where] we had the whole upstairs of the house. It was a real big house, and we used to use it like our own, yes. ... They were nice people and they liked us and we liked them and got along well together.

JW: Because Dad took care of the mom.

EW: My dad, sometimes, when Mr. French died, he used to keep the fire for the old gal.

JW: He kept the house up.

EW: Yes.

JW: You sold magazines.

EW: I had some jobs, but they were always short-term jobs and didn't pay much. Like the guy who wanted to sell advertising for his store, ... I'd go around and take the fold-ups around.

SI: You would hand out handbills or something like that.

EW: Yes, yes, I used to do that.

JW: And you sold magazines, too. You sold magazines. That's a good story.

EW: Oh, yes, I won't tell that one. [laughter] I think my dad paid for more magazines than I sold.

SI: The story that you told about the French apartment was long after this period. Was that after the Depression or was that during the Depression?

EW: Oh, that was during the Depression, and I used to, once in awhile, do little jobs, like snowplow a sidewalk or something, you know, and it didn't amount to that much. Sometimes, you did it, sometimes, you didn't. It wasn't that great a thing. [laughter]

SI: How were the winters in that area when you were growing up?

EW: They could be very, very tough.

JW: Yes.

SI: Were there any blizzards that stand out in your memory or anything like that?

EW: Rochester winters vary like the dickens. You know, one winter, you can have a terrible winter and, the next winter, you can have what they call an "open winter." That was still good for snowplowing. [laughter]

JW: Actually, in Rochester, years ago, [when] we looked for winter, you got winter, and summer was summer. I mean, the seasons, they were beautiful.

BW: Big separation.

JW: Yes, they're not like it is now, you know, [where] you have an open winter and all that stuff. We never had open winters then. We always had a lot of snow, cold, yes. ...

BW: Lake effect snow.

EW: Here, lately, we've been getting an open winter.

JW: Yes, yes.

EW: You go all winter and no snow. ...

SI: Can you tell me a little bit about your early education, where you went to school and what interested you most in school, what your favorite subjects were?

EW: I didn't like school, because it took too much time away from hunting and fishing. [laughter]

JW: That's the truth.

EW: But, I finally got out of school. [laughter] ...

JW: Tell them about ... how you graduated, what you did to graduate.

EW: Oh, all right. One of the big parts of graduation was to write a dissertation about something, of anything. You could take your choice, and I liked radios and I liked television. I wrote a dissertation on radio and television. ... I knew quite a lot about both of them, because I used to make some radios. So, I graduated with no trouble. [laughter]

SI: This is from high school.

EW: Yes.

BW: They were amateur radio [operators].

SI: Like ham radio operators.

EW: Yes. ...

SI: Television probably came later.

EW: Yes. Oh, it was coming in, but just on the edge of it.

SI: You had heard about it.

EW: Yes.

SI: Tell me about how your interest in radio developed. When did you first get started with radio? When did you first become interested in ham radio operation?

EW: In high school, I had a friend that was a ham and we used to sit there, much to the teacher's distress, and whistle the code back and forth, too. [laughter]

SI: You would whistle Morse code to your friend.

EW: Yes, yes. We were pretty good. [laughter]

SI: Could your radio only transmit Morse code or did you have voice transmission as well?

EW: Oh, we had voice transmission later, yes, yes. In the beginning, we used Morse code, and then, you go from there.

JW: But, the very beginning was, when you were kids, you took two paper cups, like this, and you put a string in the bottom of it, and then, you get in another room and you think you're hearing the other one. ... I mean, this is what we did. [laughter] Yes, you know, it's true. ...

EW: I played with Morse code a long time, and I now have all the countries of the world that I've talked to.

BW: "Worked All Countries."

SI: Is that an award or a certain level of achievement?

BW: It's a level of achievement, from the American Radio Relay League.

EW: Some of them, see, you have real conversations with, like the King, King Hussein [of Jordan].

BW: He spoke with King Hussein.

EW: Yes. My wife was there when he was coming through one day.

JW: What a beautiful voice he had, and, oh. We have his card and he sent us, what did he send us? He sent us ...

EW: Oh, a stamp, he sent us a regular letter; you know, he sent us a lot of stuff.

JW: A very nice man.

BW: Dad collected QSL cards, that represented the contacts he made.

EW: Yes. ... If you're a ham, your QSL card has your call sign on it.

BW: It's a postcard, basically.

EW: ... And you send it to me to show that you talked to me, and I will send you one of mine to show that I talked to you. So, maybe you were in Australia and maybe you were in Burma ... or maybe you were anyplace. [laughter]

BW: ... Also, you talked to a lot of stations that were set up temporarily, like down in Antarctica.

EW: Oh, yes. Yes, Admiral [Richard] Byrd, when he was down there, and some of those people; that was a lot of fun.

SI: When you were in high school, how far would your signal reach?

EW: Well, it was after high school that I got good signal reach, yes.

SI: Okay, but, while you were in high school, would you mostly ...

EW: That was just code. Then, after high school, I really built some big stations and, sometimes, they surprised me. [laughter]

SI: I know ham radio operation was very popular among your generation. Did you build your own radio?

EW: Oh, yes, yes, [my] own radio. The biggest trick, though, no matter what they tell you, is building the antenna. You get an antenna that really works and you put it up in the backyard. One morning, you might get up early and you say, "Gee, wonder if anything good's coming through?" So, you swing the antenna over maybe toward the Far East and call CQ [a code used by wireless operators to make a general call] and Burma came back, [laughter] and that was the first time ... I had ever talked to Burma.

BW: And it's a good way to terrorize the neighbors, because you can put up a fifty-foot tower, with a rotator on the end of it. [laughter]

EW: Oh, yes. ...

JW: ... Seventy feet, eighty feet, but the one; don't you remember when ... our electricity went off? and the kids were over at the house and he was building this antenna for the radio. ... The Perrys were there, and he said, "Okay, pull the switch, see if the thing's going to work," and then, it goes, "Zzzz, bang." [laughter]

BW: We lost power.

EW: [laughter] Oh, the sparks flew, sometimes.

JW: The kids had a ball with that one.

SI: Was a lot of this done through self-education? Would you teach yourself how to do this?

EW: Yes, that, plus, your friends. Yes, they all get together pretty well.

BW: ... There wasn't a school to go to. They were self-taught. They had Heathkit programmed instructions.

EW: Oh, Heathkit, after awhile, came out with a lot of ham radio equipment, and you could buy that as a kit and put it together, ... and then, I built some pretty big stuff. ... I forgot what the big amplifier was I built, but I was running two kilowatts, which is a lot of soup. [laughter]

JW: Hallicrafters.

EW: Oh, Hallicrafters was good stuff.

JW: ... That was one of the big ones.

EW: Yes.

JW: Of course, the big, expensive one ...

EW: National.

JW: National, yes, and there was another one, too. Kenwood made one. Collins; Collins was the best radio you could get, ham set.

EW: That's the best one, the very best. Yes, that cost money. [laughter]

JW: No, ... there was an ad in the paper ... one Sunday and the guy was selling his whole Collins station. We got to the house and the guy invited us in. The house was a mess. ... I'm thinking, "Why did we come here? We're not going to buy a hunk of junk." So, in we go, down the cellar steps; the cellar was a mess. We go to a room that was locked.

BW: Ham shack.

JW: And, when we went into that ham shack, it was gorgeous. There wasn't a piece of dust anyplace. It was absolutely gorgeous. Bought the whole set, yes.

SI: When you were growing up, were you involved in any other kind of organized activity, like Boys Scouts?

JW: He was a Boy Scout.

EW: Yes, I was a Boy Scout, but not deep into it. Yes, I was into it, but not deep into it, ... and the tennis, I told you, that was one of my passions. I loved tennis. I used to play all I could. We used to play almost every day during the week.

JW: You were in the band, too, at East High School.

EW: ... I was a bugler when I was in the Air Force. [laughter] [Editor's Note: The US Air Force was established as a separate branch of the US Armed Forces in 1947. Prior to that, it had been subordinate to the US Army as the US Army Air Forces and, prior to 1941, the US Army Corps. World War II era veterans tend to use all three terms interchangeably.]

SI: Did you play tennis for the high school or just on your own?

EW: ... We played just for ourselves. Yes, we'd all meet over there, almost every day, and play tennis together, and it was girls and guys and, you know, we had a good time.

SI: You mentioned that your school was a normal school, that you had people who were training to be teachers. Do you think they were good teachers? Did you think you got a good education there?

EW: I think we got very good teachers. Any faults were right here, [indicating himself], yes.

BW: Well, you went to East High. That was not a normal school. That was a regular high school.

EW: I went to East High School, was one of the best high schools in Rochester.

JW: Very, very strict, and they didn't mess around with these kids.

EW: But, I wasn't well-behaved for the teachers. [laughter]

JW: No.

SI: Was there a subject that particularly interested you, like math and science, or history or English?

JW: Fishing and hunting. [laughter]

EW: Yes, fishing and hunting, [laughter] and that's about it and I fished and I hunted all I could.

JW: April 1st is the opening day for trout, and he was allowed to go trout fishing and that caused a little problem. [laughter] He's a real boy, stealing [fruit]. He used to lay out on one of the guy's roof and eat the Ulster cherries off the guy's tree. They called the police on him. [laughter]

EW: Well, you've got to expect it, but I ate a lot of cherries. [laughter]

JW: ... Kids, they didn't get into trouble.

EW: They were Ulster cherries, boy, "Hmm," [laughter] sit on that roof and just sit there and eat those cherries. That was living it up. [laughter]

SI: When you were growing up, was Rochester a very industrial town? Were there a lot of industries and factories?

EW: Very much so.

SI: I know Kodak is very big in that area.

EW: Oh, you hear of Kodak, of course, being the industrial giant, but, if you knew the truth about Kodak, you would be very disappointed. It is falling apart.

SI: Today?

BW: Now, it is. ...

JW: But, in our day, Kodak was the ... thing in town

EW: In our days, it was great. They had all the new stuff.

JW: And they were a family company. If the father worked there, you ought to know that the mother worked there and the kids worked there, and they all stuck together.

BW: Lifetime employment.

EW: That's the way it was in those days. That's the way it was, the whole outfit.

SI: In your neighborhood, did many of the fathers, and maybe even some of the mothers, work for these industries, like Kodak?

EW: ... Buffalo, there was a lot of people used to go there and work. They used to drive all that damned way every day to Buffalo and work, ... but Kodak was the one that was the big one. ... Then, there was Graflex, which was a photographic equipment company. They made all the

press cameras, and they went to hell, too. Well, then, there was Bausch and Lomb, the lens people. I worked for Bausch once.

SI: During the Depression, did many of the people in the neighborhood who worked in these industries keep their jobs? Did you see a lot of unemployment in the area?

EW: ... No, jobs were very solid then, very solid.

SI: Most people kept their jobs in your neighborhood. They would be working.

EW: Yes, yes, definitely.

SI: What about the New Deal? Did you see the New Deal impact your neighborhood at all? Did some people have to go to work for the WPA or the CCC? [Editor's Note: The Works Projects Administration (Work Progress Administration after 1939) and the Civilian Conservation Corps were New Deal programs established to put unemployed Americans to work.]

BW: Like the works program that built the hatchery and roadways and things like that.

JW: ... WPA.

EW: Well, that was all, mostly, an emergency reaction to the bad time, yes.

JW: They built bridges, they did all that beautiful stonework at Letchworth Park. ...

EW: No, but I'm telling you about ...

SI: The CCC?

EW: CCCs, they did a lot of things. They built Letchworth Park, if you've ever been down there.

JW: Oh, it's beautiful.

BW: That's referred to as the "Grand Canyon of the East." It's not in the same scale ...

EW: And that was a wonderful thing for the people, the CCC, because what it did was, it took a lot of people that weren't working and put them in a camp where they could live very reasonable and get paid. I don't know what they got paid, they didn't get paid a lot of money, but their mothers and fathers loved it, because they were in bad trouble. So, it was a very, very good thing for them.

SI: Did you know anybody who worked for either the CCC or the WPA, any friends or friends' fathers?

EW: Yes, my father, for one. [laughter]

SI: He did work for one of those.

EW: Yes.

SI: Which one did he work for?

EW: He worked for the WPA, and I knew a lot of people who worked for ... CCCs, yes, and they were mostly run by the very outfit that I joined, close to the CCCs, the Conservation Department. The Conservation Department took over most of the projects and set them up, but they had an Army officer that ran the CCCs.

SI: What did your father do for the WPA?

EW: Worked on the road.

SI: Was he helping to lay the blacktop? What was he doing?

JW: Probably, with a shovel, digging.

EW: To tell you the truth, I don't know.

BW: Digging ditches and stuff like that? ...

EW: He probably did some of that.

BW: Probably a little of everything.

EW: And it was in the wintertime, it was miserable, ... and he only stayed on that, thank God, for a little while, when that guy that I told you about, that was his friend, got him that ...

SI: The night watchman's job.

EW: Night watchman's job, yes.

JW: And Dad also went around looking for hot water heaters that people threw out. ... He could take them and recondition them and make them brand-new.

EW: He used to take the old water heaters, and they [the Rochester Gas and Electric Company] would, throw them out. ... Dad would take them, put them back together again and sell them. [laughter] He'd send away for a new drum for the middle of the heater and ... fixed all them, painted them up and everything. He made a fair buck.

JW: He'd sell them. ...

EW: And RG&E really didn't want them. They didn't want them.

JW: Threw them out.

EW: Get rid of them. [laughter]

SI: Did your father and mother ever collect scrap metal? I have heard of people going around collecting scrap metal, to turn it in, they would get so much per pound, during the Depression.

EW: I don't think so, no.

JW: No, but I know they did go along railroad tracks, picking up anything they could find.

EW: My mother was quite a well-trained woman. She read a lot of stuff, high literature and things like that. She was very intelligent.

BW: She was into music a lot.

EW: Yes.

BW: They went to the theater, for operas. ...

JW: These were free things at the theater.

BW: This was the George Eastman Theater in Rochester.

JW: And they used to have free concerts and things, and she took him to all of them, made sure he had a little [culture]. He had a very wide childhood. ...

BW: Classical education.

JW: Education, ... you know, the fishing, the hunting, family, that kids don't have today.

SI: I have heard a lot about the Rochester Orchestra.

JW: ... The Philharmonic.

EW: We used to go, once in awhile, and see special events.

JW: Eastman Theater.

EW: Yes, like when ... Admiral Richard E. Byrd; remember him?

SI: Yes.

EW: He came to the Rochester Theater and talked to the Junior Birdmen of America, and he did that and told about his trip down to the North Pole and the whole business. I guess the North Pole; ... South Pole. [Editor's Note: Sponsored by the Hearst newspaper chain and the US Bureau of Air Commerce, the Junior Birdmen of America fostered an appreciation for aviation in adolescent boys through events and organized aircraft model building. US Navy Admiral Richard E. Byrd was celebrated as one of the great explorers of the first half of the twentieth century for his aerial explorations of the North and South Poles.]

SI: Were you in the Junior Birdmen? Were you in that group?

EW: Yes.

SI: What did that entail? What would you do with them?

EW: Oh, we used to make airplanes, and we got into a parade one day and we made a big float, out of an American flag, and we put all the American airplanes on it, yes.

SI: How old were you then?

EW: Oh, probably, it's awful hard to [say], between twelve and fourteen, I'd say, somewhere in there.

SI: How early did you get interested in aviation?

EW: Oh, I was pretty much interested in aviation all my life. In fact, my first airplane ride was down at the Rochester City Airport, and a free ride in a helicopter. Now, that was a pretty early time to be flying in a helicopter.

SI: Before the war, before World War II?

EW: Oh, yes. ... That was when they had the helicopters and ... they all had wings on them.

SI: They were just a frame with the blades on top.

EW: Yes.

JW: Well, you also worked for the post office. ...

EW: Yes. Anytime you worked for the post office, during the wintertime, during the Christmas season, ... you got pretty good pay and it lasted about, oh, maybe four, five days. ... You could almost work as long as you wanted to and they'd pay you.

SI: Was that when you were in high school?

EW: When I was going to high school, yes.

JW: And after we were married. ...

EW: I remember that.

BW: ... You worked on Curtiss-Wright propellers, too. You were a packager one year.

EW: And I worked at the Ritter Dental Company. Yes, I worked a Bausch and Lomb, too.

BW: You worked at Curtiss-Wright and you worked on the propellers before you went into the military.

EW: Yes.

BW: Yes. It was after high school, but before you went into the Air Force.

EW: Right.

SI: Growing up in the 1930s, getting closer to World War II, how aware were you of what was happening in the world? Did you know what was happening with Hitler taking over all the countries in Europe? Were you aware of that? Did it have any impact on your life?

EW: No, we were aware of all the, like, airplanes. We knew all about all the German airplanes, every one of them, [laughter] and we knew something about some of the other ones, too. We knew about the war and we knew about the airplanes. I don't think we knew exactly what was happening, because of the politics taking on so many crazy shapes and sizes. [laughter] So, I didn't know a lot about the world.

BW: Didn't they show newsreels in the movie theaters? ...

EW: Yes, but ... you're young. ... What the hell does that mean? not that much.

BW: It's too far away?

EW: Yes.

SI: You did not think that this was good or bad, or, "This is going to have an impact on me later in life."

EW: Well, of course, we didn't like the idea of a fight, but we didn't get that excited about it.

JW: They didn't dwell on it, because they figured it wasn't going to happen, [the United States getting into the war].

EW: We figured, everybody figured, "Americans are going to walk right over them anyway, so, why worry about it?" [laughter]

SI: Before Pearl Harbor, do you remember anybody talking about if America should get involved in the war or should stay out of the war, if that was debated at all?

EW: Yes, ... used to hear that all the time, yes, that it was both ways, both ways, get in or get out.

SI: Do you remember if you felt strongly one way or the other?

EW: Well, after Pearl Harbor, I guess because of the way it happened, it was so sudden and so behind the back, ... you know, we wouldn't have been very happy about it.

BW: What made you enlist?

EW: Well, I always wanted to be a pilot, always, and, when they had the openings, I went down there and signed up right away. ... At first, they didn't take you in immediately, but, when I went down there, I met some friends of mine that were doing the same thing. So, I said, "Well, let's all go together." So, we did; we all went together. [laughter]

BW: And your cousins, too, the Van Dusers. ...

JW: Yes, the war was almost over.

SI: You were working at that time.

EW: I was working at Bausch and Lomb, ... yes, when I went in the service.

SI: Had you had any other jobs between when you graduated high school and when you went into the service?

EW: I think Bausch and Lomb was the one. I had a steady job there, and grinding lenses. ...

JW: What about Stromberg-Carlson?

EW: Oh, Stromberg, that was always short-term stuff. They'd work when they were building up their line to sell a lot of stuff, and then, as soon as they got through with that, ... that was it. ...

JW: Then, they went into television

EW: ... No, then, they'd wait awhile, and then, they'd build some more. Yes, they were into radio first, and then, television. ...

SI: You worked for Stromberg before the war. What would you do for Stromberg? Did you work on a line? What would you do there?

EW: I worked on the line.

SI: Can you give me a sense of what you would do on an average day there? What was your work like?

EW: Well, ... first, we did two different things, basically. One was to assemble the radio sets, and they had all these new model ... phonograph players, and they had lots of them. Then, the next thing they did was to build the television sets. So, that was the way it went.

BW: Shaun asked about your employment when you worked at Bausch and Lomb. You did lens grinding.

EW: That's right. That was the best job I ever had.

SI: What would you do there? What was your job like?

EW: It was grinding lenses. ... It depends upon what kind of lenses that you ground, for one thing. One, if you ground the real fine, real complicated lenses ...

BW: Optical.

EW: ... Yes, that made a little bit of a difference in your pay, but the other one was, that I did, ... I did what they called rough grind, and that's what got them down to the point where [all] they needed to do was put in a final buildup, yes. ...

BW: It's a pre-finishing kind of thing.

EW: Yes, yes.

BW: There was a rough grind and a fine grind.

EW: ... I'll never forget that guy that was the foreman there. ... Say you were making, I don't know, say anything, say fifty dollars a week, ... if you were a little short that week and didn't make as much money as you hoped to, he would give you some lenses that he ground. He would give them to you.

SI: Were you paid by the hour or paid by the piece?

EW: ... They had what they called a penalty system. The more that you did and the faster you did them, the more money you got.

SI: Okay.

BW: ... You weren't paid by the hour, you were paid by how many finished lenses you produced.

EW: Yes, by unit.

JW: And where did the lenses go?

EW: They were used by the Navy, for one thing. They used a lot of them for those big, expensive [binoculars]. ...

JW: And, eventually, they went into eyepieces for bombers and things like that.

SI: Was there a lot of training involved in learning how to grind lenses?

EW: I'd say a week would be enough to do it, if you had the feel for it.

BW: You were taught on the job, right.

EW: Taught on the job, yes, and the day that I left to go in the Air Force, ... the foreman of Bausch and Lomb didn't know that I was going and he said, "You didn't have to go in the service." He says, "You could have stayed in here and ground lenses." [laughter] I wanted to go.

SI: Were many people leaving Bausch and Lomb at that time?

EW: Not too many, no, not too many. I didn't stay, because I didn't care for that kind of work.

SI: Okay. You were really eager to get into the service.

JW: Absolutely.

EW: I wanted to get in the Air Force.

JW: Yes, he did.

SI: Before we talk about World War II and your time in the service, since you graduated in 1940, a year before the war started, what did you think you were going to do at that point in your life? Did you have any aspirations of going to college? Were you just happy to get a job? What does someone graduating into the Depression think at that time?

EW: The Air Force was number one, always, and, I mean, that's what I wanted.

SI: When you graduated from high school ...

BW: What did you think you'd be doing as a career? ... You were eighteen years old. What did you want to do with the rest of your life?

EW: I hadn't the faintest idea. [laughter]

BW: Just make money to survive ...

EW: Right.

BW: ... And go fishing.

EW: ... Well, I would have tried, yes. I wanted to make money, but I really wanted the Air Force, real bad.

SI: Even in 1940, did you think about joining the Air Force? First, tell us about the day that Pearl Harbor was attacked and what you remember about that day. When Pearl Harbor was attacked, where were you and what were you doing?

EW: ... I was at home in Rochester, on a Sunday. It was on a ...

JW: I think it was a Sunday, wasn't it?

EW: ... Yes, I think I heard it on the radio. I was there and I heard it.

JW: People thought it was a joke.

BW: What were you doing when you heard it?

EW: I was looking at a magazine, I guess.

JW: People didn't believe it, a lot of people. They thought it was just a play coming on; hello!

SI: Did you believe it when it came over the radio?

EW: ... Oh, yes, I did believe it, and I hated the buggers, yes. ...

SI: Was there any initial panic or fear or anger?

EW: Yes, I was angry, yes.

BW: What about in the community?

EW: Tell you the truth, I didn't wander around in the neighborhood and hear anything. Later on, I heard it, but not right that day. I heard it a few days later. It was very pronounced.

SI: What about your parents? How did they react?

EW: Oh, ... of course, my mother was scared to death, because I was going to get in the service. I never even thought about it.

BW: What about Grandpa? Was he upset because of Pearl Harbor, Grandpa?

EW: ... Oh, no, no getting over it. [laughter] Yes, he was.

SI: In-between when the war started and when you went in the service, you mentioned that you really wanted to get in. Was there any kind of prejudice against people who were not in the service or about to go in the service?

JW: Like 4-F-ers?

SI: Nobody ever said to you, in that brief time, "Why aren't you in uniform?"

EW: No. There were guys that would do anything to stay out of the service.

SI: Were they looked down on? Did people look down on them? For example, people at the factory who wanted to stay there to get a deferment, were they looked down on?

EW: I wouldn't [know]. Sure, I know that there were some that would ask for a deferment, yes, and especially because of the big money, yes, and the money would be going up all the time. ...

JW: But, there was a lot of prejudice among the kids that enlisted and the ones that didn't. I mean, there was a lot of talk about that. They called them 4-F-ers, and, you know ...

SI: Slackers.

JW: Yes, slackers. ... Yes, he did what he wanted to do, they did what they want[ed] to do.

SI: Before you left Bausch and Lomb, had a lot of women come in to the factory to work? Was it mostly men who worked in the factory or was it a mixture of men and women?

EW: No, women were already there, a lot of them. They had women and they were grinding lenses and they were doing real good work, yes. ...

SI: Would men and women basically be doing the same type of work there, working on the same kinds of machines?

EW: No, no.

SI: Okay. Were there certain things that men would do and certain things that women would do? What would be an example of something a woman would do that a man would not do?

EW: Well, the lens grinding was the difficult part of it. They put some kind of glue on the thing that holds the lenses, and then, they would stay together, yes. ... The women used to do the glue work, yes.

BW: That was like gluing pieces of lens together to make a complex lens.

EW: Yes.

SI: I guess finer work would be for women and the harder jobs would be for men. Is that roughly accurate?

BW: The men's work was more physical?

SI: Yes, more physical.

BW: Required more muscle than the women?

EW: Yes, I think it'd be a little more physical.

JW: Now, this is before the war you're talking [about].

SI: Yes. I am just trying to get a sense of what was the norm before the war, and then, if it changed at all.

JW: ... Yes.

EW: ... There was a Navy guy right there, at the lens department, all the time I was there. He was, I don't know, a lieutenant, I guess. I don't know. He wasn't any higher than that. He was a lieutenant.

SI: He was the military liaison.

EW: No, no. ...

SI: After Pearl Harbor, did they bring in guards and have guards or anti-aircraft around the factories?

EW: [No].

SI: You went into the Air Force pretty early. Can you tell us a little bit about the process of getting into the military, how you enlisted, where you went, what you had to do?

EW: Well, sure, [I] went down to the Armory. [Editor's Note: The Main Street Armory served as a major induction center in Rochester during World War II.] Anyway, I went to the Armory and they checked you over with a physical, until you were in or out. Now, as soon as they checked me over physically, I was in good shape, so, all they had to do was give me the shots, and they gave you the shots right then, too. They didn't fool around. ... The one thing I remember, and I'll never forget that, either, when you walked in the door to the doctors, they had about three or four doctors that would all give you the shot at the same time. They had all these pictures of naked women on the doors. So, when you walked in, that's the first thing you saw, was the naked woman, and it was like a shock. The next shock was when the needle hit you. [laughter] You got about four of them at once.

JW: Welcome to the crowd. [laughter]

EW: I remember that very well. ...

SI: Did you go in knowing that you would be in the Army Air Forces or were you just going into the Army hoping that you would get into the Army Air Forces?

EW: No, when I passed the physical, I was enlisted in the Air Force, yes, and they didn't do anything else except that. ... They sent us to New York, it was [the] New York area, down on Long Island, and put us in an outfit down there for awhile. Now, there's some funny things [that] happened then, too, like, all the guys that went down there that were Air Force, all right, we were all put on guard duty at the 98th Fighter Squadron, which was a P-47 outfit, I think it was, at that time. ... What they did is, they put us, [those] that were only there [temporarily], (they didn't want us to just sit around doing nothing), so, they put us on guard duty, with loaded guns, live ammunition, the whole damned works. Some of the guys had never shot a gun before in their life and they had all of this stuff.

SI: You had only been in the military for a couple days at that point.

EW: A couple days, [laughter] and we stayed there for [a short time]. I got into some funny deals down there, too, that ... they didn't much like. I'm on guard duty one night. It's about one o'clock in the morning, walking up and down [as part of] the guard duty, and this guy comes sneaking in through the brush in the back of the place. ... I told him to ... halt, and so, then, I have to get the Captain of the Guard. ... Yes, the Captain of the Guard had to come out and we had to give him the going out "present" [laughter] and he [the trespasser] caught hell, of course, for trying to sneak in there on guard duty, but there it is. This guy is startled by a bunch of guys there that hadn't been ... ever on guard duty before, with loaded guns, and here this guy was trying to sneak in through the [perimeter]. ... [laughter]

SI: That could have been dangerous.

EW: If somebody would have shot straight up in the air, they'd have probably scared the hell out of him. [laughter] Then, anyway, they let him in and, finally, everything got straightened out. ... About a week later, I guess it was, we got our orders to proceed to the South and we were going down to--what's the name of the place where all the Air Force ... [inductees have] always been before?

SI: Is it in Texas?

EW: Yes, yes, it's in Texas.

SI: Is it Ellington or Kelly Field?

EW: Kelly Field, yes. [Editor's Note: Kelly Field was the home of the US Army Air Forces' Advanced Flying School prior to and during World War II.] So, we had to go to Kelly Field. So, we went to Kelly Field and got over in there, and then, they put us into barracks and they

became a little bit more military. It was very straightforward then, from then on, and you got all the tests that you were going to take and you got every kind of test there ever was. ... [laughter]

BW: That was the paper and pencil tests you had to take as well.

EW: Oh, yes, [for example], just a table, like holding your hands steady like this, and they had some other kind of gizmo that goes around and you've got to put the tip of the thing on that and follow that tip around, all the way around this thing, without getting off of it. [laughter]

SI: A lot of motor skill-type tests.

BW: Yes, fine motor skill.

EW: Yes, there was a whole bunch of those kind of steps.

SI: You had to move sticks.

EW: Yes, yes, and all the different ones that they had, ... one after another, and they put you through it, and then, I'm trying to think [of] what else happened. [I] don't remember too much else after that, but there was some ... parade marching, trying to get you ... so [that] everybody put their foot down at the same time and all that stuff, but they did that over and over again until [we got it], yes. ... The testing, as I remember, the testing was about two or three days, all the stuff that they did. Then, they put you, well, in the hall, and you had to find your score and all that stuff. ... Of course, that wasn't easy. Anyway, we found out that all of us had made it, except one or two, and so, we did pretty good.

BW: The written testing was the origin of IQ testing. ...

EW: Then, we got on a train and we started for Kelly Field. That's the first time I'd ever seen a train go down a main track in the middle of a city. Did you ever see one of those?

SI: I have heard about them; I have not seen them.

EW: Yes. Well, it did. Here, they were there, they stopped for maybe five minutes. ... If you were real fast, you could run down into one of the stores and buy something and run back out and get back on the train.

SI: You were going out to Kelly Field. This was the train to Kelly Field.

EW: Yes, yes.

SI: Okay. Where were you classified? Where was that? Was that also in Texas?

EW: ... While we were on the train, there were no tests of any kind, yes, nothing, and we went down to Kelly Field. Then, the tests really started. The first one was just practice. [laughter] So, they gave them to you, and really tough, tough to score.

SI: There was no place in-between Long Island and Kelly Field.

EW: No, it was Kelly Field. It was Kelly Field, down by San Antonio, yes.

SI: They gave you some of this testing in Long Island.

EW: ... Let me see, the testing on Long Island ...

EW: You know, come to think of it, the testing we had was very mild in Long Island. Yes, it wasn't really much, wasn't much, but the one down at Kelly Field, that was a good one, yes.

SI: That was where you did all the physical tests that you just described, putting the dot on the spinning circle.

EW: Yes, that was there, but some of that was up in Long Island, too, yes. It was like that was the practice, and then, we were going down and [to] really do it. [laughter]

SI: That was practice and, now, you were doing it.

EW: Yes, yes. Well, anyway, we went through that and that was one of the things, that, plus, the written exam. ... When I say written exam, I don't know how many there was of them. There was a bunch of them, and there was a bunch of these other exams. They put Joe through the test and Joe didn't have the right thing for that, now, maybe they're going to make him a bombardier or a navigator. You didn't know what Joe's going to be.

BW: Those were aptitude tests, right?

EW: ... Yes, and so, that's what happened; you were either were a pilot, a navigator or a bombardier when you came out of there, and there was no getting around it, either. If they wanted you for a bombardier, you didn't come in as a pilot, you went in as a navigator or a bombardier, and it was the same for everybody. Yes, so, you realize that a B-17 has a pilot, a navigator and a bombardier. So, every ... airplane that they put out, they've got to have three guys. So, that's how they get the three.

SI: Prior to this, had you ever really been outside of the Rochester area? Had you ever traveled outside of Rochester?

EW: Oh, yes.

BW: ... When you were a kid, did you go on a trip to Canada or anyplace else?

EW: Yes, I did.

SI: This was not that new of an experience, traveling long distance, meeting new people.

EW: Oh, no, it wasn't quite the same.

JW: Well, you've got to remember, if you went from Rochester to Buffalo at that time, that's like going from Rochester to Hawaii.

BW: In those days. There wasn't a New York State Thruway. [laughter] ...

EW: No. We went to Alaska recently. So, that's even further. [laughter] That was a long trip.

BW: That was three years ago.

SI: Does anything stand out about that experience, about going all over the country and meeting people from different parts of the country? Did you get along with people from the South?

EW: We had no trouble. Of course, we weren't [off base]. Actually, it's a little different being down there at Kelly Field and going through that business than it is to be ... at San Antonio and running around in the San Antonio [area], because, there, it's definitely different.

SI: The military was very sheltered in its own way.

EW: Yes.

SI: How did you adjust to going from civilian life to military life, where you had discipline and you could not decide your own fate?

EW: Well, to tell you the truth, you're all kind of put in a glass box, because you don't want to fail anything, because you know if you do, that's it, you're done. So, you are as good a boy as you can be. Yes, you don't do anything. You don't make any mistakes, you don't come in late, you don't do this and you don't do that.

JW: Just like now. [laughter]

EW: Hardly.

JW: Right. [laughter]

SI: After all this testing at Kelly Field, did you then know that you had qualified to become a pilot or to go for pilot training?

EW: Oh, yes. ...

BW: Did you know that you had been designated a pilot?

EW: Yes, yes. They tell you right away and they mark it down on the paper.

SI: Were you pleased with that?

EW: Very pleased. [laughter]

SI: Where did you go next, after that was complete?

EW: Oh, well, Kelly Field, of course, is preflight school and that's on the ground and it's all ground training. They gave you all kinds of stuff. For instance, one that I can always remember, that it was like a navigator's [exercise], in the Navy. You take off on a flight to go someplace to intersect with the enemy, pretending they're invading. So, here, you're flying over the ocean and you've got your course set up, but your course doesn't stay the same, because, now, the invader changes course. He goes over this way. So, you have to know how to adjust. You have to know how to make the change and get over there where he is.

BW: How to navigate, what kind of time it would take.

EW: Yes, the whole shebang. They want you to meet the other guy, they don't want you to, you know, think too much about it.

BW: It's problem solving.

EW: Yes, and that, see, might even happen two or three times.

SI: At this point, were they taking you up in flights to do this or was it all classroom work?

EW: ... You don't actually get to fly the airplane until you get to primary school. Now, primary school had the lightest, smallest airplane that the Air Force has, and they were PT-13, let's see, PT-19. ... They had about a two-hundred-horsepower engine ... that they flew in [primary] and you stayed there for around sixty to eighty hours flight time. [Editor's Note: The US Army Air Forces used the Stearman PT-13 biplane extensively as a primary trainer during World War II. Although the engines used in the PT-13 varied, they commonly produced about 220 horsepower. The Fairchild PT-19 monoplane, generally outfitted with a two-hundred-horsepower engine, was frequently utilized for training pilots prior to moving on to the PT-13.] After eighty hours, if you didn't make it, you were out. So, you would fly with the instructor, who was a civilian instructor, with three, I think three, Air Force guys on the base. So, you'd have three Air Force guys and all the rest of them are civilian instructors. ... They would check-ride you. ...

SI: The military guys.

EW: Sometimes, you know, they'd say, "Come on, get in the plane. You're going for a ride," and you'd get in the plane, go for a ride, and you might be picking up your parachute and going back to the flight place and saying, "I'm all done," and then, ... again, you might say, "Good job." They don't say, "Good [job]." [laughter]

BW: There were a lot of chances to washout.

EW: Yes, they don't say too much like that, but, when you washed out, you're washed out. There's no doubt about that. You're done.

SI: That was primary training.

EW: Primary training.

SI: Was that at a military base or at a private school?

EW: It was at a military base, but a private school.

SI: Okay. They had some military officers there, but, mostly, it was civilian trainers.

EW: Yes, yes. Well, all the ground school courses are all taught by Air Force officers, and the mechanics and the pilots are all civilians. ...

SI: Was primary the next step after preflight?

EW: Basic flying, flight training. Basic flight training is; ... all right, first, let's start out with the primary trainer. That's just the guy with a two-hundred-horsepower engine. He's the guy that gives you [the basic instruction]. You never had any forced landing before, you never had any of that stuff; you get all that. In basic, you get a lot of tests, too, like, "We want you to land today and, when you come in, we want you to land on that line," and they don't want you to land on any other line, they want you on this line, yes. So, that's what they tell you, until you get through the thing. If you get through it, okay, you go on to the next basic flying school, which is a bigger airplane now. Now, we've got a bigger airplane that's, let me see, ... around a five-hundred-horsepower engine, which is a pretty good-sized engine, and that's a BT-13 or 15. [Editor's Note: The Vultee BT-13/BT-15 Valiant monoplane was utilized as an advanced trainer by the US Army Air Forces during World War II. The BT-13s utilized Pratt and Whitney engines and the BT-15s utilized Wright engines; both produced about 450 horsepower.] It's the same airplane, almost, and you do a lot more than you do in the primary trainer, and you still have your ground school courses. They're still going along and, now, the basic flight trainer, he's an Army personnel. He's Army second lieutenant or whatever he is. If he wants to say, "This guy can't fly worth a damn, wash him out," that's all he has to do. Then, it goes to the flight leader for what they called "the stage." The stage was that group of people that were all in that area of flight training. So, ... then, a military pilot would take him for a ride and, if he didn't pass now, he's finished, done.

BW: Didn't you have a bad experience with somebody in a trainer?

EW: Yes, I did. I got put in for a washout by an instructor. Later, I found out [why]. I went there one day and there's a captain, I think it was, in the Army, regular Army. He asked me to get in the plane and take him for a ride, and I did. ... We went around the field a couple, three times, did a couple spins, did a couple loops and all that stuff. He says, "There's nothing wrong with your flying," he says, "whatsoever." He says, "Your flying is fine." He says, "That guy [the

instructor] doesn't like you very much, does he?" he says, "nor the other five guys that are learning to fly with you." ...

BW: So, he was discriminating [against] the whole group.

EW: He was from the South and he wanted to get everybody out that wasn't from the South, wash them all out, yes.

BW: So, they got rid of him, didn't they?

EW: Boy, did they. I never saw him again. [laughter] He was gone fast. I never had any trouble before or after him; he was the guy who was the trouble.

SI: When you were learning to fly, was there anything that you found particularly challenging or that you had to work hard to get down, like acrobatics, landings or cross-country flying?

EW: I don't think so.

SI: Everything came pretty easy.

EW: ... Yes, I think it was fairly easy, ... but, then, you still got advanced flight training. So, you go from that airplane, the BT-13 or 15, you go to the AT-6, which is a lot of airplane. That's got a retractable wheel [landing gear], it's got a six-hundred-horsepower engine and everything goes up. [Editor's Note: The North American AT-6 Texan advanced trainer utilized six-hundred-horsepower Pratt and Whitney engines.]

BW: Wasn't the landing the most difficult part of flight training?

EW: When he does some of the acrobatics, it might be a little ...

BW: It was more difficult.

EW: Yes, might be more difficult.

SI: Were the first few planes you were flying open cockpit biplanes?

EW: Well, they were all open cockpit, then, the BT was a closed cockpit, and then, the AT-6 was another closed type. Now, you fly the AT-6 and they watch you real close on that airplane, because that's the closest thing you got to a combat-type aircraft, because it's made especially to have some eccentricities about it. You don't know what they are until you get in and start flying. It may fly as easy as anything ... and it isn't hard. ... So, some guy might tell you that and you take it home with you and worry about it.

BW: Did it come pretty natural to you?

EW: Yes, I didn't have any trouble. Now, [in] that [course of] study, you go through the basic, you go through the advanced flight training. [In] the advanced flight training, you got [an advanced trainer]. It's got the fold-up wheels on them, it's got flaps on it, so that you make sure you slow down enough when you're landing, and it's got everything on it. It's got night flying on it, too. It's got lights on it and, some nights, they send you over to, like; I forgot where they sent us. When we were flying from Aloe Field, [near Victoria, Texas], that was the advanced flying field and they gave us a flight to a real, true airport, where big transports and everything come into. You had to go in there and land and take off and fly back. So, they made sure that you were all the way there, but they did one more thing for me that they didn't do for very, very many, ... just a very, very few. They gave me a P-40 to fly. [Editor's Note: The Curtiss P-40 Warhawk, powered by 1,150-horsepower engines, was one of the most important fighters during World War II, especially during the first two years of the war.]

SI: Wow.

BW: The real thing.

SI: When was that?

EW: In advanced flying school. They gave me a P-40 to fly and, now, let me tell you, that's an airplane, [laughter] compared to the AT-6. [laughter] So, ... I got ten hours in a P-40, and my first landing, I guess, was a "Jack and the Beanstalk." [laughter] I did some pretty good jumping.

BW: He kind of hopped a little bit, [like] skipping a stone.

EW: Yes, yes. Then, I finally got back to the AT-6 and finished up with that training. ... The day that you finished that training, you went and you got your wings pinned on. Now, the other thing you had to do, too, that was different than the guys that flew before me, you had to get an ...

SI: Aerial gunner certification?

EW: You have to shoot all the guns at targets and you have to hit the targets or you don't pass.

JW: Going duck hunting came in handy.

EW: And you get that. ...

SI: Do you mean with your plane or out on a range?

BW: Pistol training or aerial?

EW: On the range, and that's both flying targets, where they tow a target and you shoot at it ...

SI: Sleeves?

EW: ... Yes, and then, the other one is the on-the-ground target, where they have a big target on the ground and you dive down and shoot at that.

BW: You got special certification in pistols as well as aerial.

EW: Yes, yes. If you screw up on a dive down, you go right into the target, yes. You don't pull out.

SI: Target hypnosis.

BW: ... Did they call that target hypnosis, when you lose track of where you are?

EW: Yes. Then, the other one, as I told you, is the flying target, and that target flies along behind another airplane and you have to come in from the side and shoot at it. ... You only have so many shots to get off at that if you want to get that nice, little certificate. ... Now that you got down to [gunnery training], then, you graduated from flight training and you went to Matagorda Island, and that's where you ... start shooting at the real tow targets. That's down in Texas, yes.

BW: Oh, in Texas; Victoria?

EW: And not only that, but they treated you as nice as they can, too, like you go out there in the daytime and you did your flight training and you've got to go out, say, another hour of that night. So, you come back in. If you got under the airplane, the wing, and "Old Hard Gut" got out there, he'd make you stand out in the sun all the rest of the day.

SI: Really?

JW: They had some very ...

EW: Oh, he was a son of a bitch.

JW: ... Physical training. [laughter]

EW: Yes, anything they could [do to] make it tough for you, they made it tough for you.

JW: Oh, yes, and they could do it. Their bodies could not take it. A lot of them washed out with that, just that.

SI: How many guys washed out at each stage of training? Were you able to get a sense of how many guys did not make it?

EW: Only, usually, if they're the guys with you. That's what I'm saying.

SI: You would only notice if one of the five guys with you washed out.

EW: That's right, yes, but, ... if he's [the instructor is] flying with you, you know, anything you do, then, you're game [to be washed out].

SI: Were there any accidents in training?

EW: Oh, yes. One day, I'm there waiting for the number one takeoff position at night and this guy comes out to take off and he swings around and lines up with the runway and takes off and he's gone for about an hour. Then, he comes back, asks for permission to land, and they gave him permission to land, and he landed right on the bottom of the airplane, with no wheels.
[laughter]

BW: Didn't you have a little adventure yourself?

EW: I never had an adventure like that.

BW: No, but didn't you have a little water adventure?

EW: Yes, but that was someone else's fault; I did not do it. He did it to me.

BW: Didn't you take a splash in the ocean?

EW: Yes, I did. I landed a P-40 in the Gulf of Mexico.

BW: And that was good for one concussion.

EW: And it went down to the bottom, yes.

BW: Nasty concussion.

EW: He came in on [top of me]. We were coming in like this, it was my turn to come in, and he comes right down on top of me.

SI: You were coming in for a landing and he was coming in perpendicular and landed on top of you.

EW: Yes. I tried to get underneath him; didn't make it.

SI: Did that delay your training at all? Did you have to go to the hospital? Did being injured like that delay your training?

EW: [I] wasn't injured, but it scared ... the hell out of me. ... That happened a lot, though. For instance, [say] you're a brand-new pilot, you just got sent down to Sarasota, Florida, and they're going to let you fly a P-40, big airplane. ... [The pilot] gets the permission. He goes up and he circles around the field a couple times, comes back over the field, and the instructors used to tell the guy, "When you come in to land here, we want you to pull streamers. If you don't pull streamers, you go around and try to land again."

BW: What does that mean? What are streamers?

EW: A streamer is when you ... stall a wingtip out enough so that you're pulling white smoke out from underneath the wing tips. So, he finally comes in and he flies over the landing strip of the [airport]; that was Sarasota Airport. He pulls it up like this. He's going to come in, going like hell, and he's going to pull the wingtips up and pull smoke and he's going to haul her right in. ... He hauled her right in and went around once, went around twice, and the next time, he hit; it blew up. That was the end of his smoke.

BW: I would think so.

EW: So, you never knew; when you fly airplanes, you never knew when something's going to happen. ... The better you are at flying, the better your chances of coming out of it when something happens. I landed a P-51 on a British airbase without an engine. [Editor's Note: The North American P-51 Mustang was a collaborative project between the United States and Great Britain to improve upon the P-40. Its engines could produce between 1,490 and 1,720 horsepower.] The engine quit. I was lucky to make the airport and landed, and made a real good landing, good landing, and I heard that [from] the British guy. ... He was a full colonel and he was running a bombing field, that's where [I went], it was for Halifaxes [RAF Handley Page Halifax bombers], and he told me, "You did a hell of a good landing." I felt pretty good about that.

SI: Yes.

EW: Yes, and I didn't get hurt.

BW: Well, you said the British officers weren't too kind to the Americans. They were rough on Americans.

EW: They weren't too kind with the Canadians.

BW: Them, too.

EW: Oh, they were tough with the Canadians, real tough.

SI: When you were in training, were there any kind of mechanical failures that you had to deal with?

EW: You always had mechanical failures with airplanes.

BW: But, what about you, personally?

SI: Yes, say, the landing gear would not come down.

EW: No, no. It doesn't have to be because of a pilot; it can be because of the airplane.

BW: Did you have a lot of equipment failures?

EW: Yes, but you could have a dumb stunt by the pilot, too. ... Well, let's see what he could do; he could land at the wrong place on the airport, which wouldn't be very good. He could forget one of the things you should do, something on the airplane.

BW: Daddy, didn't they give you specific problems, like a dead-stick or instrument controls?

EW: You've got to be flying the airplane. [Editor's Note: A dead-stick landing refers to a landing performed without engine power. The term refers to the immobile propellers or "sticks."]

BW: Right, but you had a lot of opportunities where equipment failed, that you had to learn how to deal with it.

EW: Oh, yes. ... The other thing, of course, is instrument flying, when you have to get in the Link trainer and fly it, and the Link trainer is not usually hard to fly, but, on the other hand, it may become hard to fly. You can't crash in it, of course. [Editor's Note: The Link trainer was one of the original flight simulators and is named after its inventor Edwin A. Link, Jr.]

BW: But, ... that was important because of the same kind of thing that happened to ...

EW: Sure, everything you do is ...

BW: ... JFK, Jr., who couldn't fly instruments. [Editor's Note: John F. Kennedy, Jr., his wife and sister-in-law were killed when a small aircraft Kennedy was piloting crashed into the Atlantic Ocean on July 16, 1999.]

EW: ... like Link training. You come in on instruments and that's all you've got to go from with Link training. You follow the Link trainer, and then, do it the way it's supposed to be done.

SI: Did they ever do that with an actual plane, put a hood over the windows and have you just fly on instruments in the plane?

EW: Oh, yes, we had a lot of instrument flight time. Yes, they put a canvas head over you, just like this, and they have a guy in the front seat that flies the airplane when you're not flying it. Yes, usually, when you're not flying it, he's flying the airplane, ... but, when you're flying it, you're flying it, and it's up to you to fly it. ... He'll stay on that stick as long as he can, until you do something real wrong, and then, he's going to take over.

SI: Did you find that easy to do, when you first flew on instruments?

EW: Oh, definitely. Yes, it helps like the dickens. It helps you fly on instruments. If you don't have some help, well, you're in bad trouble. [laughter]

BW: Was it particularly difficult to just go by instruments?

EW: Well, that's all you've got to go by, because the ... Link trainer is on the ground, never goes in the air. It always is on the ground, and the guy in it sits back, like the instrument pilot. He sits back, you don't see him, and you don't see very much outside that Link trainer. Everything is black, except for the lights, ... whatever they had, the lights on it, and he'll tell you, "Okay, now, we're going to fly over to Jamaica and we're going to land there. Now, your course to Jamaica is such-and-such and such-and-such," and he said, "The weather looks pretty good." So, you're sitting there, looking at the Link trainer, you're watching the needles and balls and all the other junk go. ... He gets you about over to Jamaica now, and then, he says, "We've got bad luck over in Jamaica," but he says, "we've got a terrible storm over there." He says, "I don't know if we're going to make it in or not." So, he'll give you the bullshit for awhile, [laughter] and then, he'll turn you back and get you back to your own base. ... They do that. I don't know, you've probably never heard of an "A-N," have you, an "A-N?"

SI: No.

EW: Well, when I was a kid, about, let's see, I would say probably fifteen years old, they used to have, on what they called airwaves, they had an outfit that went up like a tower, went up to the top, and, from the top of that tower, you don't see anything, you're still blind, and you hear, "Di-dat, di-dat, di-dat," and you know you're on the "A." You know you're on the "A" and the "A" is a good one to go to [in order] to get back to your own field, but, if you hear, "Da-dit, da-dit," you know something's wrong here, boy. We've got to get this fixed up, yes. [laughter]

SI: Is it like radio navigation?

EW: It's navigation. ...

SI: These are radio beacons. One is sending a signal saying you are on the right track and one is basically saying you are off track.

EW: Right, right, and that thing goes all the way around [in a circle] and all the way around from "A" to "Z." ... If you want to stay on the track you want to stay on, you want to make sure you pick out the right lever that's going [to your destination], because you don't know, when you're over this point or some other point, that maybe it's a "Z" one. You want to go over here; you don't want any "As" over here. [laughter] It's not going to do you any good. [Editor's Note: In the 1930s and 1940s, aviators navigated via instruments using a low-frequency radio range system, also known as the A-N radio range. They would pick up either the Morse code signal for "A" or "N" and turn accordingly until a steady tone indicated that they were lined up with their destination.]

BW: That was 360-degree navigation, correct?

EW: That's, yes, 360 degrees.

SI: I have heard about that from pilots, where the beacons would tell them where to go, referring to the direction.

EW: Oh, there used to be one every ten miles down [near] the airport.

BW: Oh, the beacons.

EW: Now, the airport might be the one from here to New York City or might be the one to Philadelphia. ... Once you know which one is right, ... supposedly, you're going to make out all right. [laughter]

SI: Would you pick these up on your ham radio?

EW: Oh, no, no. Now, I don't know if they have these anymore, but they used to have them all the time, every ten miles of an airway, ten miles, just ten miles, ten miles, ten miles, straight down the airway. But, now that they have these new beacons, directional finders ...

SI: Like GPS?

EW: Yes, that's right. You won't have any problem with that one. Then, some airplanes, too, you fly the airplane, ... but you have a directional finder in the airplane and you tuned the direction finder so that you find Albuquerque, maybe, you want to go to [there]. So, you tune to that and you get that nice, steady drone from Albuquerque and just fly right in on that beacon.

BW: So, what you're saying is that your training, when you were learning to be a ham operator, that you used those skills when you got into the plane for doing instrument flying.

EW: Well, you didn't have shortwave radios; the instrument training was with the towers and the navigation code. I don't know if they [have] any anymore, ... but that's what it was then.

BW: When you were a kid and you were learning the Morse code and all that kind of stuff, that that came [in] very handy once you were flying.

EW: Oh, sure, sure it would. Everybody that went through the Air Force training had to learn the Morse code, everybody, and it was pretty tough for some of those guys because it's pretty fast. [laughter] Yes, it was pretty fast.

SI: Were you still in Texas when you got your wings or were you in Sarasota?

EW: I got my wings in Aloe Airfield.

JW: Texas.

EW: ... Yes, that's in Texas.

SI: After that was when you went for the gunnery training, or were you assigned to a unit?

EW: No. As soon as you get through there, then, you get another missive that says, you know, "Go to Sarasota Army Airfield," and that's where you go to learn how to fly a P-40, yes, and you stay there. By the time you get through with that, you're supposed to be a hot pilot, [laughter] but they all crash, all of them.

SI: When you got your wings, were you also made a lieutenant?

EW: ... A second lieutenant.

SI: How did your life change when you became an officer? You mentioned that they were very hard on you in training.

EW: There's very little [heat put] on an officer; a flying officer has very little heat put on him. ... Usually, the guys that are your training officers are real nice guys. No, everyone wants you to get through. They want you to finish.

SI: Okay. No more standing in the sun and all that.

EW: They're not waiting for you to go like that crash. They're waiting for you to ...

BW: You got kind of special treatment once you became an officer, correct? As a group of officers, you were treated differently than before you were an officer. People in general had more respect for you once you became an officer, correct?

EW: Yes, yes.

SI: Did you have better quarters and better facilities?

EW: Oh, yes, yes, and you got a lot more freedom, if you've got to go someplace or do something.

BW: [If] you've got to go fishing or something. [laughter]

EW: Yes, but you can't just walk out the door and take off. That doesn't work so good. ...

SI: Did you get to go on leave much when you were in training? Did you get to go on leave when you were in Texas and Florida?

EW: ... You don't go on leave when you're in a training program. When you graduated from the training program, you get ten days.

SI: Okay. Even just getting off for the weekend or for a Saturday night, would they let you do that?

EW: Oh, yes, for just a weekend, yes, a day or two.

SI: What did you think of these different areas you were in? How did the people treat you in these areas?

EW: Oh, fine, yes. Everybody was [amenable]. They thought that you were, you know, in a special category, that you deserved to be treated like that.

BW: But, the people in the towns that the bases were in, they had regard for the people that were being trained. People were nice to you.

EW: Yes, yes, they were.

SI: Were you ever invited to people's homes or invited to dinner at people's homes?

EW: Once, ... when I was in preflight school, [by a civilian]. I was invited to ... homes of officers, colonels and, yes, like that. If you knew them and they were a friend of yours. A lieutenant colonel, who was a flight surgeon for the Ninth Air Force, said, "El, I'd like to have you come down to the base with us and look a situation over and see what you think of it." ...

BW: What kind of situation?

EW: Well, it was a crash situation. ... [When] guys got in trouble, they crashed their airplanes into the water, you know.

BW: And you had to go and kind of try to figure out why.

EW: You may be able to figure it out and you may not.

SI: You were investigating crashes.

EW: Yes, yes.

SI: Was this before you went overseas or when you came back as the operations officer?

EW: After the war was over.

SI: In Sarasota, you learned how to fly the P-40. What happened after that? Were you sent for more training?

EW: No. Then, I went to a P-51 Mustang and, at that stage of the game, we were flying P-40s and ... P-51s off and on. Wherever, if they had a lot of P-51s, you'd fly a P-51; if they didn't have too many of them, you might get a P-40. You had to be able to fly them both.

SI: P-40s or P-47s?

EW: '40s. That's a Warhawk, a nice airplane, a lot of fun to fly. That's the one that the Flying Tigers used over in Burma. But, the other thing, too, that a lot of people don't know, that the P-40 was the most used warplane, fighter plane, that there was in the Air Force. ... '51 was a better airplane, but, when you think ... about the time that the P-40 served, [it was] a long time.

BW: That was the longest lifespan of a plane, you said, was a P-40.

EW: Yes.

SI: Where did you train in the Mustang?

EW: Meridian, Mississippi.

SI: What was that like, learning to fly the P-51? What did you think of the plane?

EW: Oh, the airplane was more sensitive, a lot more sensitive airplane, and it's a lot faster and a nice airplane to fly, generally, easy to handle.

BW: What was the top speed of your Mustang?

EW: Well, the '51 used to go, probably would just nick, five hundred. [Editor's Note: The maximum speed at altitude for the P-51 was 487 miles-per-hour.] ... I'm trying to think of the guy that did all the famous things.

JW: Oh, yes.

EW: ... Every once in awhile, you see him on the television.

SI: Chuck Yeager?

EW: Chuck Yeager. Chuck Yeager, when he was in Europe, flying during the war, he got, I think, two or three of the German; what the hell do they call those planes?

SI: Jets.

EW: Jets; he got two or three of those German jets. [Editor's Note: US Air Force General Chuck Yeager, famous for breaking the sound barrier in 1947, shot down thirteen enemy aircraft during World War II, including at least one Messerschmitt Me-262 jet.] He used to peel it over at forty thousand or fifty thousand feet and go straight down and build all the speed up he could build, and, by that time, the jets are down near the ground, because they're going in to land. They don't have that speed anymore, and he'd come down with this four to five hundred-mile speed and go, "Wham," good-bye. [laughter]

SI: When you were in Meridian, at that point, were they teaching you fighter tactics, such as how to deal with different kinds of enemy fighters?

EW: Never, never showed us any fighter tactics. ... At Sarasota, I had fighter tactics.

BW: You were learning the reconnaissance stuff in Meridian, the tac recon, right?

EW: That's where it was, tac recon. The tac recon was something that was learned and taught by the British. ... We had British officers at Meridian teaching us how to do tac recon work, and that's how that went. ... They were using Mustangs as much as they could.

BW: Because they were actually the planes they would be flying.

EW: They didn't have very many ... Mustangs then, because their Mustangs were all low-altitude airplanes. They didn't have a supercharger, and the supercharger made all the difference in the P-51. They took the supercharger out. [Editor's Note: The Packard V-1650-3 engine combined the Rolls Royce Merlin engine and Wright supercharger to allow the P-51 to perform well at high altitudes.]

BW: But, the whole idea, though, was to get close enough to get in and do the reconnaissance part of the job.

EW: Oh, sure it was.

SI: Can you relate some of the principles they were trying to teach you about tactical recon, the things that they taught you that you would have to do?

EW: Do you know what tac recon does?

SI: Yes, you were going out to ...

EW: No, I mean, do you know?

SI: Yes. Please, explain for the tape.

EW: ... Tactical recon is, number one, they'll send you over there with two fighter planes, two P-51s. While you're over there, if you're over France or wherever you're over, you are going to take [an appraisal] and you're going to look that situation over down there. ... You're going to see if there's anything that doesn't look quite right, like, maybe like the guy I found one time. We found horse-drawn artillery, and I mean it appeared to be a whole army. We saw them on the ground, we called them in. It was about nine o'clock at night, maybe nine-thirty, I don't know, on a wet, rainy night and very, very cloudy. We were able to call in on the radio and give them the exact location of the artillery outfit.

BW: How low to the ground were you at this point?

EW: We were down awful close to [the ground]. I would say we were less than ... a thousand feet, because of the weather.

BW: And that was you and a wingman, right?

EW: You and a wingman, yes.

BW: So, two planes.

EW: Two planes.

BW: And the wingman flew higher than the lead, the mission leader.

EW: He did. He was the lead man; I was not the lead man. I was the wingman for him and he did everything exactly right and I was next to him, watching him, listening to him, the whole works, and he did everything just right. All right, now, here's another one. That's one type of recon unit, and that's visual reconnaissance, right. Now, here's another one. This guy that's a very good friend of mine, went through training with me, got into Germany with ... a wingman and this mountain has got a hole burrowed right in the front of it. ... There's one of the biggest pieces of artillery that the Germans had in that hole and they were shooting into Paris from where they were, for a long shot. So, he gets over there, with his wingman. The wingman flies over with him and they shoot everything they had, at the ground, at them, [antiaircraft artillery attacked the P-51s]. So, he [the leader] sent him [the wingman] home. He says, "You go home. I'll stay here alone." He says, "It's too dangerous," he says, "to fly like we're flying." So, he [the wingman] flew [back]. ... They were still shooting at him [the leader]. So, what does he do? He calls up the artillery, the American artillery, and he says, "I want you to give them the full clobbering you can, with airbursts above the ground." So, they'd shoot down [shrapnel on the Germans]. So, he used his artillery to shoot airbursts over the German artilleries that were shooting at him. [As] soon as they started shooting airbursts, they went out of business. They didn't shoot any more. They went down and stayed out of sight. ... He took [his passes] and he examined that gun, the big artillery piece, and put a burst right on it, blew the top of the mountain right off. He finished that off.

BW: I think that was more than a tac recon operation. [laughter]

EW: That's two types of tactical recon; it's artillery and visual. Now, there's another kind. What I'm going to tell you is true. You [have] probably never heard of a ... NOBALL target. A NOBALL target is one of those German "buzz bombs." ...

SI: The launch sites for the V-1 and V-2 rockets. [Editor's Note: The codename "NOBALL" was applied to all V-1 and V-2 rocket launch sites by the Allies.]

EW: V-2 rockets, buzz, too. So, if you got that permission, you go to get a picture of the N-2, or wherever the hell it is, and you'll find it right there on the map. ... He'll go over, look at the map [coordinate], turn around and put the nose down and really start screaming, come down over that target and take pictures of that site, because it was supposed to be bombed two days before and they didn't bomb it.

BW: Because they couldn't find it? ...

EW: I don't know if they couldn't find it or they didn't bomb it, but he went back, anyway, and he took a perfect picture of the thing and took it back to the fighter squadron. ... The squadron went back and they bombed it and they got it. So, that's the fourth kind of tactical reconnaissance.

SI: Photographic missions?

EW: Photographic missions. There's two different kinds. At the beginning of the invasion of Europe, before that started even, maybe like a month or maybe two months at the most [earlier], they flew tactical reconnaissance airplanes over every inch of the shoreline, to see if they could find the guns or anything else that was along there.

BW: This is in advance of D-Day.

EW: Advance of D-Day.

BW: And didn't they also fly weather reconnaissance?

EW: Oh, they always flew the weather, Bonnie. Yes, we had water flights. Now, the water flights are also P-51s, except they don't fly that kind of mission, the five tac recons, or whatever else they fly, but they fly water missions. ... They might fly all the way way into Germany to get the water flight, and then, come back and report it, yes. I saw [that] those guys were off a lot. They were off a lot. ... Off, off on a mission, and they used to go, maybe, ... that if the weather changed, if the weather wasn't the same, they would fly it every day, maybe several times a day. So, that's what they did. They did a lot of work.

BW: ... There was a special on, I don't know if it was the Military Channel, about the selection of the day for D-Day, using meteorologists.

EW: They were plain lucky, Bonnie, they were plain lucky, because if the Germans would have got there a little bit ahead of them, they'd have had a hell of a time getting in on that beach. As it was, the Germans killed a lot of people, but, still, ... the Allies were lucky to get in.

SI: Let me see if I have this straight regarding the types of missions. There was the visual type of mission, where you would fly over and see troop movement or if they were concealing something.

EW: Yes.

SI: Artillery spotting, basically, where you would fly around an area and direct artillery fire to targets.

EW: Yes, yes.

SI: There were photographic missions, where you would take photographs of targets.

EW: That's right.

SI: What was the other one?

BW: It's like intelligence. ...

SI: Yes, intelligence, seeing the results of a mission.

BW: Yes, there's one missing. You talked about the buzz bombs.

EW: Well, the other one, well, ... maybe it's a little different, because of the way that you do it, but, when I was over in England, the first mission I ever had, and this is funny, they told me, headquarters called me up on the telephone, when I was getting ready to take off, and they said, "We want you," he said, "to fly up and down the English Channel." He says, "You go as far as So-and-So, that way, and then, you turn around and you come back and you go as far as that way," and they said, "then, come back and land." He says, "When you get down there," he says, "you call, 'Hey, Sweepstakes, hey, Sweepstakes, this is Army So-and-So and So-and-So,'" he said, "'at Target A.'" Now, they would tell us that, "Then, you turn around and fly the other way, fly over the same country you'd been over and go the other way. Then, you call, 'Hey, Sweepstakes Two, this is So-and-So, and we're down at Checkpoint C,' and we want you to memorize that." So, we were telling them, if we were the guys that were up there, that we could call and they would know where we were. They did that same thing when they had the invasion. They'd fly a plane over France. They'd fly over, maybe they'd fly over a bunch of, oh, say, artillery of some kind coming up to get into the front line. So, ... the fighter pilots who were all are doing the same thing said, "Sweepstakes Two," or three or four or whatever they called them. He says, "There's a squadron of Tiger tanks on Highway Sweepstakes Five, about forty Tiger tanks," and ... they'd go over and they'd hit them. ... We did that, too.

BW: ... Initially, it was target training, like, and triangulation of where things were.

EW: Well, it wasn't target training. This is for keeps. [laughter] ...

BW: But, the first part of it was intelligence, really. The first part was intelligence.

EW: Yes, yes.

SI: Mapping an area, saying that this road is called this, so that, later on, you can use that term.

EW: ... Yes. I'm trying to think of the name. There's one of them that was a very important one and when the Germans were trying to get up in the back of the enemy forces. They thought they would be fairly safe, but they ended up right under the bombs. [laughter] ... They really got beat up bad.

SI: Do you mean a friendly-fire incident?

EW: Yes, yes.

SI: At St.-Lo? [Editor's Note: The Battle of St.-Lo in July 1944, also named Operation: COBRA, involved a ground and air assault designed to breakout of the Normandy hedgerow country at St.-Lo. One hundred GIs were killed and five hundred were injured by friendly-fire during the battle.] Was that at St.-Lo, the breakout from Normandy?

EW: Yes, this is after, yes, not long after they broke from Normandy and everyone's heading [east]. They were going east.

SI: Okay.

EW: Yes.

SI: When the ground forces were moving forward, the air forces accidentally bombed part of them. Is that what you are referring to? It was a famous incident in July where the bomber force was lined up one way and the ground forces were lined up the other way. The bombers hit their own troops.

EW: Falaise, Falaise Gap. [Editor's Note: The Battle of Falaise Gap lasted from August 13th through August 25, 1944. Allied forces attempted to cut off the German retreat from France, but were only partially successful.] Did you ever hear of that, Falaise Gap?

SI: Okay. That was later, yes.

EW: Yes, but Falaise Gap is not the one where they bombed ... our own guys. They bombed those up towards; what the hell was the name of that? I don't know if that was St.-Lo or one of those other places.

SI: By Normandy, the bottom part of Normandy.

EW: Yes. ...

SI: Okay.

EW: Well, of course, tactical reconnaissance has to do with current events, active defense. Static defense is a little bit different. That could take a little longer, but it could accomplish the same thing.

BW: But, ... even though you were supposed to be tac recon, if you saw something, like if you saw an enemy fighter coming towards you, that would interfere with you doing your job, you could also shoot them down. That was part of your job as well.

EW: The General said that, "Reconnaissance airplanes will not engage in dogfights with enemy aircraft." That's what he said. [laughter]

SI: Would the wingman be there to engage the enemy in case they were trying to shoot you down, to chase them off?

EW: They don't want you to do it. Yes, they don't want you to, although we had a couple guys in our outfit [who did]. One guy, he got three Jerries. He chased one of them in Paris. He was chasing the guy around inside the City of Paris, between the buildings and stuff, [laughter] and he finally had to let him go.

SI: Going back to when you were in Meridian, how much of this could they teach you then? What were they teaching you in Meridian? Were they teaching you how to do visual recognition and how to do photographic missions? Were they doing that in Meridian?

EW: They were teaching us that. We had two cameras ... in each airplane. One of the ... cameras would shoot straight down and the other one would shoot out at the side, like this, an oblique. ... The obliques they liked for taking pictures of the beachhead over Normandy. They liked that, shooting them from over at the side like that.

SI: You get the profile.

EW: Yes. ... It was funny, crazy business. [laughter]

SI: How did you get overseas?

EW: On a Hog Island freighter that took thirty days. [Editor's Note: "Hog Island freighter" refers to cargo transports mass-produced for use in World War I (although completed too late for service in that war) at the Emergency Fleet Corporation shipyard at Hog Island, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.]

SI: Wow. [laughter]

JW: And there were some times the waves were so high. ...

EW: Oh, you never saw anything like that in your life.

JW: Everybody was sick. [laughter]

EW: If you know what the forecastle of a ship is, that's where the quarterdeck is. The waves went right over. [laughter]

JW: When you see those war pictures, that's exactly what it was like, when you see those ships.

SI: Did you go over as a unit or as a replacement?

EW: I went over and I got on the dock at New York City and I was met by an officer, and I don't remember, to this day, what the hell kind of officer he was. He was a commissioned officer and he says, "Mr. Wagner," he says, "I've got something for you here." I said, "Yes, sir, what's that?"

He said, "You have eight enlisted men to take over on this trip," and what the hell am I going to say, you know? [laughter] So, anyway, you know, I met one of those guys after I was over in France. I met the guy, his name was Stokes. He was a master sergeant. He was a hell of a nice guy.

BW: But, you were in charge of those people and getting them [overseas].

EW: Only as long as they were on the trip, and then, I gave them a transfer and they moved on. I had one guy that was [in] ... one of these shows that they put on for the enlisted men.

JW: USO?

EW: Yes, like that. Yes, I had one of those guys. He was only a corporal, I think, at the time. Stokes was the ... "double strike" guys; he had six stripes. [Editor's Note: With six stripes, the sergeant may have been a master sergeant or higher.] He had it all, and, I don't know, there was one guy who was a staff sergeant that was a tail-gunner on a B-17. I took the guys. It took thirty days to get over there. I took the guys and we got them all together and I said, "What would you fellows like best to do?" I said, "Would you like a little exercise every day, because," I said, "it's good for you," I said, "If you like exercise." ... I said, "If any of you get sick or anything," I said, "I've got some stuff for it." I said, "I don't know if I got what you need, but I can try it." Yes, so, this went on good for awhile. Everybody wanted exercise, everybody that was on the bunk, except the goddamn bombardier from the B-17. He didn't want to work. I told him to go and borrow [a mop]; he spat on the deck. I said, "No, we're going to get this over with. You're going to borrow a mop from one of the men on the ship. You're going to swab that deck down."

SI: Had he already been overseas or was this his first time overseas?

EW: No, he was just too smart a guy to take orders from [me]. ... Everybody else was agreeable but him, and the training was good for him, get out and do a little exercise. ...

BW: They didn't put you through any special management or leadership training at all. You took it upon yourself.

EW: They didn't even tell me I was going to take guys overseas until I got on the ship.

SI: You had never commanded anyone before. As a fighter pilot, you were pretty much set by yourself.

EW: ... We had an officer that was a Navy man that had a gun crew on the ship, small guns, they weren't very big guns, yes, ... but he didn't over rank me. ...

SI: Was it part of a convoy?

EW: Oh, yes, yes, a hundred; wait a minute, no. Yes, I think, yes, it was 125 ships. It was big. Well, I ended up in Scotland.

SI: How crowded was the ship? Were there a lot of men all packed together?

EW: No, not on this ship, no. No, I had a room with some of the hotshots that were taking the supplies over. They told me they used to steal like hell, too. [laughter]

BW: So, this was a supply ship as well as carrying [troops].

EW: It was a supply ship.

SI: You were rooming with crew members. Were the guys that you were talking about crew members?

EW: ... They were just crew members.

SI: Were there any alarms or attacks?

EW: One, just one.

SI: What was that like?

EW: One. ... We went to bed one night, and it scares you just a little bit when you think about it. The old Atlantic was really playing games and, I mean, it was rough. It was really rough, and the guy on our boat was, I don't know, ... he wasn't as high as a captain, but he was down under a captain by about one rank.

SI: A commander, or a commodore?

EW: Oh, I don't know what he was, but he was one under the captain.

SI: Okay.

EW: Yes, and we went to bed at night and woke up the next morning and we were about, oh, eight ships out of line, and this is dark, almost black, dark, at night. We could have been in the side of one of those other boats just as easy as hell, would have been easy. [laughter]

SI: Was it the executive officer?

EW: No, he wasn't the exec officer. ... Because of the way the weather conditions were, they didn't know what was coming on, and they didn't want to stop and slow them down or anything else, because they don't know when the U-boats are coming.

EW: We stayed right on the course we were on. Luckily, we didn't have any U-boat come down.

SI: You were out of the convoy, though.

EW: Yes.

SI: You were going in the same direction, but you were out of the convoy.

EW: That's right, right.

SI: Did you get seasick often?

EW: Never got sick.

SI: Never got sick, okay.

JW: Do you believe that? [laughter]

SI: You said you ended up in Scotland.

EW: In Scotland.

SI: How quickly did you get to where you were eventually assigned?

EW: ... That night, I was on a train talking to what they called; some kind of [officer]. He's got the rank to take care of my eight guys. There was another guy on the ship, an officer, underneath the captain. ... I made him give me a receipt for those GIs. I didn't let anybody go without the receipt.

BW: Daddy, you landed in Scotland and how long did it take for you to get to Middle Wallop? Middle Wallop was where you were stationed.

EW: Well, I got to Scotland ... in a little over a day.

BW: ... To get to your final destination in Middle Wallop? You took a train?

EW: A fast train, ... and I don't know if you can imagine how close this train came to the side of the track. The track is like this and the train is like that. [laughter]

SI: Pretty close.

EW: Real close.

SI: You joined the Twelfth Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron. Was it difficult to integrate into the unit? What was that like?

EW: Oh, I got in right away, yes, and probably had a mission in the next day or two.

SI: You were flying with guys that had already been flying missions.

EW: Oh, yes. I was the only one, too. I had gone on a shipment all my own. ... There were no other officers, except the ones that I took on the trip. I was all alone, [laughter] come down through Scotland and down through England and down to Middle Wallop.

BW: But, the Twelfth Tac Recon unit already had people in it, right?

EW: Oh, yes.

JW: And then, you joined. So, you were flying. ...

EW: Oh, I was just one more.

SI: Then, the next day, you were flying a mission.

EW: No, about two days, I'd say, about two days.

SI: What do you remember about that first mission?

EW: The first mission was over the English Channel. I'll tell you one thing about food I had. What the heck is the name of that ...

BW: Bouillabaisse?

EW: Yes, that's right. I remember that mission, because Bill Lacey, who was flying my mission, said to me, over the telephone, "So, El," he says, "you haven't seen any flak yet, have you?" I said, "No, we haven't seen any yet, Bill." Well, he says, "Well, we're going to take a little flight over," that place ...

BW: Bouillabaisse.

EW: "And you will have some," [laughter] and we did.

BW: Gee, nice guy.

EW: Oh, poor Bill, he didn't make it.

SI: Was he the mission commander on that flight?

EW: Yes, yes.

SI: Was that the one you described earlier, where you were going back and forth?

EW: Oh, they wouldn't make me mission commander on the first flight.

SI: You had described a mission, earlier, where you were flying to one point and saying, "This is Sweepstakes One," and then, flying to another point.

EW: Yes, yes. ...

SI: You encountered flak on your first mission.

EW: [Yes].

JW: A little bit. ...

SI: Do you want to take a quick break?

EW: Yes, for a minute. ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: For your early missions, you were based in England, correct? This was before D-Day.

EW: Yes, yes.

SI: What stands out about that period? What kind of missions were you flying? What do you remember about those missions?

EW: Well, of course, not realizing the seriousness of [the] D-Day operation, [they] had a little difficulty trying to place everything in the proper order. It looked, you know, [like] we had something coming up and it was going to be serious. ... We didn't know all about it, but we did [find out]. A couple days before the actual invasion, we were told it was going to happen, and so, we were ready for it and it was, of course, all that we expected and more.

SI: In this period before D-Day, were you mostly flying photographic missions or doing visual reconnaissance?

EW: ... Outside the buzz bombs, we didn't have anything except those that were going to be funneled into the main invasion.

BW: ... What you're saying is, there was not a lot of training, that it was the real thing.

EW: Well, we had pretty good training all the time that we were in this field, and so, ... we didn't really need more now. What we needed was information.

SI: On these missions, the intelligence you were gathering was going to be used in the invasion.

EW: Right.

SI: Were you photographing the beaches?

EW: We didn't. No, we already had the photographs, so, we didn't take any more at that time. We did later on, but it was a matter of seeing, on a day-by-day basis, what the status was, which way to go. ... So, the actual invasion, of course, was [a secret]. I don't think the troops knew exactly where to go. I think they all were striving to see how far they could go and how much they could attack and still have a chance of making it through. That pretty much says it.

SI: How many missions do you think you flew while you were in England?

BW: You flew forty missions on the books.

EW: Yes, well, closer to fifty, probably.

BW: And with maybe ten or more off the books.

EW: Yes.

SI: Before you moved to France, how many missions had you flown?

EW: ... I honestly don't remember.

SI: How often would you fly? How often would you have a mission?

EW: It might be every day and it might be a couple or three or four in four days, because there was other things to do besides flying the airplane on a mission. We used to do a lot of things, too. [For] some of the photographic missions, after we took the photographs, we had to return them to the squadrons, so that they would have an up-to-the-minute report on what their progress is.

SI: Do you mean that you would be taking photographs of bombing sites, places where other squadrons had already bombed?

EW: No.

BW: ... You were delivering the photographs to the squadrons, right?

EW: Yes.

SI: Where they were going to bomb.

EW: Yes.

EW: Now, of course, you never knew. Now, I guess we had, probably had, about somewhere between thirty-five and forty pilots in the outfit, and they're broken down into many, many different assignments.

SI: You said earlier that you had encountered flak even on your first mission. What was that like, seeing that, particularly for the first time, dealing with flak?

EW: Well, it's not very pleasant looking. When you look at it, it's black, colorless, and it was potentially disastrous to you and you don't want it if you can help it. [laughter] So, you'd do anything you could to avoid it, but, if you had a mission, the mission, you had to do whatever the mission called for and that's all there was to that.

SI: Would your plane often be hit with flak? Would you come back and find flak holes in your plane?

EW: Usually, it's almost impossible to predict what you think is going to happen, because, ... over the submarine bases and St. Nazaire, the flak was so heavy, it was like popcorn. ... You wouldn't believe that the airplane could fly through that without being damaged, and, yet, it did. So, you weren't sure the flak was going to hit you or not hit you, or exactly what was going to happen.

BW: Did you ever get hit?

EW: Yes, I was hit by flak.

SI: Can you tell us about that?

EW: It was a simple thing. You're flying along, probably doing three hundred miles an hour, and you feel something tick the airplane and you don't know what it is, ... at that time. ... Of course, as soon as you land, the mechanic'll find a hole, ... but that's how it goes. You just don't know.

SI: Were you ever personally injured in one of these attacks?

EW: No, no, never was injured.

BW: But, you did have an accident in France. Didn't you have a crash landing in France, that you had to go into the hospital?

JW: Wait a minute, your plane went down in the English Channel. ...

BW: How did you wind up in the hospital? You were being treated for a concussion in the hospital. It's in the papers here, [referring to documentation related to Mr. Wagner's service].

SI: We can look at that later. Aside from flak, was there any other kind of threat? Did you ever encounter German fighters or were you close enough to the ground that they could hit you with small arms fire?

EW: No.

SI: What about the fighters? Did you ever see enemy fighters? Did they ever come up to intercept you?

EW: Oh, I've seen them.

BW: Did they try to cut you off when you were doing your reconnaissance mission?

EW: They tried everything they could, Bonnie.

SI: At first, you were flying as a wingman, right?

EW: Right.

SI: When did you start flying as a mission commander?

EW: Oh, golly, it would be about, probably, October.

SI: How did your job change then? Does anything stand out from those missions when you were the mission commander?

EW: You kept the same airplane.

SI: Your duties.

EW: Yes.

SI: You must have more responsibilities or different responsibilities.

EW: Yes, but, ... you know, to say it, in a lot of ways, if you had a wingman and your wingman was shot down, you had a mission that was still ongoing. You had to finish. You'd have just done it and that would have been it. ...

SI: Your daughter said that there was a time when all of the pilots were called out to their planes. Can you tell us about that?

EW: ... Just before we went overseas to France, and it was only a matter of a day, actually, we got a quick message from the commander and he said he wanted all the airplanes in the air, as soon as possible. So, we started getting ready to get our planes in the air. I went down to the place where my plane had been kept and my plane was gone. Somebody else had taken my plane to fly the mission. So, I looked around and I found another plane that was there. I took that, taxied down to the runway and we all started taking off together. ... I find out I had the commander's airplane. So, I was a little chagrined for awhile, to put it mildly, [laughter] and I found out that I didn't have any airspeed indicator on the airplane. So, I came back down to land and, as I was taxiing the airplane into the line, the commanding officer made a motion that he wanted to see me behind the hangar. So, I went over and I taxied the plane in and went back behind the hangar. ... When he found out that somebody had actually taken my airplane instead

of theirs and that I had, therefore, taken his airplane in place of mine, ... there was a few silent moments. ... I didn't turn into a buck private or anything. I was very lucky. I kept my rank.

JW: But, he told you ... to go in by a shack there. ... He wanted to say something to you, [laughter] and he thought he was going to get whatever.

BW: ... Why was everybody called out?

EW: Well, the reason for the special assignment was that one of our favorite American artists had become lost over the English Channel, and his name was Glenn Miller. [Editor's Note: American Big Band leader Glenn Miller joined the US Army Air Forces in World War II to lead the US Army Air Forces Band in performing for troops. He disappeared and was presumed killed when a USAAF UC-64 Norseman he was a passenger on was lost on December 15, 1944. The incident has been a source of controversy and given rise to several conspiracy theories.] You remember Glenn Miller? Well, he disappeared one day over the English Channel.

SI: When was that, approximately?

EW: ... I don't know, it had to be, maybe, in June or July. That's when it happened. ... I don't think that they ever found Glenn Miller. They did find [the] airplane that they thought was his. He was flying a special kind of airplane at that time, but they never really did locate him. ...

SI: What is your most vivid memory of your time flying these missions?

EW: Well, probably, it was the mission over St. Nazaire. Now, St. Nazaire was where the submarines were and that's where the Germans kept them and they had a special hangar for the submarines. ... It was very well-protected and defended, and, oh, I don't know how many heavy aircraft bombed that area without taking them out, and they were still there. They only lasted about, I guess, maybe a month-and-a-half, two months before the Germans got pushed out of there. [Editor's Note: The German garrison at St. Nazaire refused to surrender until V-E Day, May 8, 1945, although its ability to launch U-boat attacks had been eliminated as the Allied advance across France severed its supply lines.] Well, after D-Day, it would be about at least a year before the Germans subs would be pushed out of their special spot.

SI: How soon after D-Day were you redeployed to France? Was it soon after the invasion?

EW: ... I believe that we went over to France in about ... '44.

SI: Was it still in the summer when you went over? [Editor's Note: Mr. Wagner indicates yes.] Okay; do you remember any of those bases, what they were like?

EW: Oh, yes, I remember a lot of the guys that were with me in the outfit, and I still think about them, occasionally, and I wish they had made it back.

SI: What stands out about your time in the bases in France?

EW: Oh, bases in France. We ended up, ... the last days were in Germany, actually, and it was a German base and we used it. It was the first base we had, I believe, that was waterproofed and warm. Now, almost all the other bases we had, we were in tents or that type of protection.

SI: Were you able to interact at all with the French while you were there? Were they anywhere near these bases?

EW: We had a couple of close relationships with the French. ... There was one prominent French company in Dijon and I had been invited there for dinners on several occasions, and they were fine people. The man's son eventually became an Air Corps cadet himself. So, it was kind of interesting, getting together with them.

JW: Dad, tell them about [how] they used to save you eggs. They used to save their eggs for the flyers, yes.

SI: They used to give you eggs.

JW: Yes, what was it, once a week, or something like that, they'd give you guys eggs?

EW: Eggs were very hard to come by when we were over there and you were very lucky when you were able to latch into a few of them. ... So, I'd say about twice a week was all we could have eggs at that location.

BW: They gave you a lot of wine, didn't they?

EW: ... General Patton was over there for awhile and he was friendly with the Air Corps, because they did a lot of things that he wanted in reference to visual reconnaissance and that type of thing. ... He had a German wine cellar that he had captured and what he did with that wine is, he spread it over the Air Corps and everybody got a good share of it.

SI: When did you come back from Europe? When was your tour over in Europe? When did you stop flying these missions?

EW: ... I stopped flying the missions about December 1st, around that date.

SI: Were you sent back to the United States immediately?

EW: I finally got a flight out of France that landed in New York City, and so, I was ... [in] New York City for a few days.

SI: When was that? Was that still in December when you flew home?

EW: Yes, ... around December 15th.

SI: Was there a particular reason why you came home then? Had you fulfilled a tour obligation or was your unit sent home?

EW: No, they just sent me home. They sent my orders and I went home. I had over forty missions then, plus some extras.

JW: ... They wanted him to stay and he didn't want to.

BW: They sent you down to Meridian again.

EW: Yes, I went to Meridian as assistant operations officer.

SI: Okay.

JW: But, he wanted to come home.

BW: And you were there for how long, Daddy?

EW: October.

SI: October of the next year?

BW: You [have] a letter from the Colonel in your file about your service and how happy that they were that they had you working there and that they missed you. It's a nice letter from Peterson.

EW: He's a colonel.

BW: "We regret losing outstanding officers like you. Your work as assistant operations officer was so superior and you served your country so well that we sincerely hated to see you leave."

SI: What is the date on that?

BW: 27 August, '45.

SI: It was soon after the war, between V-J Day and the official surrender. What would you do as operations officer in Meridian?

EW: Well, when, say, a regular pilot came in to take a cross-country flight someplace, I would review his request and, if he seems like he knew what he was doing, you know, and had all the orders and the gas consumption that he needed, that I would write him a permit.

SI: After you were discharged from the Air Force, what did you do next? Did you go back to work right away? Did you plan on using the GI Bill right away?

EW: No, when I left the Air Force, I went back to Rochester.

BW: And then, what happened? Who did you meet?

EW: I didn't meet her in Rochester.

JW: Who are you talking about?

EW: You.

JW: Oh. [laughter]

EW: Not at the date that she suggested.

BW: No. You met mom after you returned to Rochester.

JW: Yes, but he was home, hunting and stuff, awhile before I met him. We, my sister and I, had an apartment down from where they lived. ...

EW: Yes, I thought it was before then.

JW: No, because we were married in '46, and I'll show you the place you're going to love.

EW: Where'd you get all that junk?

BW: This is your file. I was looking for the report about the injury in France. I found the injury in Tampa. ...

EW: Oh, for gosh sakes, that's way back.

BW: Weren't you injured in active duty?

EW: That's when I crashed the P-40 into the Gulf of Mexico. ... That's the one where I got ... a little bang on the head.

JW: You got a little bang on the head all right.

BW: Which came back to revisit him.

EW: I haven't even seen some of those things. I don't know where she got them.

BW: It's funny, because I never thought of my father as being disabled and ...

EW: I stumble.

BW: ... It wasn't until a couple years ago, when somebody mentioned the disability. They were joking and said he was a disabled veteran.

JW: No, he was deer hunting and the guys all met at this guy's house and they were all talking, having a drink and stuff, and Father goes up to the bathroom. ... As he's coming down the stairs, he had toilet paper on his shoe, and he says, "Well, what do you expect?" he said, "I'm a disabled veteran." [laughter]

SI: Okay. Yes, they have the different degrees of disabled, like ten percent.

BW: Yes, this was for the concussion, hearing loss, asbestosis and a bunch of other nasty [things].

JW: And then, we went to Paul Smith's, and then, we went to Michigan, and I'll show you the "estate" we had in Michigan for three years, you're going to love it.

BW: They were out-of-state, non-residents attending the University of Michigan, so, they got, as housing ...

JW: There is where we stayed. Isn't it beautiful?

BW: They got converted chicken coops to live in. [laughter]

JW: The only plumbing was a toilet. When it rained, the water came down the walls. We had to mop up before I went to work and he went to school, and, if we had a sandstorm, then, they had to sweep the place. ... We had a wood stove in the living room, kitchen, and we had a pot-bellied stove with soft coal in the bedroom/living room, or whatever you want to call it. ... I had my cat in my arms and he said, "Now, don't worry, it's going to be warm in here. You don't have to worry." ... I'm holding my cat and he said, "Now, you hold the top of the stove and, when I tell you to let it go, let it go." So, he says, "Let it go," and it went, "Poof," and all this black stuff was floating all over. [laughter]

BW: Soot.

JW: The cat got under the bed. Oh, I'll tell you, that place was the worst. ... They built these dumps for people that worked on the Kaiser-Frazer Automobiles, years ago, and, when they got through, when the war was over ...

BW: Migrant workers.

JW: They sent them back home. They'd have murders and stuff, just, like, thirty feet away, you know, and you never knew what you were going to see. ...

BW: When you came back from the war and you were trying to figure out what you wanted to do with the rest of your life, ... you went to work on an assembly line, didn't you, somewhere, just to have money, a job to make money?

JW: ... Where did you work when you first came home?

EW: I worked with Stromberg-Carlson for a little while.

JW: At Stromberg-Carlson, and then, after we were married, you went to work for my uncle, building houses.

EW: That was only for a few days.

JW: That was only for, yes, a couple weeks. ...

BW: It didn't go very well.

JW: No, and, if he worked in the factory, he would've died.

BW: So, you made a decision that you wanted to go to school.

JW: Well, we didn't know if he'd even be accepted at school.

EW: Yes, I wanted to go to Paul Smith's.

JW: ... We went there. Well, he went ahead of me, ... to see if he'd even be able to pass the exams at the college, because he'd been out of school so long, and he passed them. So, we were there a summer and two years after that. ... Then, they took three guys from Paul Smith's, to go to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and he was one of them. ... He went ahead and we got this dump to live in. [laughter] ...

BW: Wasn't your class one of the first classes graduating from Paul Smith's, or was it the first class?

JW: Yes, yes, it was the first one.

BW: You got an associate's degree.

EW: No, I don't count that as a degree.

SI: How did you hear about Paul Smith's, since it was just getting started?

EW: It sounded like a great place to be. [laughter]

BW: How did you find out about it? How did you find out about the college?

JW: How the heck did he find out about Paul [Smith's]? I don't know. How did you find out?
...

EW: I don't remember, Mom.

BW: They must have advertised it or something.

JW: Well, whatever.

EW: Don't remember.

SI: You studied forestry there.

EW: Forestry. ...

SI: How did you decide on forestry?

EW: Well, if I'd have known there was a wildlife management course, I'd have gone for that, but they didn't have it at Paul Smith's. They had it at Michigan.

JW: The college had only opened the year before we went.

BW: But, he was very interested in the outdoors and sportsman activities and things like that. ... You had some very interesting professors, too.

JW: Oh, yes. ...

BW: Who was the one guy [that] was from Oak Ridge?

JW: Dr. Picket.

BW: He was a nuclear physicist.

JW: Yes, he worked on the atomic bomb.

BW: At Oak Ridge.

JW: And he couldn't stand it any longer, the idea of what the bomb is going to do. (He was opposed to the development of atomic weapons.) So, he decided he'd get away from the South and come up to ...

EW: We got to be very good friends.

JW: ... Paul Smith's, yes, and we stayed in their upstairs bedroom, one of them, for awhile.

BW: And a lot of the food that you ate ...

JW: Fish, trout.

BW: ... Were things that you caught in a lot of the lakes.

JW: Yes, because we lived on it, and then, we were there for two years and a summer. ...

BW: What was your hot date up there? [laughter]

JW: Where?

BW: You went to the Dew Drop. You went to the Dew Drop and got spaghetti.

JW: Spaghetti, that was our big deal.

BW: And, when the cat got sick ...

JW: Yes, I took the cat [to be spayed]. We didn't have any money. ... She was a little, tiny kitten and, when she got a little bigger, I figured we're going to have a little problem here. So, I heard about this vet in Saranac Lake and, one time, when El was there doing something, I walked over and I said, "I have a kitty that has to have an operation," and he said, "Okay, want to bring her in?" and I said, "Well, there's a little problem here, because [of our finances]." ... He says, "Are you kids from the college?" and I said, "Yes." "Bring her in, I'll take care of her." So, he operated on her for free. Then, I made him cookies.

BW: And didn't the pharmacist give you a bunch of stuff?

JW: And the pharmacist, yes. Everybody was poor, all us kids. We were all poor. Nobody had any money. So, we kind of made do.

BW: And Daddy did some odd jobs.

JW: Well, yes, in Michigan.

BW: ... Fishing guide.

JW: He guided, yes. When we were in Michigan, ... there was a place called; oh, what was the name of that, where we were in Michigan there, where you guided for the millionaires?

BW: Rocky, Rockefellers?

JW: No, what was the ...

BW: That was in New York.

JW: When we were in Michigan, remember, on Saturday and Sunday, when you guided for these millionaires from Detroit and stuff, when they were hunting?

EW: Oh, you mean ...

JW: What the heck was the name of that place?

EW: You're not talking about the duck marsh?

JW: Yes.

EW: Oh, well, all right.

JW: What was the name of that? ...

EW: Forgot the name of the place.

JW: Well, whatever. ... After we were in that dump, living there for two years, he came home one night and he said, "What would happen if we had to stay here another year?"

BW: She was thrilled, of course. [laughter]

JW: Oh, was I thrilled, and I got to thinking, "Oh, we're willing to live in a dump this long, I guess another year can work," you know. So, we stayed there for another year and, oh, yes, he's going to get this big job if he gets the master's degree. We came back to Rochester; there were no jobs, there was nothing. So, somehow, we found out about this place down in Marion, North Carolina. We got down there. All the stuff that we had was in a trunk. We got down there and it was 115 degrees in the shade. It was terrible. ... Every once in awhile, the fire alarm would go off and the guys would have to go on the [fire call], and, one day, we pulled into this gas station and I was sitting there with the heat. ... He said he went to get the ... trunk off of the train, and I'm thinking, "Oh, God, send it back to Rochester." So, he comes and I say, "Where's the trunk?" and he said, "I told them to take it back to Rochester," and that's when we got there. ... There still were no jobs, only we heard from the state that there was a job as a laborer in Watertown. So, he went up, got interviewed, and he said, "I'll take whatever you got," because ... that was part of his career, building marshes, ponds for wildlife. So, that's what he did, for twenty-eight hundred dollars a year, two thousand, eight hundred dollars, oh, boy, were we rich. So, we got our first apartment. ...

SI: Was that job within the Department of Environmental Conservation?

JW: Yes, Conservation.

SI: You were there for how long?

JW: We were in Watertown for two-and-a-half years in the first apartment and we met this guy that had just gotten out of the service. ... He said, "If you give me fifty bucks, or whenever you have fifty bucks, give it to me, ... you find a lot and I'll build you a house." So, we went looking around.

BW: It was built in installments.

JW: And, yes, as we'd give him a few bucks, he'd do something, and then, El did a lot of the work in the cellar. ... After work, he'd go out and do painting on windows and stuff. ...

SI: Did you use the GI Bill at all in building the home?

BW: Oh, not in building the home, ... only for the purpose of education.

JW: Oh, no, and then, he got the house built and we were there for seven years. ... If ever a young couple ever had a wonderful experience, we were all [together], it was a community, called Adams, New York. ... Bonnie was just going on two-and-a-half when we moved there and we were there seven years and we had the most wonderful time. The people, they took us in. We looked and I said to El, ... we went to the town, I said, "This place is a dump. Are we going back to Michigan and another dump?" He said, "Now, wait a minute," he said, "I'll show you some nice places in Adams." So, we drove around and there was. We went down Roberts Street, into Hungerford Avenue, and there were two lots there. There was a guy that owned the Ford dealership in Adams, and then, our lot, and then, Ethel and George, a retired couple, lived next to us. ...

BW: And all of these bordered a dairy farm.

JW: Yes. It was ninety feet by two hundred, and beyond that was all dairy farms. It was beautiful, and, yes, when the neighbors, Pauline and Herbie, saw us pull in, and, of course, we had Bonnie, ... I could see what they were thinking, because they were fifteen years older than us. ... I could see, "Oh, God, here we go with a bunch of kids running around." [laughter] So, [we] walked over, introduced ourselves, and I said, "You don't have to worry. We're not going to put our house sticking out. It's only going to be a little ranch house and we're going to make it so [that] we don't stick out beyond your [home]. You know, we're going to make it so [that] it's [in line]." Well, we were friends forever. [laughter] No, we did. ... We had street picnics and such. ...

BW: We were active in the church.

JW: Oh, my God, I was a Sunday school teacher.

BW: And Daddy was the president of the Lions Club and was a Mason as well.

JW: Yes. Oh, it was so much fun. ... After we left, we were there seven years, and I didn't want to leave that house. ... They'd say, "Now, Mrs. Wagner, we know you're selling the house." "No, we're not. Not selling our house; we're going to stay here," ... but, no, finally, he got the job. ...

BW: How many times did he turn down promotions?

JW: Five times, he turned down positions for me, because I didn't want to move out of that house. ... Then, we did, but it was better for Bonnie, too, because, then, we had good schools in Fairport.

BW: And it was close to family.

JW: And the family. So, it worked out okay, but, remember, if you ever get married, don't show your wife-to-be anything like that [the chicken coops at the University of Michigan] or she'll never look at you again. [laughter]

SI: It reminds me, here at Rutgers, they had trailers, just on wheels and blocks, yes.

JW: Oh, my, yes.

BW: That was a lot of fun. ...

SI: Could you tell me a little bit about your career? Tell me about the jobs you had with the DEC.

EW: Well, let's see now; I'm surprised I remember at this point. ... Well, I was a biologist, Biologist I, ... but everything went good. Once I got started with DEC, everything went good. I kept going right uphill.

BW: You were building ponds and you were planting trees.

JW: And, also, I don't know if you ever heard of Marketplace Mall in Rochester. It's a big mall, and he was in charge of the environmental ...

BW: The impact statement.

JW: There's Wilmots [of Wilmorite, Inc.] that are millionaires, and they were just going to put this place up and El says, "You can't do that until you have holding ponds."

BW: Drainage.

JW: "For drainage, because the people down from you are going to get flooded out." So, they had hearings and stuff and he stuck to his guns and they had to build the ponds, but they were business people and very nice people, very nice people. ... Everything went on okay. [Editor's Note: The Marketplace Mall was constructed in 1982.]

BW: Tell Shaun about your career over the course of the time you were with the DEC. You started out in Watertown, digging ponds and planting up forest areas and things like that.

EW: Well, the first year I worked for them, I sold, probably, to the people that lived in that area, at least a million trees. I was [in] tree planting. ... All the rest of my life with DEC, I sold trees and shrubs and built ponds and ...

BW: ... Reforestation projects.

JW: And, of course, he built Perch River [State Game Management Area] up in Watertown.

BW: And then, ... when you went from Watertown to Rochester, what was your other job, your new job, when you went to Rochester?

JW: With Bob Perry, your boss. ...

BW: Well, first, it was in Scottsville. What was your title when you were in Scottsville, before they built the new office?

EW: Regional Supervisor of Regulatory Affairs.

JW: Yes, they moved the office out to Avon.

BW: They built a new office in Avon, mainly because the old office was sliding into the Genesee River.

JW: That's true. ... This was his new office, right. I went into the building and somebody dropped something and it rolled right into the pail. ...

BW: The building was kind of skewed a little bit.

SI: You retired in 1986 as the Chief Permit Officer.

EW: Yes. They had all kinds of fancy names at those times.

BW: But, what were your main responsibilities? You were working with people that wanted to develop land, to make sure that they were going to do it right.

EW: That's right, that's right. We were working for the big boys.

BW: Right, make sure they weren't violating any wetland areas, designated wetlands, and you had ... quite a bit of head butting with a few of them.

EW: Yes.

BW: Where they had ... to take down whatever they did and return it, restore it, to its original condition.

JW: Oh, yes, boat launches, for one thing. When the people with their places down in Sodus Point wanted to build beyond where they were supposed to build boat launches.

BW: That was part of your job.

JW: That was part of his job, ... but people had to go along with it.

BW: He was still very active with the ham radio as well. ... He'd be working the radio, but, then, they'd have field days, where they would set up a temporary station as if it was an

emergency situation. ... They would put a tower up and run wires and all that kind of stuff and they'd run the station. He was part of the emergency relief when there was flooding in the Southern Tier, [the counties of New York State that border Pennsylvania west of the Catskills].

SI: Was that Hurricane Agnes?

JW: Was that down in Horseheads?

BW: It was in the Southern Tier. Wasn't it near Olean?

JW: Oh, yes.

EW: Oh, that big ... flood in the Southern Tier, and flooded that whole area.

BW: Agnes, Hurricane Agnes, yes. [Editor's Note: In mid-June 1972, Hurricane Agnes inflicted a heavy toll on the East Coast, particularly Pennsylvania and Western New York, which suffered dozens of fatalities. At the time, it was the most destructive hurricane on record.]

SI: What would you do, get in contact with people who were cut off by the flooding, direct emergency aid to that area? As a radio operator, how would you help the situation?

EW: Well, we ran the radio operator's emergency communications.

JW: There were no telephones, ... no communication.

EW: ... It was what we did because we wanted to help them. ...

JW: Nothing, nothing there.

BW: Just like with 9-11, the early stages of 9-11 recovery were ham radio operators. [Editor's Note: Over eight hundred volunteer amateur radio operators assisted the response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City.]

EW: But, then, ... the other thing they were going to do, too, was build a brand-new highway down that way. So, we [the DEC] designed the highway for them.

SI: Let me read some of your distinctions and awards into the record. You received the New York State Governor's Award for Distinguished Military Service. You received the Air Medal with seven Oak Leaf Clusters for your missions in World War II. You were on the Monroe County Water Quality Management Board, with recognition for your work from the Monroe County Executive. We talked about the distinguished public service in ham radio operation with these responses to the emergency situations. Also, is there an official title for having contacted all the countries in the world?

BW: "Worked All Countries," WAC, they call it.

SI: WAC, for having contacted all the countries through your ham radio. You were recently the Veteran of the Year at your American Legion post.

JW: And the Conservationist of the Year. ...

SI: Is there anything else you would like to say for the record?

EW: Can we cash the check? [laughter]

BW: Well, it was very clear that, from what he did in the military, he learned a lot about leadership and these skills spanned all of his career. He was engaged in the execution of leadership from the point of view of environmental conservation. So, he had a very long record of public service.

JW: And a lot of respect by the people that he worked with. A lot of those deals were made with just a handshake, eye to eye. This one guy (a millionaire) had a lot of property. A doctor had moved in next to him and had taken over some of his land. They had a meeting with this millionaire and the doctor and El. My husband said, "You're going to go along with this agreement. ... It's a shake." Mr. So-and-So said, "How can you trust the doctor?" El said, "Because he's shaking your hand and that's how we do business." You don't get that today. You don't just shake a hand and expect anything, because you're not going to get it. [laughter]

BW: Fifty-page contract, notarized and witnessed.

SI: Did you ever do any flying after the war?

JW: ... Yes, our neighbor who had the Ford dealership had a plane and he said, "Take the plane any time you want it." So, he took me for a ride. Coming in over trees, I thought, "Oh, my God, he's going to show me a little excitement." He [thought he] was flying a P-51.

BW: He still drives like he's flying a P-51. We hide the keys now. [laughter]

SI: All right. Thank you very much. I appreciate all of your time; thank you very much for your time and your service.

BW: Thank you, Shaun.

EW: Well, I hope it does some good for somebody.

SI: Yes, absolutely.

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

Reviewed by Rebecca Schwarz 10/20/10

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 12/10/10

Reviewed by Elmer Wagner 4/7/11