Albert Lawrence Wile Oral History Interview

MIKE ZAMBRANO: This is Mike Zambrano. Today is January the 31st, 2015. I'm interviewing Mr. Albert Lawrence Wile at his home at Highland Estates in Cedar Park. This interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission for the Preservation of Historical Information related to this site. Good afternoon. Can you tell me where and when you were born?

ALBERT WILE: Yes, 11th, January 1924 in Port Carbon, Pennsylvania.

MZ: Oh, so you just had a birthday?

AW: Yes.

MZ: Well, happy birthday.

AW: Thank you.

MZ: Carbon, Pennsylvania.

AW: Port Carbon. Port Carbon. C-A-R-B-O-N. It's the southern gateway to the anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania.

MZ: OK. Did you have brothers and sisters?

AW: Yes. I'm the oldest one. My sister is older than I, 14 months older than I. I have a brother, Alvin, that is now deceased, and a brother -- we called him Peewee -- his name was George, and then my youngest brother was Austin Wile.

And he lives in south San Antonio now and he's in an RV park there. And he's the youngest one of the family still living and I'm the oldest boy of the family still living. And out of the five, we're the only two left. My dad died when I was 12 and then my mother tried to keep us together and succeeded. We had to move from the east side of Pottsville to the west side, which was older and more downtrodden. They called the borough the Fifth Ward. Minersville Street was one street behind us, our backyard bumped up against theirs, and that's where the black people lived. And next door to me, the lady was white with white hair and the male was black, all the way black, so the kids were sort of chocolate-colored. They were nice people. On the other side of me was an Italian family that couldn't speak English. But we were living where we could afford to live. I think my mother paid $16 a month renting the house.

MZ: Wow, what was your father's name?

AW: George Hain Wile. Hain was the name of his mother, the maiden name of his mother, so he used that as his middle name.

MZ: What was your mother's name?

AW: It really was Nathalia Beatrice Wile, but she used B, Beatrice as the working name. Everybody called her B. Wile.

MZ: So you're 12 years old when your father passed away, so that must have been about 1936?

AW: Yes.

MZ: Well, before he passed away, what did he do for a living?

AW: Well, he had a trucking business. He had his own truck and he was general hauling. Coal, ashes, ice, just anything that he could haul and get paid for it. That's the way we made a living, the way he made a living. It was, of course, nobody had any money then. It was rough living, but we always did well enough to get along. We got along better when my dad was living than we did when my dad died. My mother tried to keep us together. We were poor, but we didn't recognize it. We didn't even think about being poor. We never were hungry. We always had potatoes and bread. We never had any pop, or ice cream, or dessert, or anything like that. Fruit, even milk, wasn't something we didn't have on a regular basis. But we always, always had enough to eat. My mother would get a soup bone at the butcher shop and 25 cents worth of mixed vegetables and make vegetable soup and that was a meal. Just the soup, and the bread, and margarine instead of butter, and a lot

of scalloped potatoes, and macaroni. On Sunday, we would have a pot roast, which is when we had meat, but otherwise we just ate what she could afford to buy. Part of our livelihood was my grandmother, which was my mother's mother, was blind, and she lived with us when we went to the west side, and she got a $30 a month pension, so that helped support us. And then, of course, when we got old enough to work, we kids always worked, doing whatever we could find a job to do, we would do and we would give the money to our mother and that's the way we made out. And my sister, who is 14 months older than I, she quit high school as soon as she was old enough, and then went out, and got a job cleaning houses and doing any kind of that kind of work because she had no skills to get anything better. I was the second oldest and I was the boy, but I never thought I was going to do anything other than go to high school. I just knew I was going to go to high school and I did, but I wasn't always well dressed and I never had enough money to date girls or go out socializing. But I spent a lot of time going to the library, picking up books, taking them home, and reading them. That's what I did. And my brother, as soon as he was 16, he joined the Navy. He went to the training base up by Chicago. I think he had six weeks of basic training. They sent him back to Pottsville

for a week vacation, and then they sent him to San Diego, put him in the aircraft carrier *Essex*, and before he was three months older than 16, he was in combat.

MZ: Really?

AW: The *Essex* had a lot of battles. He had nine or 10 battle stars. We both -- I worked in the baker's outfit adjacent to where we lived, and as soon as he was old enough, he did too. So as soon as the Navy interviewed him and found out he worked in a baker shop, he became a cook in the Navy. And his battle station was someplace deep in the aircraft carrier, where he was given a room with a door there, and a door there, and big latches on it, and his battle station was to close that room up with him in it.

MZ: Sounds a little scary.

AW: He didn't like that, so he immediately after the battle was over went to the duty sergeant and told him he had to get a job topside. So they put him on one of those aircraft guns on the side of the aircraft carrier and that's where he fought the war. And they took a kamikaze bomber on the gun station next to him, but didn't hit him. He just had to clean all the body parts off his weapon, but he wasn't hurt. And the other time the aircraft carrier got hit was by an F-15, which was our airplane, but it apparently was flown by a Japanese pilot and he landed it right in the

middle of the aircraft carrier and tried to sink it. The damage was there, but he didn't do any major harm to it. Otherwise, he came out of it OK.

MZ: What was that brother's name?

AW: His name was Alvin.

MZ: Alvin. Alvin Wile?

AW: Yes, Alvin Justin Wile, yes.

MZ: Let's see. Do you recall what you might have been doing when -- oh, actually, before I ask you that, since your mother was raising you and four other children, what did she do for a living?

AW: Nothing. She just did whatever housework she could get, but we lived on relief, whatever we could get. We would go and pick up surplus food. It would be three-pound boxes of cheese, a lot of cheese sandwiches, and I can't remember what else. Anything else that they had that was surplus.

MZ: Do you happen to remember where you were when you heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

AW: Yes, I was at a place up on the hill where we used to hang out and play football in front of the factory that was closed up and we were playing football when we heard. They called us on the porch, someone said Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I remember having cousins that were drafted and were in the Army, but they were older than I, so we knew

enough about military to know that we were in war and we were in trouble. So I knew as soon as I would get out of high school I would join the Army. And I tried to join the Signal Corps, I memorized the eye card because my eyes were bad, and they got by the sergeant that recruited me. He was happy to get a recruit. And they send me to Harrisburg for the physical and they had the same eye chart, so I said I could read it. The doctor that was checking me, he said, "No son." He said, he looked at my glasses, he said, "You can't read that chart." He said, "Can you even read the big E?" And he said, "Tell me the truth, can you read the E?" I said, "No, I can't see it." He said, "OK." So they flunked me, said I wasn't qualified, and I would be 4-F, and they sent me home. So I was very disappointed about that because I just felt like I needed to get into the military. So I went down to the draft warden and asked him to call me up early, figuring maybe I can be drafted easier than trying to join. So they sent me to Philadelphia for my eye test, and once again, as soon as I said I could read the eye chart and read it off, E-D-G-D-O-M, I think it was, he shook his head and said, "You can't read that." And I said, "OK, that's true. I can't read it." He said, "Well, I can't pass you." He said, "So we'll go on with the physical, and go report until the end and then the officer

finally will give you a review, and tell you what we did, and what we are going to do." So got to the end, there was an Army colonel and a Navy captain, which is the equivalent to colonel. I didn't like the looks of the Army guy, so I went to the Navy guy, and he looks through my reports in my physical and he said, well, he said, "You're in pretty good physical shape." He said, "What kind of work did you do?" He said, "You've got big shoulders and a lot of shoulder muscle, arm muscle." I said, "Well, I was a gymnast in high school." So my build-up came because I did all those exercises on the parallel bars, the high bar, and the ring. And it helped me because when I became a freshman in high school, I weighed 76 pounds. I was skinny and they thought they could build me up for the 96-pound wrestler because I was wiry, and strong, and I was groomed to be the 96-pound wrestler my sophomore year. But we had gym teacher that really used the gym to teach gym. He taught calisthenics the first semester, then the apparatus the second semester. And at the start of the second semester, we started off by hitting the springboard. Well, I hit the springboard the first time and I was well coordinated and got height, and he sort of looked at me and then he hit me on the backside with the rawhide cord on his whistle. And the next time I hit it, he did it again and said, "You come into my office

after class." And I did. He said, "I want you out for the gym team." I said, "Well, I'm out for wrestling." He said, "We're not going to have wrestling next year and gymnastics would be better for you anyhow." And that's how I ended up making my letters as a varsity gymnast until I graduated. He was judge for gymnastics at Penn State and he used to take us up there with him when he was going up for a meet, and then we would work out the college gymnasts. And boy that was a treat for us, working out with those college guys. And a lot of our guys, when you graduated, you could get a job at Penn State in the Beaver House, and wait on tables for your meals, and then you could work for the school to get your tuition paid. So that's what I was aiming for when the war started. When we get into the war, I lost interest in that because I wanted to get in the Army, and I did finally.

MZ: So you mentioned the whole eye test thing. Have you always had problems with your eyes?

AW: Yes, I'm myopic and from the sixth grade on I had trouble with my vision.

MZ: Really?

AW: That's something that I passed onto my kids too. My kids all were myopic. It means you can't see far away. But close up, I could see the smallest thing. For example,

later on, my daughter got married and they were trying to pick out a ring. I went with her for the diamond to pick out the diamond, and the American Diamond Corporation had the diamonds graded, and then they had the flaws listed, and we picked out a stone that looked good. And I looked at what the flaws were, I took off my glasses -- my glasses were thick, much thicker than this -- and the guy looked at me sort of funny. And I picked up the diamond, and I looked at it, and I looked at where they said the flaws were, and I said, “Well, at two o’clock here, you have a feather and it’s not listed.” And he said, “You can see that?” And I said, “Yes.” Oh, he said, “Well, you took your glasses off.” I said that, “Without my glasses, I can see the print on the side of the cigarette carton.” And he said, well -- she said. It was a lady. She said, “Well, let me go back to the back and tell them back there.” So a guy comes up that was doing the grading, he had his thing to put on his eye, and he looked at where I told him. He said, “You’re right.” He said, “At two o’clock there is a feather and it’s not on the certification.” And so he said, “I can’t believe that you could see that.” I said, “Well, that’s what I can do without my glasses.” But if you take my glasses away from me and asked who that is over there, I wouldn’t be able to tell you. So that made me

very much aware of taking care of my glasses and be sure I didn’t do anything that would put my glasses in danger because my mother didn’t have money to go buy me new classes. But as I told that Navy captain when he said you’re not qualified, I said, well, I do things that -- I said, “I can do a backflip on the parallel bar with my glasses on. I don’t lose them, I like to put a piece of tape from here to here on each side and I can tumble with them.” I said, I know my limitations, and I try to make up for it by doing things that would protect me, and still be able to take care of it. I said I played touch football, and I played baseball, and I don’t see well, but I’m always able to participate. So he said, “Well you’re 4-F.” He said, “You have to go home, and get a job, and take care of the girls because there won’t be many guys left around.” I said, “That’s what I don’t want to do.” I said, “I don’t want to be 4-F.” I said, “I want to get in uniform.” And he said, “Well, it’d be a disadvantage for you.” I said, “I can take care of that.” He said, “Well, I have an exception here, that I can put you in uniform as limited service and you’ll be just like everybody else, except that when they screen you for something that involves combat or something that you wouldn’t be able to qualify for.” He said, “You won’t get that, but you will be in uniform just

like everybody else." So they send me home for a week, and they send me back to Harrisburg. They send me from Harrisburg to Fort Meade in Maryland, and that was the bakers' and the cooks' school where I was assigned to and that was where I was assigned. They sent me to a cooks' school, they sent me to a mess sergeant school. Went two months with the cooks' school, a month with the mess sergeant school, two weeks at dehydration school, and then they made me an instructor. And what they did for me was the repple depple, training the last station before the troops went overseas to be in the war. And we processed a lot of people that were in the invasion and they were just all the European combat troops that were in there. Sometimes, it was the last good meal we fed them, but all the mess halls on Fort Meade were serviced by students like I was. I got out of cook school, and they send me out in the mess hall, and I was cooking for the troops who were going overseas. So you learned to cook and I appreciated the opportunity to be in uniform. And I always learned early on that I had to make the best of whatever I was doing. To do my best, as my dad tried to teach me. If you do everything as hard as you can do it, that's all anybody can ask for you. But you can do more than you think you can if you just make up your mind, so I followed that rule.

And after I cooked around Fort Meade in different kitchens, they sent me to Fort Eustis, Virginia to cook again. And we were segregated at that time, so the kind of food you would cook for the mess hall that fed the black people was different from the white people. So in Fort Eustis, I was assigned to cook for blacks only and I became familiar with a lot of differences we have in the way we think and the way we eat with the black people. And I learned when I was going to school living next door to a black family and going to school with the black guy that sat behind me, his name was White. One was White, I forgot the other guy's name, but they were both black and they were my associates in my school. So I was just not in any way, shape, or form race-oriented. And I knew that we were different because when my dad was little, he lived on the east side. We had a swimming pool, the only public swimming pool in Pottsville, but the blacks were not allowed there and I knew that there was this distinction. But when I got where I was living right adjacent to all the black family, you get to where you learn that we're not different. The primary difference, I believe, in the blacks and the whites is the amount of education we get and the amount of training they get at homes where they can recognize discipline, and recognize authority, and then they're all

right. So that helped me. And on Saturday morning, they tried to keep you busy, so we didn't have classes on Saturday. So the sergeant said we're in charge, Sergeant [MisKanic?] and Master Sergeant Pickner would come Saturday morning and we'd have to drill. Well, these were Army guys that were in the Army before the war and they were there at the bakers' and cooks' school when they could have been overseas and they resented that and I didn't like that part of it. I didn't respect them for trying to avoid the war. So MisKanic was trying to march us one day and he made a mistake, and I shook my head and laughed, and he saw me, and he was a tech sergeant and I was a buck private. And he said -- while I'm out here, they call me Willie -- and he gets around from the squad, he's OK now, he says, "You think it's funny?" He said, "I'll get in your place in the squad and you drill us." Well, I didn't know how to drill, so he let me mess up pretty thoroughly, and then he said, "OK, back in rank." Now he said, "Remember what you do and how you do it." He said, "First place, you should be recognizing the stripes I have on my arm and never again do anything like that." So I say, "Yes, sir." And I went back and they drilled us the rest of the day. And then at night, I went to the library and got an infantry field manual and I started checking on how to drill. I went to

work at four o’clock in the morning every morning over at the kitchen and on the way I would drill myself. Preparatory command on the right foot or the foot on which the commander would choose the next step and I got to where I was good on that. So the following Saturday, I did the same thing. I laughed at him. He goes, “You didn’t learn your lesson, huh?” I said, “I don’t know, sergeant.” I said, “Let’s see. Let me see what I can do this morning.” And I drilled them the rest of the morning and all the troops were pleased that I was able to react to the sergeant, and the sergeant and Master Sergeant Pickner, they both became very much aware of me then and they sort of knew who I was. And they we went back after four or five months at Fort Eustis, they took me back to the baker and cooks school in Fort Meade, which is the show kitchen of the Army. It’s where all of the coffee the Army used during the war was roasted at Fort Meade. We had a big bakery that baked all the bread for the base. There was a rotisserie oven about 10-foot long and I think it took five or six 100-ration roast pans. That’s how big it was. So you found out a lot of things you didn’t know. And then the cooks at the cook school, you were on 24 hours on, 24 hours off. You would work the morning, prepare breakfast, serve it, and then you would leave, go home, shower, put on

your different things, and report for your either basic training or exercise. Well, what I taught myself about marching helped me there because pretty soon I was the one doing the basic training and I never had basic training.

MZ: You never had basic training?

AW: I never went to basic training. And I learned and I told you I learned how to drill. I learned the same when they finally told me I was going overseas how to pack the field pack by using the manual. I didn't know how to do it. And a field pack is nothing but a bunch of straps; you have to know how to do it. So I pretty much taught myself how to do those things. And then the Battle of the Bulge developed and before that they found out that I could read, and write, and could speak before a group of people. The way that was done, I was in my class one day and the senior instructor and his assistant, Sergeant [Rawlins?], our teacher at that time, were there and he said, "What we're going to do is pick three volunteers that would like to be trained as a classroom instructor." So he said, "Do we have any volunteers?" And there was a tech sergeant, a guy named Stanley Zabawa, who owned the [Beachcomber?] Nightclub in Baltimore, and he was a political influence. That's why he was able to get in the military when he was drafted and avoid going overseas. So the nightclub was in

Baltimore and he was at Fort Meade, which was close to Baltimore, so he just was able to wrangle away to stay there. And the other guy that volunteered was a tall Jewish boy who had graduated from college and he had influence and he volunteered. I learned early that you're not supposed to volunteer and I did because they did. And then Pickner told Sergeant Rawlins, "Pick your three best students." And he picked Zabawa, and the Jewish boy, and me. So Pickner says, "OK." He says to Zabawa, he says, "Get in front of the class and speak." He says, "Speak like you're talking to a class or just to a group of people and speak about anything you want to speak about." And he was smart, he was a businessman, but he made a mistake. He tried to speak on the lesson of the day and he didn't do well. And then the Jewish guy, I think his name was Roland, he got up and he did the same thing, and I noticed that neither one of them did very well. So he said, "OK, your turn." So I get up in front and I said, "I understand the sergeant say I could speak on any subject?" He said, "Just speak." I said, "OK, I'm going to talk baseball. I'm going to deal predominantly with the Brooklyn Dodgers." And I talked until he stopped me, and I was elected as one of the potential instructors and ultimately I became a classroom instructor for the bakers' and the cooks' school.

And I think I made T/4, which is equivalent to sergeant, in a year and I taught the class until I left there. And I left there, left Fort Meade because once again, I became part of the cavalry. I was with the sergeants and worked with them to develop menus and all that and I was the only lower ranking guy with the group. I became too familiar with them and didn't respect them as much as they thought I should. So one day they told me to move over to another squadron, and I had the room at the end of the barracks, and I didn't want to move into that squadron because I knew they had bedbugs in there. So I thought, well, they really didn't want me to move, so I didn't move. And then the guy that I roomed with, after dinner, he said, "They asked me to be a witness on a court-martial." And he said, "I told them I didn't want to do it." And I said, "Well, why didn't you want to do it?" And he said, "Because the one they want to court-martial is you." I said, "Me?" He said, "Yes, you were told to move and you didn't move, so they're going to try to court-martial for disrespecting and disobeying an officer, a non-commissioned officer direction." So I thought, oh, that's not very good, so I'm trouble more than I want to be. So when they came to tell me that I had to report Captain [Rezinko?], and he said, "Well, you're doing very well for yourself." He said, "All

of the sudden you're disrespectful and get yourself in trouble." But he said, "I don't think it would help the Army if I put you in the guardhouse for six months." I said, "Well, I sure wouldn't want to do that either," because I had been to the guardhouse, and we cooked for the guards, and I didn't want to do that. So I changed my attitude and then they said, "OK, we'll reduce it to an Article 15." And they tried to give me an Article 15, and then they reduced me in grade from technician fourth grade, which is grade three level -- buck sergeant level -- and then promoted me back to corporal. So they reduce you and then brought you back on the same water. And they intended me, the secretary told me, that they were going to make me a sergeant the next cycle, get me back where I was because I was just the personification of the very diplomatic, pay attention NCO, and "Good morning, Sergeant Pickner," and all that kind of stuff they just liked. And finally they recognized that I was shaping up, so they then determined that they tried to reduce me in grade and give me restriction at the same time and they couldn't do both. So they just reduced me and waivered the disciplinary action. And as soon as they did that, I immediately went and volunteered for overseas and they were pleased with me. I was back and running the mess hall and they told me if I

got a superior inspection, I'd get a three-day pass. So the inspections were white gloves, on knees, smelling drains, and doing things. You just wouldn't believe the inspection we had. And I got a good inspection, I thought I'd get the three-day pass and Pickner came back in and said, "OK, you got a good inspection." But he said, "I can't live up to what I promised." He said, "I can't give you a three-day pass." But he said, "Don't get excited," he said, "Because I'm going to give you a seven-day furlough instead and when you come back you're going to report to Camp Kilmer to go overseas because you volunteered for overseas." And that's how I got recognized as being qualified to go overseas because normally a limited service would not. And they were getting down on the troops because the Battle of the Bulge had been raging and we'd been in combat for a long time. We were losing a lot of people and the Battle of the Bulge was looking pretty rough for us. So they started taking anybody they could get on the ship and get over there. Three and a half days after they put me on the ship, I was landing, went over on the Queen Mary, then we landed the 5th at full tide, got on a train that took us down to Liverpool. Put us on another ship and took us to Lahr, and first thing you know I've got a rifle, and a duffle bag, and my field pack,

and I’m trying to get over the side of the ship. And I didn’t have any trouble because my gymnastics made me strong, but the guys with me, a guy named Hess, was dopic. He couldn’t do anything so I said, “OK, Ralph.” I said, “Give me your duffle bag.” And I put a duffle bag on each shoulder and I gave him my rifle. I said, “OK, now come here and get over the side.” He got over the side and got on the net, and I said, “Put your rifle on your shoulder, get your hand in it, and then grab the net so you don’t drop it, and take mine on the other shoulder.” And I got him down inside the landing barge, and I went down with my duffle bags, and his duffle bag, and made it. And then we landed in the harbor and they took us to repple depple, and we were heading for Belgium to participate in the Battle of the Bulge, which by that time was winding down because that was March and the Battle of the Bulge in December, January, it looked like we were going to be repulsed when General Patton did his drive from the south into the southern flank of the Germans trying to take lead. And he was successful, even though they didn’t want him to do that, but he did it anyhow and saved me from getting in combat, because had I got up there, we went over not as a unit, but as branch and material. We were just replacements. We were bodies that they would put on the line and that’s what I would have

been doing if they hadn't decided that they didn't need us anymore. When we won the Battle of the Bulge and the war was winding down because we were defeating them at that time, they sent me back to Germany and that's how I got in the Labor Supervision Company.

MZ: Back to Germany?

AW: No, back to Cherbourg, France. We were in France. From France, we were heading for Belgium. Didn't get to Germany.

MZ: Just real quick. What year did you get into the Army?

AW: Nineteen forty-three.

MZ: Oh, 1943. OK. And you didn't get to Europe until late '44 then?

AW: Right.

MZ: OK. So you're in Cherbourg now, I'm sorry. Go on.

AW: We didn't have anything to do for a while, but it was a big stockade. I was in the 1591st and Cubbage, my friend, was in the 1595th and I didn't know him at that time, but the cavalry was only a seven-man cavalry because we had 250 German PWs. And I would go in every morning, I would go into the mess hall of my company and they would make me a roll, a cup of coffee, and we would discuss they were going to make for the meal. And my interpreter was a guy from Dresden, Germany named -- I forgot his name. Anyway, he

could speak English and he was willing to talk because he had been on the Russian front, and he knew the Russians, and he was lucky to make it to Dresden. He was from Dresden, but I think his name was [Murrell?]. And I got to be really able to communicate with me and find out what was going on because the German company was manned with people who manned the company when they were in the German Army. So they had a first sergeant, the cooks, and that, and they ran their own company. They ran the orderly room. The Germans' pay record was their personal record that they had on them and they could keep track of when they were paid because they never knew where they were going to be and that was their pay record also. So they pretty much took care of themselves. Murrell came to me one day and he said, "Can I talk to you about something just between you and I?" I said, "What do you want to tell me?" He said, "Well, they're trading the German francs. They're going to reissue all the German francs because there are people who have money that's in the black market and they should not have it. So they're going to say on this day, at this time, the French money in existence at that time is no good. And you want to turn your own francs in for the new francs, you report, and then they make sure they knew where the old francs came from. So any black money they didn't

get.” And said, “You know about the franc thing, though, right?” I said, “Yes, I know about that.” He said, “Well, we have money.” He said, “In the stockade.” He said, “We have the equivalent of $250,000 in French francs that we can’t convert, so we’re looking for somebody to do it for us. Now we have the connection made in Cherbourg, all you have to do is take our money, take it down there, and he’ll give you new money for it, and then we’ll disseminate it to the people to whom it belongs here in the stockade, and we’ll give you half of what we have of the $250, we’ll give you half.” I said, “No.” I said, “I don’t want to get involved with that.” I said, “I’m basically honest.” And I said, “I don’t do things I’m not supposed to do.” So I did not do it. But a couple of weeks later, and between that time we knew that there was a black guard, all the guards were black, and there was one that went AWOL. And he asked me, “You know about the black guard gone AWOL?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Well, he was the guy that we got to be our agent, and he took all of the money, and he went to Paris.” And he said, “We know that.” He said, “And we know also had you done it, we would have got our money, and you would have gotten yours.” But I said, “Yes,” but I say, “I just don’t do that.” So that’s a sideline I got

interested in. I don't know if that's the kind of thing you're interested in.

MZ: No, no, that's exactly. But let me ask you this just to clear it up because you said you were in the 1591st Labor Supervision Company?

AW: Yes.

MZ: Can you tell me a little bit about that because I had never heard about them until you told me that?

AW: Well, they wanted to make the German companies available for cleaning up the war in France and that's what the Labor Supervision Company did. The 250 PWs went out in Belgium. When we got to Belgium, the roads, all the back roads and the side of the road, were stacked with 150 little --

MZ: Shells?

AW: Yes, shells. Artillery shells and it was all over. And they had to pick them up. Every morning, they went out to work early in the morning, worked all day long, loading these 150 shells on trucks, taking them down where they put them on a ship, take them out and dump in the North Sea. That was what we did while I was there. And Cubbage and I became acquainted with each other when we found out we were going to be the two selected to go to Belgium. And to go Belgium, we had to go down to the salvage depot and draw weapons that were in salvage, draw weapons carriers, six-

by-six wheel trucks that had communication equipment hooked on the back. I said, “Well, OK, we’ll pick out the best ones we can find.” Because we had screened our PWs, and got drivers, and got them to go with us when it was time to pick up the trucks because we had taken two trucks, Cubbage and I, and we took them to an empty stockade, and we used them to train the drivers we had selected on our trucks so we had them all trained. And then we went down to pick them up, and they said, “Well, let’s unhook that communication equipment. You got to take it, that belongs to the Belgians now, you got to take it up there.” So we took it. And they gave us two guards from the black guard company for each truck. So I had a truckload of Germans and then two guards riding with them. Some of the trucks had covers and some of them didn’t. When it started to rain, the guards left their truck that was uncovered, and went to the covered truck, and sent two of the Germans to the uncovered truck so they could be in the dry, and they weren’t protected them, and they were in convoy taking care of themselves. They predominantly moved themselves from Cherbourg to all the way there in Belgium because Cubbage and I were in the lead vehicle showing the route that we were taking. And our lieutenant, Richard L. Bailey, we never saw much of him. I became First Sergeant of the unit

when I was listed on my record as my cook and a mess sergeant. And the first sergeant found out that I could read and write, so he made me the morning report clerk. So then I became running the orderly room, doing what the first sergeant should be doing because he was elected to go to Italy to visit his family. His family came from Italy, and they had relatives there, and he had facility for being able to go, take a furlough to go visit family. And he went, while he was gone because his wife was pregnant, and he had made her pregnant before he came over. And then when she had the baby, he got 12 points more and he was eligible for rotation. So they rotated him and I as the corporal because I had been reduced when I got in that trouble, I guess. I was a corporal at that time, acting first sergeant, and all of a sudden I'm running the orderly room because Lt. Bailey, you could never find him because he was a real ladies man. He was a little guy, but he looked like Errol Flynn and he mimicked Errol Flynn. And Cherbourg had the hospital system and always had nurses and the nurses were always looking for a little excitement. So he was always shacking up with the nurses. They could never find him. I could sign his name better than he could. And we did it without much help from him. We got to Belgium. But the ships would go and come and when they

would come, he'd find the nurse he had before and get her again. But this one time, she brought her sister. Her sister came with the nurse and her sister, well, she introduced him to the sister. And then at the club one night, she was with Lieutenant Bailey, and then she couldn't find him, and she couldn't her sister. So she knew where he was tent was and we had ammunition crates that we took the 105 howitzers out of, a piece of the wood about this long, and we'd make walks with them. So it was all muddy, so she knew where his tent was, that he went to his tent. But he was in the tent with the sister.

MZ: Oh boy.

AW: And he pulled the sheet up over his head and the girl said, "But their feet were sticking out." And the sister knew what was going on, she went back, and waited for him to come back, and then she went right back to him, and she didn't date him anymore.

MZ: I could see why. (laughter)

AW: But that's the kind of a guy he was. So, at any rate, I'm trying to get some continuity here. We got to Belgium and the stockade was already in existence, and the former PW company ran the mess hall and were sort of in charge of the stockade. So we were the newcomers, and our guys got all the bad things to do, and we had to try to take care of

them. They followed promotions, but most of them were frozen, things got leveled off. Said, OK, we'll promote one grade at a time and have a cycle every month. So when the first cycle came, Cubbage, who was a tech sergeant, the lawyer from Kentucky, he made first sergeant, which was the highest NCO grade at that time and I made grade five, buck sergeant level. And then Cubbage went down to the center, and talked to them down there, and said, "Hey. He's got one company, I got the other company. I'm a first sergeant, he's a buck sergeant. We're doing the same work." He said, "He should have a chevron." They concurred with that. The next week, they made me a first sergeant, so I skipped staff sergeant and I skipped tech sergeant, both tough grades to make. I never served in either grade. I made first sergeant. Well, a sideline to that is on New Year's Eve, 1945, I met the girl that I subsequently married. And when I wore my chevrons for the first time, I guess I'm a 22-year-old skinny kid, weighed 150 pounds. And when I walk in the club, there were chevrons from my elbows to my shoulder, and walked by a couple of combat guys, looked on their shirt, they had combat infantry badge, Silver Star. And this one guy got his feet up on the table, and he looks at his buddy, and he said, "Look at the guy there." He said, "He looks like a

kid and he's a first sergeant." So he looked at me and I looked at him, and he said to his buddy, he said, "How would you like to have him as your first sergeant?" I looked him straight in the eye and said, "Sergeant, if I were your first sergeant, you wouldn't like it either." And he comes out and said, "OK, serge. OK," he said and they didn't bother me anymore. But my wife-to-be never noticed my chevrons and when I finally ask her, I say, "Well don't you notice my chevrons?" I said, "That's a promotion." And she said, "I thought you we were wearing Cubbage's shirt." She said the jacket that I was in, the stripes, I said, "No, they're mine." And that was the reason I reenlisted, because I made First Sergeant, and that was a good grade, and I wanted to stay in the military and I was able to.

MZ: Where was this where you met your wife? What city?

AW: Liege, Belgium.

MZ: Liege, Belgium. And what was your wife-to-be, what was her name?

AW: Victorine Looz. L-O-O-Z. That's her picture there.

MZ: I guess she was Belgian.

AW: She was, oh yes, she was Belgian.

MZ: Victorine? Victorine. So where do you go from there? What happens? You're head of this company?

AW: Right. And funny thing had happened after I made first sergeant and they sent me a replacement. They sent me a replacement out of the guardhouse and I opened up his record. He was an Indian and he had been charged with desertion in the face in the enemy and sentenced to death.

MZ: Wow.

AW: And they relented to give him release of the charges and we were trying to rehabilitate him. So I got his records. His records are that big. And it was a real mess trying to straighten it out, and find out how much back pay he needed, and everything. That's where I learned a little bit about personnel and taking care of people. But when I reenlisted, then they rotated me. They decided that I needed to go back to the states. They gave me a 90-day reenlistment furlough and I took 15 days of the 90 days to spend at the end of furlough to go to Liege to meet the girl I had met on New Year's Eve, which incidentally was the only night of the year that she could be out after 10:30 at night. (laughter)

MZ: And this is New Year's Eve?

AW: New Year's Eve, 1945.

MZ: So we went to the club. Alex was the driver; he was our driver. He drove the jeep and we drove the jeep from all the way to Belgium, which is an hour drive. And he had a

girlfriend and that night he brought the girlfriend's friends, Vick and another girl with him, and then Cubbage and I ended up with the two girls. Well, my wife was good-looking and the other girl was just ordinary. But Cubbage was good-looking and he would have gotten Vick as a date, but he was driving the jeep. So I ended up with Vick, the better of the group and we spent New Year's Eve and I made a date for her for the following week. And during the date, she found out that I couldn't dance very well and she really liked to dance, so she wasn't too pleased with me. So I waited for her at the club for an hour and a half before she finally walked in, and I wasn't sure it was her to start with because she didn't have the same coat on, and usually they only have one coat on. I didn't know that she was a designer, and a dressmaker, and she had a profession where she could make anything to wear. So I finally recognized her and she smiled at me. She came over, she said, "I'm sorry for being late." I said, "Well, I'm glad you're here." So we got together that night again and enjoyed ourselves a little bit more and she found out more about me. She was a little older than I and that was one of the things she didn't like me. I was just a kid. And then we became steadies and we finally decided that it would be a good deal if we could get married. So we got

engaged and the following December, then, when I went back on my reenlistment furlough, we got married and we ended up creating a family. We got married in December. My first son was born in January. And in Belgium, it's not usual to have more than two kids. That's a Catholic country, but they still -- two children was a family as far as they were concerned and they would be happy if it was a boy and a girl. But when I started having children after I brought Vick back, the first thing they didn't want me to do when they gave me permission -- I had to ask the father for permission in French and I had to learn how to say that. And finally Vick helped me and they finally said, "OK, you can have our permission. We like you and we think you're good for our daughter, so we approve. But we would rather you not leave. We want you to stay in Europe." I said, "Well, I'll stay as long as I can, but I won't have control over that." And sure enough, they sent me back pretty quick and they didn't like that at all. But I'm now taking my Belgium wife -- she came by herself and was pregnant when she came, and I had flown back and went to New York to pick her up, and we were sent to Salina, Kansas. But she was spoiled. Her brother had been killed the first day of the war when the Germans invaded, and she was the only one in the family left, and they didn't like her leaving. And

she was spoiled by her mother because she had this profession. She used to go fashion shows and have to remember the designs, that then she would go home and draw them, and then she could duplicate them, and you can't do that in Belgium. You're not supposed to that. But she could do that and she was good at that. She could design, and she could throw a piece of material up on the table, and cut, cut the design, and I'd say, "What are you doing?" "I'm cutting," she'd say and she'd cut the dress out. And she could take your picture if you were a lady, and then she could make the garment, and they would be just like the fashion ones, and she would make all that. In Belgium, getting confirmed is the big day where all the girls wear dresses like wedding gowns and they're all handmade. So she made a lot of those and she was good at it. So I got her back in the states and she could speak English. She was a linguist of sorts. She had six languages that she had --

MZ: Wow.

AW: -- working capability. Of course, Belgium is a two-language country at that time. They're Flemish and French and their money is printed on one side in French and the other side in Flemish. And you go to school, if you're French, you learn Flemish, if you're Flemish, you learn

French because you need it because it's a two-language country. So she never really liked the Flemish and the Flemish don't get along with the French. So they were not pleased to speak Flemish, they would speak French. But the other language they have, the French-speakers had, their heritage was an archaic language and she had to learn that. So that was a language she had along with the French, and then the Flemish, and then during the occupation she had to learn German, and then when we went to Spain she learned Spanish, and then, of course, English. So those were the languages she had. And when I brought her back to the states, she had to sharpen up her language. She had to learn a new country. She had to learn how to take care of a baby. And we didn't have a car. We got an ad in the newspaper to find a baby bed and we found where it was. And her, seventh months pregnant, we're walking to get this baby bed and then we carried the springs, and the bed, and the mattress. We carried it back to the apartment we were living in, which was not much of an apartment. So I brought her back to a living arrangement that was beneath her standard of living because she lived pretty well during the war because she would go out to the country with her bicycle. She could ride a bicycle like you wouldn't believe, drive 100 kilometers with a bicycle, and have

baggy pants that she'd fill up with potatoes and things that she could bring back. Butter, and eggs, and things like that. Bring back that you could have if you had a connection. So they lived pretty good during the war doing that. But her mother would not let her do anything around the kitchen. She didn't learn how to cook; she didn't do any cleaning. Her mother took care of her, cleaning her clothes and all that. So she was sort of spoiled and now she has to learn the language, learn the country, learn how to take care of a baby, and be at home while I was working all day long. We lived in a house, then we had a room that was a kitchen, but no running water, and we had a bedroom, and the house had one bathroom, which was downstairs. The people that owned the house used that bathroom. They rented it to another man and lady that were farmers. He would grow wheat. And that one bathroom was all we had, so it was bad living. And finally, we got to where we were able to -- and they didn't like having a baby, so we had to really take care of the baby not crying and everything. So we had a rough time for her, for my wife, but she was intelligent, and she worked, and she took ahold of responsibility, and became an outstanding mother and wife, and we had a happy marriage. Twenty-six years of marriage, six kids. I went to Salina, Kansas, which was my first

stateside assignment. I was assigned to the 301st Bomb Wing, which was an outstanding unit at that time commanded by Joe Kelly, who was a real gung-ho colonel. At that time, the wings were commanded by colonels. The authorized position of a wing commander is general, but they didn't make general until they after they left that job. They proved themselves at that job. And Joe Kelly, of course, became a general and he went out to California and when Truman went to Japan to have the treaty, he stayed at Kelly's, our commander's, home. That's where he stayed when he was in California on the way to Japan, so that's an interesting sideline. Ultimately, Horace M. Wade became the commander of the 301st. I joined it in Salina, Kansas and I became the personnel director as a sergeant, a first sergeant, assigning all the people that were being assigned to the unit that was becoming the 301st Bomb Wing, which was one of the wings which is our first line of defense against the Russians when we came in the Cold War. And I therefore became part of a combat unit and I had the air base group. And I would assign all the people that came into my unit and assign them to where they would go to the units. We had three battle squadrons and we had five, six squadrons A, B, C, D, F, were the air base group squadrons. The A was -- I forgot what the A was. B was the air police.

Electronics was A. D was food service. F was the black squadron, the service squadron. And I had responsibility for manning that whole thing, so I became a pretty good personnel officer even though I was not an officer. And one day, well, during that time the Army was trying to make itself an army because we were Army, and then we were Army Air Corps, and then we were Air Corps. And then September, 1947, we became an Air Force and that's when we became equal to the Navy and the Army on the standard of being a unit. Taking care of the air, and Navy taking care of the Navy, and the Army, of course, themselves.

MZ: If I could ask, what year was it that you got back from Europe?

AW: Nineteen forty-seven. And right about that time, concurrent with my rotation, the Army trying to develop themselves, initiated a warrant officer program. You know what a warrant officer is?

MZ: Yes.

AW: The grade between the enlisted and the commission. Refutably was supposed to be something that was formulated in France when they wanted to get somebody who could communicate with the lower-level people and then also communicate with the officers, they made them warrant officers. And they had a series of tests, three basic

tests. One of them was specialty, your specialty, one was a biographical survey, and one was an educational level and intelligence test. And I took two of the specialties, I took classification assignment as well as personnel, because when I came back from my reenlistment leave and reported into a bid for Germany, reported to Captain [Corona?], and he said, “OK, I’m going to assign you right to my office. You’re going to be my classification officer, NCO, classification assignment.” I said, “OK, but I want to take my leave first.” He said, “You’re just reporting in. You want to go on leave?” I said, “I’m entitled to it as my reenlistment furlough.” “OK,” he said. “Here,” and he hands me a 35-0-1, which was the classification manual. It was the manual that had an MOS, a number. For example, 6-0 was cook, 824 was mess sergeant. Along with this came a job description, and you had the grade, the level they were entitled to, and then the duties and tasks of that description. And that’s the way we classified people and then we assigned them by the MOS so we didn’t have to interview each one on assignment, just know that they were qualified if everybody did their job, and I became an expert on the manual, the classification manual. I knew all the MOS, and I knew the jobs, and I knew how to interview, and I became pretty

proficient as the classification assignment officer. And later, when the warrant officer test came out, the predominant number of warrant officers were people who were former commission officers that were getting rid of their pilots, and navigators, and all the other flying officers, but they were already commissioned. They were reenlisted as enlisted people, so they got pretty good grades. Then you had to find them a job and that was what I had to do. I had to find what I could do to find a job for a pilot. So the navigators are much easier, they're better educated. I can find them a position. But that was what I remember doing and knowing, the qualification that you ran into when you find people that can fly airplanes and nothing else. And I made warrant and 52% who made warrant were these former commission people, so I was unique from that standpoint. But warrant officers were notified for being qualified in their specialty because it was how they got their warrant. They got their warrant because of the qualification, and the specialty, and then that was your career field and you stayed in it. Where you'd get some people that, commission officers, for example, would rotate from one job to another, so they'd learn more than one job. But warrant officers became sought after individuals and we were regulars. And then we starting Rifing people,

reduction in force people, so I was interviewing people, captains, majors, lieutenants, colonels that we were pushing out of the military, and I was a warrant officer and I was staying. So that became a distinct advantage and I became noted for that, then we moved. Salina, Kansas was where I joined the 301st, which was not a good base, and we were directed to move into the choice bases of Air Force at that time, which were owned by Air Training Command, because they were here, and they were here during the war, and they got all the good bases. So we got Barksdale Air Force Base, which was a good base, and the Training Command that, but they couldn't do anything about it, so we took over the better bases. But when we got to Barksdale, the quarters were hard to find, so that became a problem, too, after we got to Barksdale. But it was a good assignment. So I stayed with the 301st Bomb Wing from Smoky Hill, to Barksdale Air Force Base, from being a first sergeant, to being a warrant office, to being a commission officer in the same outfit, which is an abnormality. They normally like to move you, but my commander was Horace Wade, Horace M. Wade. And when they would come after me to put me on a quota or move me some place, he would intercede and be able to retain me. One of the times they sent a message down after I got assigned to Second Air Force, when they were

either going to send me overseas or send me to Second Air Force, which is on the same base. Headquarters of Second Air Force had the two wings assigned to that base. So I was able to take the Second Air Force job and stay because I wanted to stay with my family if I could. And I stayed there and became classification and assignment officer of Second Air Force, which was a major position, a good job. The guy that I relieved, I think I may have told you, he was a rated guy and he was destined for future promotions. But they had a party at the officer's club and the general's wife was on the committee that organized the party, and she was part of the unit that went to a designer store in Shreveport, and got a model that they dressed and put in a window. Those are expensive things. They look just like a real person. And she had got one of those to use as a décor in the party, and somebody took it after the party, and put it on the front porch of the general, and it was there when everybody went to church, which is across from the general's house. They all saw it and that major lost his job that night.

MZ: Oh boy.

AW: And when he was reassigned, then they had to get somebody to take the classification and assignment job and I was the

best known classification guy available, so that's how I was moved to Second Air Force.

MZ: What year was that?

AW: It had to be 1948 or '49, I guess.

MZ: Let me back up a little bit there because there are a couple of things here that I missed asking you. Back to the Labor Supervision Company. What was it like working with all these prisoners? I mean, it seems a little bit odd that these prisoners would be willing to work for Americans.

AW: Absolutely no problem. The German soldier respects authority and if you had stripes on your arm or if you were the victor in the war, they were bowing to you. And I had a German first sergeant that could speak German, mine, an American, and if he took a cigarette out of his pocket to put in his mouth, before he could get it lit he had three Germans trying to light it for him. And you could get them, well, for example, here. Any time, any time at all in the squadron, you could find whatever you wanted to do. So one of the things I did, I asked the first sergeant and my interpreter if there was an artist and then he said, "We got anything you want." And I said, "Well, get me an artist that can paint my portrait." So that was the portrait the German PWs made for me.

MZ: That’s pretty good.

AW: Yes. I was falling asleep, trying to stay awake, but I had to model for him because, you know, partying every night.

MZ: I’m going to repeat some of this just so the recorder get this, but Mr. Wile has showed me a painting that one of the German soldiers had painted of him that’s on his wall.

AW: A portrait.

MZ: A portrait, yes.

AW: You could get them do anything. For example, one night, Lieutenant Bailey, he did the same when he got to Belgium. He was out with all the women, and he brought one back to the camp, and brought her to our tent, told me to get one of the doctors. And I got Murrell to find a doctor and he brought a young doctor up, and this gal takes her clothes off. She was an acrobat ice-skater, and she had sprained her thigh, and she wanted to know what he thought about it. He checked her out and said, “Well, it’s a sprain.” He said, “It’s a muscle sprain. It’s going to take lack of use to get over it,” he told Murrell, the translator. But that’s the kind of talent you could get. You could get a doctor or anything that you wanted. A carpenter, everything, all kinds of things you could make. They made jewelry out of a wrecked airplane, they’d get the aluminum and make a band for it, and then you’d put your watch on

it, and then inscribe it, and decorate it, and all that stuff. They had all of that. They were subservient. They would do anything you wanted them to do.

MZ: Do you think they were glad to be out of the war?

AW: Yes, I think. Well, that as the primary reason we moved them without losing them because there was nowhere for them to go. Everything was pretty devastated. You were just lucky to have a roof over your head and food to eat, even in Belgium, and France, and Germany. We bombed the daylights out of them.

MZ: So how many prisoners were there in the company?

AW: There were 250 in each one. I had 250, Cubbage had 250, but there were already several companies there already in the stockade. There must have been over a 1,000 PWs there.

MZ: And who was the company commander? Was it you?

AW: No, it was the captain, an infantry captain.

MZ: OK. And then, was Lieutenant Bailey like the executive officer?

AW: Well, he was the commander of our units and yes. He became sort of an adjutant to the captain, but the captain ran things.

MZ: And this first sergeant, you were first sergeant for the company? Is that right?

AW: Yes, for the Labor Supervision Company. The Labor Service Company were the Germans. And Cubbage was my counterpart in the other, the 1595th.

MZ: So how many American soldiers were there in the company if there were 250?

AW: Five. There were five in each company. First sergeant, enlisted five, and then Lieutenant Bailey, and the other one. There's only five supervision people.

MZ: Wow. For 250 German soldiers?

AW: Right. Now of course we had a guard detachment. That was separate. I didn't have anything to do with the guards.

MZ: Oh, OK. I'm curious because you mentioned Cubbage a lot of times. What was his first name?

AW: Thomas Hunter Cubbage.

MZ: Did you stay in touch with him after the war?

AW: No, I did not. I tried to find him here and these computers got all sophisticated. But I couldn't find him. (phone rings)

MZ: Let me pause this. We're good, we're good. Let me just turn this back on. OK, we're back. So we were talking about Mr. Cubbage. And you tried to find him?

AW: Yes, he was from Leitchfield, Kentucky and his father was a district attorney there in the area where they were. And I told you, I may have told you, that he had to wait until he

was 21 years of age to take the bar examination, which he took and passed, and then the first case he had, he had against his dad. He had to go against his dad, the district attorney. He beat him. Thomas Hunter Cubbage. I think he was the only boy in the family.

MZ: Huh, and you never found him?

AW: No. He'd have been proud of me and what I did if I had followed up on it. But when you start having kids, you don't have the time to do that. (laughter)

MZ: That's true. So do you have any particular recollections of the Labor Supervision battalion that stand out? Any funny or odd things that happened?

AW: Well, right after I made warrant officer, I was officer of the day, selected to be officer of the day, which means you're the commander of the base at that night. You're in charge. And the aerodrome officer called me and said, "We have a problem down here in the POL area," which is the fuel area where the fuel is there, the JP-4 fuel, gasoline. He said, "There's an overflow down here," and he said, "It's really not my job." He says, "You better get down here and take over because we got a problem." So I went down and there was a hose on a pipe leaning on it like this and it was spewing gasoline out into the area. And the pumping pits were being filled with gasoline, and it was

running into ditches, and it was a major problem. So they had called the air police and the fire department and I said, “Well, who’s in charge? What’s going on?” They said, “Well, you’re in charge.” I said, “OK, somebody find the nozzle to turn this pump off. We got to stop this fuel from pumping.” What happens is you have big tanks and when you drain the fuel out of them, they have to put water in there to fill the void so it doesn’t become vapor and explode. So when you fill it up with gas, you push the water out. That’s why this pipe was this way. But when fuel starts coming out, you’ve got to turn it off, which somebody didn’t do. So then the fuel was running into the area and the drainage would take it to draining ditches that circumvented the base. So you could fuel surrounding the base if you didn’t get the thing turned. So I got the casualty department, I called the first sergeant and got him up, I said, “OK, get the troops up, get them in battle gear. Tell them not to bring anything to smoke or to light. We can’t have any sparks. We’ve got a problem that could blow up the base.” So I was able to get that done and get a car going around the base every 15 feet so that they would make sure nobody get in the area. And got the fire department there, talked to them about what to do about it. They said, “Well, we don’t want to put foam on

it because if we put foam on it, it will trap, it won't evaporate. So we just want it to evaporate." He said, "You did the right thing by getting it turned off so the leakage is stopping. So it'll eventually evaporate." He said, "I think we have a handle on it if we don't have a fire." So around about two o'clock, I finally went to the higher chief, "It's OK. I'm going to let you have it now. If you need me, call me." And I went back, and was making notes on it to give to the commander the next day, and I made a pretty good detailed resume of what happened and what we did about it, and never heard a word.

MZ: Really?

AW: Nobody ever said anything to me, nobody ever questioned me or anything. It was quiet. Kept quiet. And nothing, we didn't have any trouble. But subsequently, the same thing happened, and it did get in the ditch, and it did ignite. The ditch had fire all the way around the base. They had trouble getting that out. So it was a dangerous thing that could have been really dangerous.

MZ: And where was this at?

AW: Smoky Hill Air Force Base.

MZ: Smoky Hill Air Force Base. You know, let me go back again because there was a question about the atom bomb. Do you remember where you were when you heard about the atom bomb?

AW: Yes. I was at my home on Laurel Street in Pennsylvania, Pottsville, Pennsylvania. We were playing football in front of a factory that had a wide-open parking area that we could play on and that's where we played.

MZ: Oh, well, that was Pearl Harbor, but I meant the atom bomb. Do you remember where you were when you heard that they had dropped it on Japan?

AW: Yes, I had to be Germany. I had to be Cherbourg, France. No. That was later. That was after D-Day.

MZ: Let's see. You say here you were in Cherbourg. But you don't remember anything, any talk about it, like, I mean, a bomb wiping out a whole city?

AW: Oh, everybody talked about it, but that was the other theatre, you know? We had a theatre of our own. I don't remember a whole lot of talk about it.

MZ: Do you remember hearing the war was over? Well, actually, since you're in Europe, what was it like when you heard that the war was over in Europe?

AW: We had a big party in downtown Cherbourg. That's where we all went. I was never a drinker, I didn't drink much, so I didn't get drunk. I never smoked, but I went with the troops, and we traded something for a bottle of gin, and that's what everybody was sipping on. I just wasn't a drinker. They used to get calvados in Cherbourg and all

the farmers made calvados, and they would have bottled it, and you'd get a bottle of that and our guys would always get drunk. And they'd have a bottle, but you'd pass it from guy to the other, you'd have to wait until the spiders, and the bugs, and the dirt at the bottom of the bottle settled to the bottom before you took your swig. I wouldn't drink that. But it sure made people drunk. We had a captain there, every night people would bring him home. They liked him, but he'd get drunk, and they'd have to bring him back to the guard, and get him bed.

MZ: What about when the war altogether was finally over with? When you had heard the Japanese's surrender and that was it, no more war?

AW: Well, I was at Smoky Hill when that happened, I guess.

MZ: Oh, so you're already back in the United States?

AW: Yes. I'm getting mixed up with those dates now.

MZ: That would have been like August of '45.

AW: I was not in the states in August of '45. I would have been in Cherbourg. When was V-E Day?

MZ: V-E Day was --

AW: May of '45.

MZ: Yes, May of '45.

AW: See, just two months later, the Japs gave up and I was still in Cherbourg.

MZ: OK. Let's see. So you told me earlier that you retired military. How many years altogether did you spend in the service?

AW: Thirty years.

MZ: Thirty years?

AW: Over 30. A little over 30 years, yes.

MZ: So you got out in maybe like, 197--

AW: Three.

MZ: Seventy-three?

AW: Right.

MZ: So how do you become a lieutenant colonel? I mean, I think it's interesting you started out as a private, they barely let you in.

AW: OK, let me tell you how it worked. I told you I was interviewing all the people coming into this base, and I interviewed a staff sergeant, 405, and I remember him because he wasn't real strong, and I put him in the communications squadron because I had a good first sergeant, and I tried to put people where they could get training as well as be productive. And then he subsequently came up to me and came in to see me, he said, after a while, he said, "I need to get sworn in." I said, "Well, you might get sworn out here." I said, "I don't about sworn in." I said, "What are you talking about?"

“Well,” he said, “I got a letter from the President here giving me a reserve commission and I want to get sworn in to accept the commission.” I said, “Let me look at it.” I look at it, I said, “OK, we can handle that.” I said, “But warrant officers cannot render oaths, so I have to take you to Lieutenant Tilke, but tell me how you did this.” He said, “Well, there’s this one public Circular 101 that I became familiar with.” I go, “I don’t know about that.” He said, “Well, it’s a facility for making application for reserve commission.” I said, “OK.” So I looked it up, I found it. It was if you were a first three-grader, you were eligible to apply for it. You had to go before a board. And I did the requirement and I got my appointment as Second Lieutenant in the Air Force Reserve. And my mother sent me a letter wanting to know what kind of trouble I was in because she got a letter from the president and, “You must have done something bad.” I said, “No, I didn’t do anything bad, Mom.” I said, “What does the letter say?” “Well, it says something about a commission.” And I said, “OK, I know what that is. You have to send it to me. You get Alice to help you put it in an envelope and get it to me. They’re giving me a reserve commission in the Air Force Reserve. It might be something I will need later on.” And that’s how I got the commission

in the Reserve. Now the Reserve has reserve headquarters in Denver, outside of Denver, the Lowry Air Force Base. And ultimately, I became when I retired and got with the personal data system in headquarters Air Force level at Randolph, I became possessor of the mass of personnel files for the whole Air Force. I had the active, reserve, and guard records, computer records, for the whole Air Force. My section was responsible for maintaining and modifying that personnel data system. Probably the most sophisticated personnel data system at that time. And then the reserve unit was under my direction, so an anything-relative system. But after I knew I had a reserve commission, then they started calling people to active duty because of the wars that were constantly being developed. I put in an application for call to active duty so I could get called to active duty as an officer, instead of a warrant officer. I'll talk about that later, about the KD, but. Well, that happened, and then I was moved to Second Air Force, as I told you, and then they called me, they sent a message from headquarters telling me to report to their SAC Headquarters to be interviewed for assignment at SAC Headquarters. That was a directive, there's no questions about it. You're given a directive, then you cut some water, and then to report to SAC Headquarters. And I

did. I reported to SAC Headquarters, at that time SAC Headquarters was in the Martin bomber plant adjacent to where they built the headquarters. A three-story modern building, three stories up, and three stories under, where the red telephone is. It's all underground. And I reported to the bomber plant and laid out all over trying to find where to go and finally got directed to the personnel director and to the colonel that was going to interview me. As I walked into his inner office, along the walls they had private offices, but out where they build the airplanes, it was just big open rooms where they had to build the airplane. But these rooms were where the colonel's were, and there were offices outside of his room where they sectioned and set up. And I walked in there and I ran into a guy named Major Sampson, who was right down the hall from me at headquarters Second Air Force. He had the training function. And I said, "What are you doing up here, Major Sampson?" He said, "I'm up here looking for a reserve officer who has an application in for call to active duty, and I screen them, and select them, and call them back to duty." I said, "Well, why don't you call me back to duty?" And he said, "Are you a reserve officer?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Do you have an application in for active duty?" I said, "Yes." He said Mabel, or Susie, he

said some form of girl, he said, “That file over there.” And he even named the file and he said, “Get in there and see if you can find an application for active duty for Albert L. Wile.” She was back in a minute, she says, “Yes,” she goes, “Here it is.” And he looked at it and he opened it up, said, “Hell yes.” He said, “OK,” handed it back, “Theresa, call him back to duty.” And that’s how I got called to active duty.

MZ: Wow. So when do you become a lieutenant colonel?

AW: Well, you get promoted in the reserve. Now I’m a reserve commission officer, but I’m a regular warrant officer. So while I was a warrant officer and got called to active duty, I became a captain on active duty. But I never made major because they stopped promoting us that way, they were trying to get rid of the reserve officers. Ten years’ commission service, 20 years’ service in the separation. So I never made major and never made lieutenant colonel on active duty, but when you retire, you retire in the highest reserve grade held, provided you had 10 years’ commission and you had to have 20 years. So that’s how I made lieutenant colonel in the reserves. And when you retire, they had what they called a hip-pocket promotion. If you’re on active duty and you had a high reserve grade, you

could retire in your highest reserve grade held and that's how I retired as lieutenant colonel.

MZ: Wow. And it all starts with being a private?

AW: Right.

MZ: Just barely getting into the service.

AW: Right.

MZ: In later years did your eye issue become...

AW: Oh, all the time.

MZ: All the time?

AW: All the time. When I had a regular warrant and I got out of labor from the Army for the warrant officer. When I got called to active duty and took the physical, the sergeant, his name was Nick Maselli, he said, "We can't call you to active duty." He said, "Your eyes are below minimum." He said, "Well, you can't come on active duty." I said, "Well, I am on active duty." I said, "I got a waiver for that." He said, "Let me see a copy of the waiver." So I went over to my file and I got the copy of the waiver, which is the 101 Circular waiver, and it gave me a bilateral waiver for being underweight and below minimum vision. He said, "Oh, that's good." He wrote at the edge of the physical, waiver granted by Brigadier General Whitehead on such, and such a day and they used that waiver to bring me on active duty and I'm not sure that was legal.

MZ: Was it ever an issue after that?

AW: Well, when I applied for a regular commission when I was -- you know, I wanted to be in the war and I ended up in the best bomb wing SAC had, 301st Bomb Wing, I mentioned it already, and then when I went to Germany, I joined the 36th Tac. Fighter Wing. Flying F-86 at that time. And in SAC, when you're in SAC, you get to believe it's the best command and you're in the best group of people because you're all hand-selected. You get what we called "SACumcized." And then when I went back and became a member of SAC Headquarters, I was the assignment guy that assigned all the overseas people going to SAC bases. We had SAC bases so we took our best people to tend to our bases overseas and then we brought them back and SAC maintained their proficiencies that way. But we were one-third of the Air Force at that time and we were the primary defense to save us from being beaten by the Russians. And our bombers, during the Cuban missile crisis, and I was at SAC Headquarters at that time, we had people that went into the section, the war room, down underneath the headquarters three floors down. After you get to the first floor down, to get any further you had to pass an MP to get further down and you had to be escorted after you got down there, no matter what. I was top security cleared, I still needed

to be escorted. So it was a top-secret operation where the red telephone was. When the missile crisis occurred, I lived right outside the base. I thought I better get rid of my wife and send them to Arkansas or some place because if we came to a nuclear war, certainly SAC Headquarters was going to be hit because we were surely a target that they had for us and we had targets for them. Our crews had targets and we had special crews proficiency test continually that became select crews or combat crews and the select crews were the ones they'd target. They knew if the bell rang where they were going. They also knew they weren't coming back and that's why we had spot promotions. We would promote people temporarily while they were on select crews and all the time they were on select crews, they had a higher rank. I became part of the combat unit because the 301st Bomb Wing, we had airplanes in Korea in the war and we were in it. When I went to Bitburg, I found out that despite what I thought about SAC, I found out that the crews we had at Bitburg, the fighter-bomber crews, we had on 15-minute alert. So if the bell rang, 15 minutes after the bell rang, the guys on alert would calibrate their weapon, and they would take off, and they'd be over the target dropping their bombs, trying to get back, which they had little chance of getting back because they'd go in

this way, go this way, release the bomb so it would go out there, and they'd turn around this way, and try to get back. But getting back after a deep end rush, it would have been difficult. So I was, again, in a combat element, even though I was not personally in combat. I was supporting the guys that were flying the airplanes, that were losing their lives.

MZ: Right, wow.

AW: So I was doing what I wanted to do. I had the best job of my career, even though I never served as a lieutenant colonel. Most of the time, my jobs were either for major or for the lieutenant colonel and I became the personnel director for the 36th Tac. Fighter Wing, and we had five tactical squadrons on four bases, and I was the DP. We had such guys as that were double jet aces, had one guy as lieutenant colonel, had the fastest man alive, Pete Everest. I was a captain, director of personnel, the only non-colonel on Colonel Putnam's staff. Colonel Putnam was the colonel that was with MacArthur in the Philippines and he put his crew chief and his airplane together with all kinds of wiring, and making missions when they're the one making mission, until finally he couldn't do that anymore, and he was able to get on a boat back to Australia. He became a colonel quick after, during the Japanese war. He

also got a distinguished service cross for his service under MacArthur and he worked with MacArthur on the “White Paper” wrote to channel the way we were going to do things after the war, the way MacArthur controlled Japan and we were running Japan. And that’s the way MacArthur did, he ran what he was in charge of and that’s how he got into trouble with Truman. But Putnam didn’t have a lot of characteristics of MacArthur. He was a little guy, but he was very, well, the first thing he did, he walked into our base. Our base moved to Bitburg from Fürstenfeldbruck, which was the West Point of the air for Goring, and we had Goring’s desk in our commander’s office. And Putnam walks in and he says, “What the hell is that?” And I said, “Well, that’s Hermann Goring’s desk.” “Get it out of here,” he says. “I don’t want that in my office.” He said, “I’m in the United States Air Force, my desk is gray. You know what I’m talking ’bout? That’s what I want in here.” And nobody wanted the desk and it ended up down in the civil engineering department back in the corner. Nobody wanted it and it’d be worth a lot of money. It was a prized possession. But Putnam didn’t want it.

MZ: Was it a big desk?

AW: Oh, it was massive. And it had all kinds of secret compartments and drawers with things in it.

MZ: But nobody wanted it?

AW: No, when they found out Putnam didn't want it.

MZ: OK, that makes sense. (laughter) Let me ask you this. Out of your whole experience of World War II, what memory stands out the most?

AW: Well, I think when I became the director of personnel for the 36th Tac. Fighter Wing, when I was the base personnel officer until a major came in, and then the major had to take the job, and I had to take the personnel officer job. The major didn't like the fact that I was running the function that he took over and people wanted to talk to me more than they wanted to talk to them. So concurrent with them, we had a base in Soesterberg, Holland, the only base in Holland that we had. And my lieutenant colonel at the wing level who was in charge of personnel, on the way back from Soesterberg with his TTY, was in an automobile accident at the same time that Colonel Putnam was having a staff meeting that he had periodically, which we called wingdings, where all the squadron commanders and all the staff officers would be called to a meeting. Well, that was to happen the day that he was supposed to be coming back to take over the personnel functions, that was going to be that staff meeting that day. Well, the sergeant major called me and he said, "Al." He said, "You know

Colonel" -- I forgot what his name was, Russell, I think -- he said, "He's in an accident on the way back so he can't take the staff meeting tomorrow." And Colonel Putnam said, "You can take it." (laughter) I said, "OK." I said, "Do you have charts made for the colonel?" He said, "Yes." I said, "What's the subject?" He told me and I said, "OK, I know. Bring the charts to me so I can look at them and then I can handle that. I know it." So they all knew, all the staff, that I was the only non-colonel there and now I'm briefing the whole staff, the best fighter wing in Germany, and I'm telling them what they're doing well and what they're not doing well. And one of the guys that had the 461st was the fastest man alive, Pete Everest, and he was always working with the research and development people. In other words, he didn't know nothing about the Air Force. He was never in the real active Air Force and now he's a squadron commander. And the first thing he did was refuse to let any enlisted people look at officer's records and the enlisted people run the Air Force, the NCOs run the Air Force. So when I found that out, I went over and had a talk with him and told him that that's the first thing I wanted him to change. (laughter) Here I am telling him what I want him to change and I'm a captain and he

said, “OK.” And then when we had the staff meeting, he was there.

F1: Hi, Al.

AW: Hi.

F1: Oh, it’s not a good time.

AW: Well, I’ll take it.

F1: Oh, I’m sorry.

MZ: That’s OK, I’ll pause it.

F1: Yes, could you?

MZ: One last question for you and then I think we’ll finish up.

AW: I’m sure we missed a lot.

MZ: No, no, no. Regarding World War II, what about World War II stands out to you? Your time in Europe, your time with the Labor Supervision Company, what about World War II stands out to you, even today?

AW: Well, I think the thing that I’m impressed with, having been in SAC during critical periods, we were taught to believe in our mission and to believe that we could accomplish our mission. And we believed it. I knew in the Cuban missile crisis that we were not far from being in a nuclear war. We couldn’t have done it. We were worried about it because we would have learned firsthand what goes on in the war because we would’ve been hit. We would have

hit them, but they would have hit us. We would have been bombed.

MZ: Well, it's a good thing that it never came to that.

AW: Well, yes. In World War II, everybody participated, even to the point of doing things that you know could cost your life, you did it.

MZ: It's true.

AW: And we had people like that. I had to take care of the casualty reporting of people that killed and I didn't have to do that during the war because I wasn't in that business at that time, but I had to do it several times. Like we lost a refueling airplane north of Cologne in Germany. It blew up. And going back to the states after being over here, you'd take passengers, and we had not only crew, but we had passengers onboard the airplane. Then you have to worry about whether the manifests were turned in, whether you got the right names, but you're close to the fact that you can get killed in this business. We lost airplanes because we were flying our airplanes over Russians and they shot down a couple of us. We got out as graciously as we could, but we knew that people were, the people in charge of those flights, they knew that the Russians had licenses to shoot us down because we were over their territory.

MZ: When was this?

AW: Oh, we had several of them lost. They weren't publicized a lot. It was in the newspaper that they were lost, but what they were doing was never publicized.

MZ: But this is after World War II, right?

AW: Yes, this is the Cold War.

MZ: OK. Well, you know, I think you've answered the questions that I have today.

AW: I knew, I felt like SAC could do their job, and I felt the same way about the 36th Tac. Fighter Wing, whose bombs would be already exploded before the SAC bombs were even dropped, when I came to the 36th thinking we were the best. (laughter) Our Air Force is good.

MZ: Yes, we do have a good Air Force.

AW: I'm worried about it now. I'm worried about what the President's doing to us.

MZ: How so?

AW: Well, we're not as capable as we used to be. We cannot fight a two front war now. We don't have the capability, I don't think. You can't cut our Air Force back to where it was before World War II and think we can do what we need to do. We got to see if we can get something done about that because you can't fight an enemy if you don't even want to name it. We're fighting a religious war and we're not recognizing it. We got to get the new Congress in and see

if we can do better than the old one has done because we're not doing well. You can't spend more money than you make. You can't do that at home, you can't do that with the government, and all Obama does is spend money and give it away. He's got people that would rather get money from the government and work. That's contrary to the way we thought in World War II. If we had had the same attitude in World War II, we'd be speaking German. Well, the doctor, Carson, Ben Carson, may try to get the nomination. He said when he was talking about the "Star-Spangled Banner," he said, "You have your hand over your heart at the end of it, as it ends, 'the free and the brave.'" He said, "Bear in mind that you can't be free unless you're brave." (laughter)

MZ: That's a good point.

AW: It is.

MZ: OK, well, I think that covers everything. Everything that I came to ask you today.

AW: Right. A lot of it's probably not information that I thought you'd be looking for because the things that you remember are the things that were challenges for you and you overcame the challenge. I didn't say anything about my family or much about my family, about my six children, five boys and one girl. Tried to have a girl because my wife, as I told you, was a seamstress and wanted to get a girl

that she could teach to sew. And so she's left-handed and you can't teach somebody that's left-handed how to do what you do right-handed.

MZ: Oh really? Oh boy.

AW: Even knitting.

MZ: Did she ever learn anyway?

AW: No, she's not a seamstress. But she works for IBM, 34 years of service at IBM, she's ready to retire.

MZ: Well, that's pretty good.

AW: She's an executive with IBM. She makes lots of money.

MZ: You know, how do you spell your wife's first name?

AW: Victorine? V-I-C-K-T-O-R-I-N-E [sic].

MZ: R-I-N-E. OK. All right.

AW: We always called her Vicky, and when the kids got old enough, she went to work at the best stores in San Antonio. And all the socialites of San Antonio found out about her and she was fitting all the big shots in San Antonio. They knew her.

MZ: Oh, really? Wow.

AW: Frost Brothers, [Nan?] King of the King Ranch, all the mayor's wives. Fit the mayor's wife, they got divorced, and then fit the new wife.

MZ: When you say Frost, do you mean like the Frost Bank?

AW: Frost Bank, yes, but the Frost Brothers mercantile store was a department store not associated with the bank. But the Frost Bank, she fitted one lady named Frost. They would come out to our house and be fitted. And she came out to our house one day and I was in the yard and helped her out of the car. It was a brand new Mercedes and I opened it up because it pulled up, and she was angry because she got a ticket. I don't know what she said, something about -- I don't even think she knew how fast she was going. But Vick used to fit her. She was good at what she did and a good, smart lady.

MZ: It sounds like it.

AW: Our kids are all successful. The guy that called me there, he's part owner of an electric company, all these water tanks, and the water we drink. Electric work on the pumping stations from the lake to the tank there and the tanks here, that's all his work, and his company does most of the ones in this area, he does.

MZ: Well, good. You must be very proud of your children.

AW: Yes, they're all good. They're all close. We never have bickering among my kids. And if somebody needs money, I only have one that isn't well off and he makes good money too. He's the electrician in charge of refurbishing the Texas A&M stadium. He has nightshift, dayshift, 10 hours a

day, seven days a week working on that stadium. And he's in charge of all those men. He's a good electrician, Ron's a good electrician, and they're all trained, several of the kids are trained by them. If you talk to anyone in the electrical business in this area and they know about the Wiles, the Wile brothers.

MZ: OK. Well, let me take off our recorder here because I think we're just about done. Before I turn it off, I want to, sir, from behalf of the museum and myself, thank you for your service.

AW: Well, you're certainly welcome.

END OF AUDIO FILE