

REECE B. ROBERTSON

Salt Lake City, Utah

An Interview By

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March 7, 2002

**SAVING THE LEGACY: An Oral History of
Utah's World War II Veterans**

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THIS IS AN INTERVIEW WITH REECE B. ROBERTSON ON MARCH 7, 2002. THE INTERVIEWER IS BENJAMIN J. BAHLMANN. THIS IS THE PROJECT "SAVING THE LEGACY: AN ORAL HISTORY OF UTAH'S WORLD WAR II VETERANS." TAPE NOS. 498-500.

BEN: Today is March 7, 2002. We're in the home of Reece B. Robertson in Salt Lake City, Utah. This is Ben Bahlmann conducting the interview. When and where were you born?.

REE: I was born May the 5th, 1920. The Mexicans celebrate my birthday, Cinco de Mayo.

BEN: Of course (laughs). Where was that at?

REE: I was born in Lovell, Wyoming.

BEN: What were your parents' names?

REE: Bryant Robertson and Amelia Robertson.

BEN: And how many were in your family?

REE: Just the three of us. I have one brother and one sister.

BEN: And where do you fit in?

REE: I'm the oldest one. My brother joined the National Guard, same as I did, but since he was only fourteen, he had to backdate the date of his birth four years. The captain of the unit knew how old we were.

BEN: They were all local, right?

REE: They were all local, and I'd say about a third of them were underage when they enlisted.

BEN: What were your parents doing in Lovell, Wyoming?

REE: My father was a farmer and at that time, they were exempting farmers from the draft, so I could have gotten a deferment, but I decided I'd go ahead and put my year in. And, of course, before the year was up we hit Pearl Harbor.

BEN: Before we get there, what kind of farm?

REE: Just an irrigated farm, much like we have around here. We had sugar beets, grain and hay.

BEN: Were your parents from that area as well? Or what brought them to that area?

REE: No, my father was born in Spanish Fork, and my mother was born in that same area, generally. My father helped colonize this colony up in this area.

BEN: So that's what brought them up there?

REE: That's what brought them up there.

BEN: Did you stay there the whole time? Did you go to school there?

REE: I went to school before the war. I had one year at the University of Wyoming.

BEN: But the elementary school, it was all there?

REE: It was all there. The town was about 2,000 people. It's even a little smaller now.

BEN: What kind of things did you do growing up? As a young man, what kind of activities could you engage yourself in, in that area?

REE: Well, being the farm, it took most of my time on the farm. It was about four miles out, so I didn't participate in any athletics.

BEN: So, your chores were pretty much helping out on the farm?

REE: Yes.

BEN: What kind of chores did you help your father with?

REE: Well, we did everything.

BEN: How many acres?

REE: He had about 120 acres; about eighty of it was under crops.

BEN: When it comes to the farm, is that just a two-man operation, or did you bring in any other family members, uncles, aunts or hired help at all?

REE: No, we did it ourselves. The most unpleasant job was thinning beets. Those beets took a lot of labor. But we did most of our—my brother and I and my father—took care of the labor.

BEN: Did the farm increase in size as you got older?

REE: No. Well, when we got out of the war, my brother and I bought another farm.

BEN: Before you and your brother came along, it was just your father working the farm?

REE: Right.

BEN: And was it still about eighty acres, or was it smaller?

REE: It was about eighty acres.

BEN: All right. How about any dairy cattle? Did you have any at all?

REE: We just had one or two cows for milk cows.

BEN: Just for personal, family use?

REE: Just personal use.

BEN: And then horses? Did you have a tractor?

REE: Well, we had horses mostly until a little later on when we got more mechanized. We had one tractor we plowed with. We later on got a tractor where you could put cultivating, and things like that on it. You could put mowers on it and things like that.

BEN: That was all pre-war?

REE: Yes, pre-war.

BEN: You said the beet season was the most difficult. I'm not sure exactly how that works—I know you have to top them—but do you remove that from the ground, or can you plow them up?

REE: They have a special plow that plows them up in the fall, and then they're put into kind of windrows, and then we'd top them and throw them on the wagon or the truck.

BEN: And that's the hard work?

REE: Yes, the thinning was. I told my father one time, I said, "When I grow up I'll do anything to get off this farm. I'll even join the Army" (laughs). He laughed.

BEN: During the harvesting seasons, did the community help each other, or just on your own farm? You didn't help someone else, and their boys didn't help you?

REE: Sometimes we would do it that way, because if you were thrashing it would take a bigger crew, so we'd help each other.

BEN: Were you much of a hunter?

REE: No. What I did—We carried in the pickup was a shotgun, in case we had to shoot a pheasant to get it out of the road (laughs). Actually, when the hunting season was on, we were in school or working on the farm, so we didn't have too much of an opportunity for hunting.

BEN: How would you get to school? You said it was four miles away. Was there a school bus?

REE: A school bus would pick us up in the morning and at night.

BEN: Did you enjoy school? Was it a break from the farm?

REE: Well, it was all right.

BEN: Did you excel in one particular subject?

REE: No, I didn't excel in any particular subject.

BEN: Okay. How about hobbies or any talents—things that you might have done on your free time when you got that?

REE: Well, my parents were interested in having us do some kind of musical, and we had a trumpet between my brother and I, but I dropped out. Later on, he was in the high school band. He'd go to all these places with the band, and I would stay home and do the chores. So I figured that had to change (laughs). So one summer I picked up the clarinet, and I managed to get in the band. So I was about the third or fourth clarinetist, I guess. But that's the only music I had.

BEN: Why did your parents want you to get involved in music? Were they musical themselves?

REE: No, but they had a piano. They tried to get us to do that, but we didn't do that. But, no.

BEN: You were raised in the LDS faith, is that correct?

REE: Right.

BEN: Was there an active church community?

REE: There was, I would say, about fifty percent of the community was LDS.

BEN: And was your family active at that time?

REE: Yes, they were active.

BEN: Were there activities to participate in through the church?

REE: Most of our activities were through the church, yes.

BEN: Was there any kind of scouting program?

REE: No.

BEN: Was there any influence, like the National Guard, any influence in your life in respects to military, other than yourself, joining the National Guard? Was your father in World War I? Or any uncles?

REE: Not my dad. I had an uncle who was in World War I. But, no, Dad never was and most of the people I knew weren't active in the military. The reason my brother and I did it is because we got, as I say, there weren't too much to do around there and so going to drill once a week was kind of an activity. And then we'd have two weeks of camp during the summer and it got us away from the farm.

BEN: Right before we get to there, how did the '30's and the Depression affect your family in your memories? Were you aware of this?

REE: Yes, I was aware of it.

BEN: In what way?

REE: Well, we grew most of everything we ate. My mother canned everything. We had our own meat. We'd kill a cow or sheep or something like that for meat. So really, it was kind of tough, but we really got by all right.

BEN: So food wasn't too much of a concern.

REE: Yeah, my mother boasted one summer that she'd only spent at the grocery store about a dollar and forty-nine cents. We grew everything we needed.

BEN: So temperature and climate-wise?

REE: It's pretty much like it is here.

BEN: It worked out okay? Nothing really affected you?

REE: No.

BEN: Did you have any transient community come through at all? People looking for work?

REE: Not really.

BEN: Did anyone participate in any of the government programs during that time?

REE: No.

BEN: Any work projects?

REE: Yeah, they did have those, but we didn't do it.

BEN: Okay. Were you aware of current events globally at all? I don't know at that age, did you pay much attention to what was going on in Africa and Italy?

REE: Not particularly.

BEN: What year did you graduate from high school?

REE: I don't really know. I think it was about '38—'37, '38—something like that.

BEN: Okay. So you actually joined the National Guard while you were still in high school?

REE: Right.

BEN: And how did you first hear about that? Did it form up while you were there, or was it already in place?

REE: It was already in place, and everybody knew about it, and there were several of them joining. As I say, one of my teachers in high school was the captain of the National Guard.

BEN: Where was the training done? Right there?

REE: We had the horses and it was a cavalry unit, so we trained with rifles and horses and so forth.

BEN: What year in school did you get involved with that?

REE: I think I was about a sophomore.

BEN: Really. Okay. What age were you supposed to have been to get in?

REE: You were supposed to be eighteen. As a matter of fact, at that age your parents had to sign for you.

BEN: So, sophomore probably doesn't work. You were probably a little older, then, if you had to be eighteen, right? But you didn't have to fib about your age?

REE: On the application, I just changed my age two years.

BEN: Oh, you changed it two years?

REE: I changed it. I backdated two years.

BEN: Oh, you did as well. Your brother did as well?

REE: Yes, he did. He backdated his date of birth four years. I only backdated mine two.

BEN: (laughs) Of the other boys your age, how many boys were involved in the National Guard as well? Was it pretty much everyone?

REE: They were all local. And a lot of them did the same thing I did.

BEN: So it was a cavalry unit. Did they provide horses? What kind of things did they give a National Guard unit at that time?

REE: Well, since this was a horse unit, we had horses there and they didn't have enough. When some were drilling on horses the others would have to do something else because they didn't have enough horses to put us all on at once.

BEN: Could you bring your own?

REE: No.

BEN: (laughs) I was just wondering. I'm sure the community had enough horses. So you specifically joined the National Guard because it was a change of pace, something to do, you said, two weeks of summer?

REE: Two weeks in the summer.

BEN: Were they maneuvers with another outfit?

REE: Yes, they would join...see this was a troop, they called it Troop A, and during the summer active duty, we joined with other groups in the National Guard. The National Guard in Wyoming had several other units, and they'd all come together. Sometimes we'd go down to [Camp] Guernsey; sometimes we went to Fort Lewis, Washington.

BEN: Just to run maneuvers?

REE: Yes, and they would rent horses to make it so that everybody had a horse.

BEN: What kind of things did you do in the National Guard as a horse unit there? Do you remember what kinds of things would you train on? Were you still working on charging on horses with rifles?

REE: No, they did have, before I joined up there, a bunch of long swords that they practiced with, but when we got in they didn't do that. We had a pistol, an automatic pistol. On horses, we were trained to shoot both to the front, to the side and to the rear.

BEN: While on horseback?

REE: While on horseback. And you had to be on the gallop. And believe you me, it was difficult when a horse was galloping to hit anything very accurately and if you see those movies where people are shooting off the horse (laughs)...of course, sometimes we

could hit the targets. Then, of course, we had the rifles when we'd go out, when we were on horses. We practiced, like an infantry unit would. As a matter of fact, they had these big four-by-four trucks that they used to move the men and horses around in. That was it.

BEN: It's interesting, though, that you actually did have to shoot while on horseback. That sounds exciting; it's kind of interesting.

REE: Well, they had a course there where you'd run around and you had to change the clip in your pistol—we had these pistol clips—and you had to keep your horse at a gallop all the time, moving around there. Then they had this extra clip in your mouth or your teeth and you'd pull it out and you would change the clip all the time your horse was galloping around this course.

BEN: For National Guard, did you actually receive payment for your time while you were training?

REE: Oh, yes. Now, as you know, during World War II, payment for a private was a dollar a day—thirty dollars a month—so we got the same thing. So when we went to drill at night, we got a dollar. If you were a sergeant, you got two dollars, or whatever it was. So we got paid. And during summer camp we got paid. As a matter of fact, the state of Wyoming would give us a little extra bonus. In addition to the dollar a day, they'd give us a dollar a day. So we made a handsome sum of two dollars a day.

BEN: You did this for a total of...even after you graduated?

REE: Well, yes. When I went to school at Laramie, they had a similar unit at Laramie, Wyoming. So I would go down there and I would get credit and get paid. So I did it, I stayed with the National Guard until we were activated on February 24, 1941.

BEN: How often would you go?

REE: Once a week. Four times a month.

BEN: And interestingly, one of the high school teachers, you said, was the captain.

REE: Actually, he was the stake president, too (laughs).

BEN: So he definitely knew everyone's age, then.

REE: And when I went to sign up, there was a person standing in front of me, and he swore him in, he raised his hand and swore him in, so when I came up he said, "You heard what I said to him? The same goes to you. Sign here!"

BEN: Was the outfit run with military discipline, or was it because you knew everyone so well, it was almost a club more, or did it definitely feel military?

REE: Well, you knew everyone. I'm not saying...we had discipline, all right. You had to salute and so forth. We had the usual military discipline, but it wasn't very strict.

BEN: So it was pretty enjoyable, then?

REE: Yes, it was enjoyable. At that time, a dollar was worth (laughs)...and also it was interesting. They taught us how to shoot. They had practice courses. We had one person who was an expert with a rifle, and he would teach us. So until I joined the National Guard, my expertise with a rifle wasn't too good. But after I got this training, it was a lot better.

BEN: So when you graduated from high school, did you immediately apply for the university?

REE: I think the next year I went to the University of Wyoming.

BEN: In Laramie, you said?

REE: Laramie, Wyoming.

BEN: Did you have any specific objectives in mind?

REE: No, I didn't.

BEN: Had your father had a higher education at all?

REE: No. I don't even know if he graduated from high school or not.

BEN: Where did you get the idea, then, to go to the university? What influenced that decision?

REE: Well, one of the ways in which you escape from a small town was to get an education. And so I was going to get an education. I didn't know exactly what I wanted—general courses—but that little town turned out a lot of college graduates.

BEN: Growing up in a small town, how did you realize that things could be better, more exciting, possibly? What things influenced you? Was there a media influence? What made you realize there are things possibly bigger than where you were?

REE: I can't remember anything particularly; all I knew was I wanted to get off that farm.

BEN: (laughs) All right. Were you just taking general courses for that first year?

REE: Yes, general courses. They asked me what I wanted to do and I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I said, "Economics." But I don't know how I ever would have used that.

BEN: Okay. And that was 1940?

REE: Yeah, about 1940.

BEN: When you were in the university, did world events become more clear?

REE: Not particularly. I wasn't particularly interested.

BEN: But you were still participating in the National Guard?

REE: Yes.

BEN: The money that you received in the National Guard, did you give that to the family? Or was that something you were allowed to keep? Particularly in your high school years, did you turn that money over to your mother?

REE: No, we generally had that for our own expenditures. That was about the only expenditures we had.

BEN: What were you prone to spend your money on? Anything specific?

REE: No particular thing.

BEN: Did you have a movie house in town?

REE: Yes, we had a movie house. And we'd buy something, maybe clothes or something.

BEN: So that winter of '41...

REE: I didn't go to school then, because I heard that they were going to mobilize. So I didn't go to school. So the last semester of '40 and the first part of '41, I didn't go to school. As a matter of fact, I went back to Chicago. What happens is, see we were shipping sheep and if you had a carload of sheep, the train you'd ride with...theoretically, you were going there to make sure your livestock was taken care of. Actually, I didn't see them (laughs). But they went into Chicago and then they paid your ticket back. So I went into Chicago. I knew some people from Wyoming there, and I decided I'd stay there for a while.

BEN: Were they your father's sheep?

REE: My father's sheep, yes. What they would do, you would send them to some slaughterhouse, like Chicago or Omaha or things, and they would give you the best prices you could get.

BEN: Nothing closer than Chicago?

REE: Well, I went to Billings, Montana, It was the so-called big town. It was about a hundred miles, but then it wasn't very big. But I only stayed in Chicago there until just before they activated me, then I came back.

BEN: So you were in Chicago, then, when Pearl Harbor happened?

REE: No, no. We were activated before Pearl Harbor.

BEN: Oh, okay. I didn't catch that.

REE: See, as the military build up, they activated several units in the National Guard, and this was one of them.

BEN: So in Chicago, you said you had friends there?

REE: Yes, I stayed with friends.

BEN: Were you working or just bumming around?

REE: I was working. I worked for Montgomery Ward. I went and applied for it and they said, "Well, since you're on the farm, we'll put you where they have all these things you put on horses and stuff like that." So they assigned me to the agricultural section of the store.

BEN: Did you like Chicago? Was that the change you were looking for?

REE: (laughs) Well, it was a change all right. But that's where I got my social security number and so forth.

BEN: So you knew they were mobilizing?

REE: Apparently. I heard they were going to mobilize. I wasn't sure. I heard they were.

BEN: Did you mobilize with the Laramie unit?

REE: I didn't go to Laramie. So when I came back I went back to the Lovell unit, and when they mobilized, they brought us in as a bunch of draftees and sent us to Fort Lewis, Washington.

BEN: So it says they mobilized your unit on the 24th of February of '41.

REE: Right.

BEN: So that put you into active duty. Were you excited about that? Do you have any thoughts on that?

REE: Not particularly.

BEN: I mean, it changed from one day a week to twenty-four/seven.

REE: Right.

BEN: How did that change? They activated the unit and did they take you out of Wyoming?

REE: Yes, we stayed around there for two or three weeks or four weeks, then they shipped us to Fort Lewis, Washington.

BEN: Now, was there any change? Was there new equipment issued? What kind of things changed from when you were in National Guard to actually mobilized?

REE: Actually, they gave us more horses. And it was then that they got those big trucks. See, the cavalry unit's duty was primarily to reconnoiter. And when you're on—you'll find this a little hard to believe—we'd drive up there until we got shot at, then they'd turn. But, anyway, we were largely reconnoitering. We were mobile on the horses and if we ran into trouble, then we would get off. We were never intended to fight from a horse, even though we were trained to use a pistol. We never anticipated that we were going to use those pistols in combat, except if we accidentally run into something. Then

we had the pistols. So what we would do is if we ever went into combat we would take up a position, we would have one man hold all the horses for the squad and the rest of the squad would go up to wherever we were going to go.

BEN: So what did you think of Fort Lewis?

REE: Well, it was all right.

BEN: Was your brother activated too?

REE: No, he didn't go in right then. Later on he did go in. He went into the Naval cadets, Naval air force, and eventually became a Marine pilot. And he wanted to go too, of course. The Navy gave them a broader training in many respects than we got in the Air Force. So he ended up towing targets over Hawaii (laughs). That was kind of a disappointment to him.

BEN: You were mobilized as a unit, so you were still with people you knew, is that correct?

REE: Right. They brought in more men, they fleshed out the unit—fleshed out is probably not the right term—they fleshed out the unit with draftees. When they would get the draftees; they would get people who knew how to ride horses. There were some exceptions. We got one little fellow, a miner from Pittsburgh, who'd never been around a horse. He bounced along like a sack of potatoes. It was really something.

BEN: (laughs) At least the kernel of your group was from your town, and then they filled it in by just pulling in regular draftees.

REE: Well, the captain was from our town. The colonel was over the entire state.

BEN: Okay. So you were up there for ten months, nine months at least before Pearl Harbor?

REE: Correct.

BEN: Was it constant training?

REE: We were training. They did mechanize part of the regiment. They had those armored cars, and so forth. But eventually they did that. But they kind of just dissolved the unit. I don't remember exactly what happened after that, after I left.

BEN: So you were up in Fort Lewis when Pearl Harbor happened. Do you remember that day specifically?

REE: Yes, I do. It was on a Sunday and we were out on the rifle range qualifying for the various arms so that we could take leave in December on Christmas. We were hoping we could take two weeks off, or whatever we could get off during the Christmas period. And then one of the officers had a car radio and he heard over the radio about the attack on Pearl Harbor. Now after that, as I said there, you would have thought the Japanese were landing in the beaches the way they acted. They sent us down to Oregon. This one little unit, our regiment, was supposed to patrol the whole southern part of Oregon.

BEN: Were you on the coast actually?

REE: On the coast.

BEN: With your horses?

REE: Yes. What they'd do is we'd go into these fairgrounds where they had stables for these horses. So the men, we didn't have any place...we just slept around wherever we could find a place to sleep. And we stayed there until—Let's see...after a few months we were sent back, actually, quite a few months later, we were sent back to Fort Lewis.

BEN: Were there any incidents while patrolling on the beaches at all? Were there any scares or flashes on the ocean that might have been signals or anything like that?

REE: No. You would have thought the Japanese were right there, but finally things quieted down. No, there wasn't any.

BEN: But you were physically on the beach?

REE: Not physically on the beach; we were back in. We were on the coastal area, but we weren't on the beach because, as I say, we were in McMinnville or Salem or so forth.

BEN: Did you have patrols?

REE: Yes, we'd send out patrols. And we would practice lines of defense in case of a Japanese landing. We would go out and we set up in these places where we would be stationed. When it first came about is we were out so often, because there were so many rumors around—we were always chasing down these rumors—finally the commander of Oregon says, "We're not moving out until we see the slants of their eyes." So we kind of quit that.

BEN: How long did it take for that to happen?

REE: It was about three or four weeks that this was going on. They said, "We're going to cut this nonsense out. We're chasing all over the country."

BEN: So there was definitely a relax thereafter?

REE: Yes, a relaxing. We began to relax a little.

BEN: Was there quite a change in civilian life, too, in the cities? Was there a change there too at all?

REE: I wouldn't know about that.

BEN: How about the relocation of the Japanese. Did you see any of that going on along the Oregon coast?

REE: No, we didn't. We didn't see any of that.

BEN: Or participate in moving them out at all?

REE: No.

BEN: You talk about a Sergeant Walker, Eldon Walker. Was he from your hometown?

REE: Near there. He wasn't from our hometown, but from a town near there.

BEN: And what about him? You mentioned he was interested in flying?

REE: He would go out to the airport. He was nuts about it. And me, I didn't know a bi-plane from a mono-plane. All I did was say, "I'll sign this or anything to get out of this outfit."

BEN: So he suggested it to you?

REE: He had this letter written to this examining board in Portland. And I said, "I'll sign it." So I signed it.

BEN: What did the letter state? It was just a personal letter?

REE: It was just a little note saying we wanted to take the examination for Army Air Force cadets. So we had a colonel in charge of the whole thing; he was absolutely unbelievable sometimes. If he caught you smoking or something when you weren't supposed to, he broke the man right on the spot. He broke so many men that the payroll dropped and they wondered why the payroll is so low (laughs). He was breaking half of his non-coms. Anyway, he sent down instructions to the captain, "Break these two sergeants." So we were reduced to privates.

BEN: And as far as you can tell it was because...

REE: Because when they sent back the time to come and take this.

BEN: It went through channels, of course.

REE: Yes, it went through channels. Nobody was going to get out of his outfit. So this Captain Poulson, who was our coach at Lovell, he stuck out his neck, called us in and said, "You know, I wanted to leave as a unit and I want to return as a unit, but if you boys want to go and take that exam, go ahead." He really stuck out his neck. So we took the exam.

BEN: Do you think he was supposed to put pressure on you not to do it?

REE: Yes, he was supposed to not let us go (laughs).

BEN: So losing a pay scale like that, was there any recourse?

REE: No, they didn't have the...after that, when they had the code of military justice things changed, but not then.

BEN: Okay, so you took the test, and where was that at?

REE: Portland. We took it up there. They gave us a thorough physical exam and they had me, they had some kind of written exam. While they're giving a physical, I was laying there in this cot or bed, and I went to sleep. Now, most of the people that were taking that exam, almost all of them, were civilians coming in. So the guy taking the examination, he woke me up and said, "You must be in the service now." I said, "Yes." "That figures."

BEN: Because you were able to sleep?

REE: I was able to sleep. The other people were so excited, I went to sleep on the bed.

BEN: How long was the test?

REE: Just one day?

BEN: And after the test, was there any coordination test involved at all?

REE: No, you just had to have 20/20 vision. That's what everybody had to have. They took some kind of written exam. The ironic part is, I didn't get called up; it was several months before I actually started my training. They didn't call me up until...I went to Santa Ana. But the ironic part of it was the fellow, this sergeant Walker that was with me, washed out in primary training. He'd taken private flying lessons and everything, but he washed out. I didn't find that out till later. We kind of got separated there, so I didn't find that out till later.

BEN: So after you took the test, did you have to go back to your outfit?

REE: I went back to my outfit for a little while.

BEN: Did the one colonel treat you poorly?

REE: No, he didn't say anything. What happened was eventually this colonel got replaced and I was taken out of that unit and was put in what they call a casual unit in Fort Lewis while I was supposed to be in my cadet training, but somehow or another I got mixed up. So I was just wandering around there. I was working part-time. I didn't have anything to do, so I went out and got a job. Finally, they called me in. They said, "Where you been?" I said, "I've been waiting for this exam." Oh, you're supposed to have been on leave." Great!

BEN: How did that work out? You actually took a job?

REE: Yes. They put me into what they call a casual unit. I wasn't assigned to any place, so I'd go out and take a job.

BEN: Were you supposed to?

REE: It didn't matter, I guess. They didn't care.

BEN: So you were being paid for being in the military and then you took a side job as well?

REE: I worked in the cannery there for a while.

BEN: Really? That's interesting. And you're waiting for another air test?

REE: I was waiting to be called up to start my training. But somehow or another, what they said they did, they said I was supposed to be given leave until they were ready for me. But, I don't know. Then I was sent to Santa Ana.

BEN: For cadet training?

REE: No, this was for, they give you three months of preliminary ground training, like a basic training. They talk to you about the airplane, about the carburetors, about all this stuff about meteorology.

BEN: Was it in college training at all?

REE: No, not particularly. But we did have training in weather, and all these other things.

BEN: Had you been separated from your friend by now?

REE: We'd been separated before that, because he actually went to somewhere in Kentucky to take his training. Anyway, my primary training was near Hemet, California.

BEN: So up to this point, you had never been in an airplane. Is that correct?

REE: No, I'd never been in an airplane. Now they gave me what they call the dollar ride. Everybody got this ride—don't know why they called it the dollar ride, but I guess no matter what, you got this dollar ride.

BEN: What time in the training was that?

REE: That was before, when we were going to Hemet, California, when I was supposed to take my training. And he turned this plane upside down, and, of course, they were open cockpits, so I was hanging there by my safety belt. And the guy was saying, "And to get out of this place you have to do this and this..." And I said, "Great Scott!" Anyway, I thought, "You're telling me all this and I'm looking down at the ground hanging on by my seatbelt. Boy!"

BEN: Started to doubt what you're doing?

REE: Yes (laughs).

END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1

BEN: Okay, where were we. You were just talking about Hemet Field on your first ride there.

REE: First ride up. They call it the dollar ride. And then, course, I went into training.

BEN: That was your first flight. Did you get sick at all?

REE: No, no problem. Never did get motion sick, never did get sick.

BEN: Okay, tell me about primary then. Was it a military facility, or was it civilians training military?

REE: It was civilian. They had civilian trainers that they'd hired. Of course, they did have some military people who were in charge of the whole unit. But the flight instructors were primarily from civilian life. You would take, usually half either in the morning or afternoon you'd take some flight training and then you'd maybe go to school, or something like that.

BEN: So in class, partial. Okay. How soon did they take you up in the aircraft, and what were you flying? Was it the Stearman?

REE: It wasn't the Stearman. They called it the PT O'Ryan, or something like that, but it wasn't a Stearman biplane. It was a monoplane. I've forgotten the name of it. Those Stearmans were more difficult because on landings they'd tend to spin, they said. I didn't know.

BEN: So it was a low wing monoplane?

REE: Yes, low wing. Then the instructor was behind and you're in front, as I recall. He'd talk to you over the phone.

BEN: One of those gosport things?

REE: Yes.

BEN: What did you think of flying in that aircraft?

REE: Oh, I liked it.

BEN: Were you taking to it pretty easily?

REE: Oh, yeah. Of course, you're always, there's a lot of pressure on you, afraid of being washed out, because they washed about a third of them out.

BEN: Were you afraid of being washed out? Did you want to stay in flying once you got in?

REE: Oh, yes. You bet. I wanted to stay in and I enjoyed flying. No particular incidents that I recall. Nothing stands out. I was there for three months, and then I went to basic, which was Lancaster, California. And that was a bigger plane and it was still single engine, of course.

BEN: Do you remember what aircraft that was? Was that the Vultee?

REE: It's been fifty years (laughs).

BEN: More power, though, for sure.

REE: More power. Bigger plane. More stuff on it. I did have one embarrassing situation. We got up there and the engine quit. So I hit the pump and the engine started up again, and it quit again. I thought, "I'm out of gasoline." I did not think to switch the tanks (laughs). So, usually one tank will do it, so I thought I was just out of gas. So I made a dead-stick landing—a very good landing—I hit it right.

BEN: Were you able to make the field?

REE: Oh, yes. I made the field. I came in. It was a very good landing. You gauge it there. The mechanic came out, switched over the tanks, taxied the airplane. It was so bad; so embarrassing.

BEN: Did anyone talk to you about that?

REE: Oh, yes. I got talked to. The guy, the officer there in charge, I'd just been given a progress ride before. I guess I'd done all right because he said he was going to pass the thing up. So I stayed in, but that was embarrassing.

BEN: Did everyone know that happened? Does word get around like that?

REE: I don't know how many people knew about it, but nobody said anything about it to me.

BEN: Were there any accidents in either basic or primary training with any of the cadets?

REE: Yes, there was one fellow that flew the plane into the ground; this was basic training. He jumped out of the plane and he said, "I got seventy-five feet. I got seventy-

five feet.” He was looking at the altimeter instead of [unclear] (laughs). Seventy-five feet. Anyway, that’s the only accident I knew of.

BEN: Was he okay, though?

REE: I don’t know what happened to him, whether they washed him out or not.

BEN: What time of year are we looking at? What season?

REE: I don’t know.

BEN: Well, it’s kind of hard to gauge seasons in California.

REE: Yes, I don’t know.

BEN: Were you happy at this point that your friend had talked you into signing those papers?

REE: Yes, I was well satisfied. I was very happy that I’d made a change.

BEN: Was it exciting? It’s a new thing, flying at this time was still...

REE: My excitement wasn’t that great, but I liked it.

BEN: Were you writing home at this time? Was there much correspondence at home? Were you much of a writer home?

REE: Not too much. I’d write home once in a while.

BEN: Where did you go for advanced?

REE: Stockton, California.

BEN: At this point, were you hoping for single engine, or were you hoping for multi-engine?

REE: I had, when I was graduating from Stockton, most of them there were requesting multi-engine. The reason I asked, I wanted to be in a plane where I had a navigator. So I

really wanted to go in B-17s. There were some people who wanted single-engine fighter planes, but I wanted...

BEN: How about aerobatics? Was that something you, there are certain people who are just crazy about aerobatics.

REE: I did some of it.

BEN: Did you enjoy that?

REE: Oh, yes.

BEN: But not enough to want to become a fighter pilot, specifically?

REE: No. I decided, as I say, I wanted somebody to tell me where to go (laughs).

Then as I went to graduate...

BEN: What did you fly in Stockton? Was it a multi-engine?

REE: I think it was a multi-engine. I can't remember. It was so long ago.

BEN: But it was multi-engine?

REE: I knew I flew some multi-engines. Some of them were supposed to be...they had this one older plane, this multi-engine, that was supposed to simulate what a B-17 was like flying. So I remember flying one of those for a while. Then when I was graduating, they wanted to know what you would like. So I got to thinking about it and I thought guys in those -17s fly about 18,000 feet, 20,000 feet, they're on oxygen. I said, "I don't want to be flying on this oxygen." So I—I think there were six of us; there were about 200 of them graduating—and I think there were six of us asked for medium bombers. So that's where I got the B-26.

BEN: Before we get to that, are there any specific memories of advanced? Anything stand out there for you?

REE: Not particularly.

BEN: No difficulties?

REE: No, I didn't have any problems. I didn't have any things like I had in basic.

BEN: Where did they put you? Would that be a transition, I guess?

REE: A transition. I went to Del Rio, Texas. I remember, that was in the summer.

BEN: That was in the summer (laughs).

REE: I went over to the officer's club and I must have drank a gallon of lemonade a day.

BEN: At this time you had your commission, right?

REE: Yes. When you graduated, you got your commission. Now, when I applied for my commission, or when I was going to get my commission, they wanted a birth certificate. So, a fellow called me in and says, "You were only sixteen when you enlisted? That's a fraudulent enlistment." I says, "Yes, what are you going to do about it." I figured they spent all this money training me, they're not going to...by this time, of course, I was much older. So he just kind of looked at me and thought, "You smart kid." Didn't say a thing.

BEN: That's a clerk's job, I guess, isn't it. So did they correct it at that point? I would assume so; they had your birth certificate (laughs).

REE: They probably changed my birth date.

BEN: You went to Del Rio, did you say?

REE: Del Rio, Texas, right on the border down there.

BEN: What was that like? You actually trained on the B-26, is that right?

REE: Yes, on the B-26.

BEN: Was it just working with pilots again, and navigators and co-pilots? What was the training set up there? They didn't bring on the crew at this point?

REE: Well, I didn't have a crew then. I had an instructor who didn't care about anything. He was a frustrated guy or something. Anyway, I finally was sent to...

BEN: What did you think of the B-26? Did it fly all right? I don't know much about the B-26?

REE: The B-26...well, I actually had some time in the B-25 and the B-26. The B-26 had a rather peculiar, they had a shorter wing. And when you cut the motors, they dropped a lot faster than, say, the B-25. But when you learned how to land them, they were easier to land than the B-25 because they just sort of...what do you call it? They sort of mused in—I don't know exactly how to tell it—anyway, some of them found them very difficult to land. Well, I found them easier to land than, say, the B-25, because the B-25, if you pulled back too quick on the stick, you'd bounce along.

BEN: But the B-26, if I remember right, it had a different engine system, is that correct?

REE: Yes. Well, I think they had the Pratt and Whitney, I think.

BEN: The -26 had a certain, wasn't there a history about that plane? They were dangerous. They would actually fall because, I forgot exactly what that was, but there was something about them that some people really disliked them.

REE: Well, as I say, when you cut the engines back, you came down rather fast, but if you learned how to cut it at the right time, they were really easier to land for me than the B-25.

BEN: So did you do both of those in transition?

REE: Well, I don't know why I got any B-25 time, but I know I had some B-25 time; I don't know why.

BEN: Not having flown myself, is there a difference in flying an aircraft with the two stabilizers in the back, like on a B-25?

REE: I didn't notice any difference.

BEN: So where do we go from here? So you're working with these medium bombers.

REE: Then they sent me to Tampa, Florida. They had B-26's there. I was waiting around for...well, I went into Tampa, Florida. I sat around there, fiddled around there for about two weeks. Now I was supposed to pick up kind of a crew, and do some more training. They called me in and said, "Where have you been?" I said, "I've been here for two weeks." "You didn't sign in right." (laughs) So, then, I signed in.

BEN: I guess that just counted for the time at the beginning of your training where you got the job working at the cannery. It kind of evens out at the end. They gave it back to you, your free time (laughs).

REE: Yes, they gave it back to me. So, nothing happened for a little while and finally what they did is—this just shows you how things happen—they said, "You're going into the A-20." "A-20? I haven't had any experience with those." That's where they only had two gunners and in the lead ships they had the pilot/navigator, I'm sorry, the navigator/bombardier. So I was then sent to...

BEN: Was that relatively new aircraft at the time?

REE: Not particularly. It was kind of, I think they called it kind of an attack bomber, because it had guns in the nose and they had pocket 150's on each wing. They really had a lot of fire-power. But, as I understand it, they found out that in combat, particularly in

Germany, where they got down on the deck, the German's really knocked them out of the sky. So we never really did get down on the deck. We were always, when I got over to Europe, we bombed at 8,000 or 10,000 feet up. I'll get to that a little later.

BEN: So they put you in the A-20's.

REE: The A-20's and I took an A-20 overseas.

BEN: So you had to check out, though. Was there much difference in the A-20's than what you'd flown?

REE: There was no thing to check me out, because there was no room for another person. The cockpit, that was it. The gunners were in the rear. They had an upper turret gunner and a lower turret gunner.

BEN: But you were connected, is that correct?

REE: Well, there was no place, well, I couldn't really walk back because, you know. But anyway, the two gunners were one in the top and one in the bottom turret.

BEN: So when you're flying, there's a single seat, then? No co-pilot seat?

REE: That's right. You're in about this much space. You didn't have any room.

BEN: How did you get in and out?

REE: Through the top. You raised up.

BEN: The actual canopy opened?

REE: Oh, yes. The canopy opened. You got out of the canopy. There was, when I say that, I had a friend in the infantry who wanted to take a ride with me in this A-20. Back of me, where they normally had a radio, they didn't have a radio, so he laid on his belly and he got in there. But, there was no place for another person to fly the plane.

BEN: I can look this up—this is my fault in not understanding the A-20 as well as I should—are you connected to the gunner? If it was on the ground, could you crawl back, or are you separate from the crew?

REE: I don't recall. They're separate, because between the gunner and the pilot is where the bombs were, and they had an extra gasoline tank, a reserve tank. I think it held about 300 gallons.

BEN: Who controlled the guns on the wings, then?

REE: The pilot did.

BEN: So you actually had fire capability?

REE: Yes.

BEN: Then they had a gunner who would control the upper and they had a tail gunner.

REE: They had an upper turret gunner. He had his 150s. And the lower one had his. I guess they could have, particularly the top one, they could have set it so...no the gunner would have to fire those. But we had plenty of firepower.

BEN: So you had a top turret and a ball turret?

REE: A top turret and a lower turret. They had the two gunners. One was the top, one was the lower.

BEN: So nobody was in the tail?

REE: No. Well, they were back toward the tail. I don't think—I never thought about it—I don't think I could walk back there.

BEN: Okay. I can look that up. I'm just curious. So did you train as a crew?

REE: Well, from then, we trained for a while and when I went overseas, well, we had some preliminary training in the A-20's.

BEN: So you graduated from the Army Air Force cadets on July 27, 1943. You took transition flying A-20's. By the time you got your orders to ship out, were you eager to go?

REE: Not particularly.

BEN: Did you feel prepared enough?

REE: Oh, yeah. I felt prepared enough.

BEN: Did you feel confident in your own skills?

REE: Oh, yes. But I wasn't one of these super patriots that was anxious to get out in there. I said, well that's what they're paying me for, that's what they trained me for. I didn't...

BEN: You're definitely aware that people were going to be shooting at you (laughs).

REE: Yes, that's right. But I thought, well, that's what they paid me for, what they trained me for. So what we did is I flew the plane from up to northern Canada, stayed there a day or two or three. Then we went from Canada to Greenland and stayed a few days there. A kind of funny thing happened in Greenland—not a funny thing, but a thing happened in Greenland. These places like Greenland and northern Canada, the ground personnel or the personnel that stays in there—this was terrible, they were really—so in Greenland, they only had one runway. And they showed you pictures how to get in this one runway. Anyway, I stayed there for two or three days, something like that. But the first morning I came out and someone had tried to break in the door—there was a door in the rear of the plane where you put stuff, put baggage or anything. I noticed that the handle had been jimmied. There was a guard standing there on the plane. I said, “What happened to this thing?” He said, “I don't know.” I looked at his rifle, he had his bayonet

on and I noticed it was bent slightly (laughs). So, apparently, he'd tried to break into my airplane, maybe to get liquor or whatever, because it was a monotonous thing for them.

BEN: Kind of go crazy up there.

REE: Go crazy. They didn't have any movies or anything. So the next time, I flew from Greenland to Iceland. This was the first time this ever happened to me. Now there were three of us. We had a navigator, and my wings began to ice up. Now on these planes they had a rubber boot on the leading edge so you could expand and break off the ice. And they had also, on the propeller, they had a liquid that would spray on the propeller to keep it from icing. So this began to ice up. Now, that's the first time and the last time I'd ever flew a plane that had...the conditions had to be apparently just right to form this ice. But, we immediately dropped clear down close to the ocean, really close, and we didn't have any problem. So I went to, as I say, from Greenland to Iceland, and then from Iceland, we went to Scotland.

BEN: On that journey over there, any specific attitudes of flying over water?

REE: No.

BEN: It can be more concerning because if something happens over water, it's a lot more serious.

REE: I'll tell you, when we were flying over the tip of Greenland, I looked down, and even though it was May, it was cold. I could see kind of like a blizzard going right over where I was flying. I thought, "Boy if I go down here, this is it." And I thought I heard one engine kind of coughing. It turned out to be my imagination (laughs).

BEN: So you had a navigator on that one, of course.

REE: I had a navigator.

BEN: Now, was he in front?

REE: He was in front. See, I was flying, it wasn't a plane that was equipped with all the guns and stuff. It had a plexiglass nose in, so he was...

BEN: Okay. Was it new aircraft you were taking over?

REE: Yes, brand new ones, as far as I know

BEN: Were they painted? Were they olive drab or were they silver?

REE: Oh, no, they were olive drab. That's how they came out of the factory, I guess.

BEN: So to Scotland.

REE: Scotland. When I landed in Scotland I was about ready to come back home. The accommodations didn't have central heating, they had outdoor toilets, and I thought, "What kind of...this is supposed to be a civilized country!" Anyway.

BEN: Did they keep you up there long?

REE: No, just a few days. One of the things I'd done is I collected all the...I'd heard they were short of candy, so every place I'd go I'd get the maximum amount of candy they had. So I unloaded, I think it was in Scotland or some other place, the guy says, "Are you the PX officer?" I had a whole bag of candy.

BEN: What were you planning to do with that?

REE: Eat it (laughs). I heard that they were short of candy. And they were.

BEN: Where were you assigned to? From Scotland where was your base?

REE: I went down to a little place not too far from London, Southern England; it's called Braintree, as I remember the name.

BEN: And what outfit were you with? Which bomb group were you attached to?

REE: I was with the Ninth. I think it was the Ninth group, as I recall.

BEN: Which Air Force?

REE: Well, it was the Ninth Air Force. It was the 115th Bomb Group, I believe. I'm not sure. I don't remember which squadron, the 67th Squadron, something like that. I'm not sure. It's been fifty, sixty years.

BEN: Sure.

REE: So that was where we would fly over to, where we were bombing France, and this was...

BEN: How many missions did you fly?

REE: Thirty-nine. I was on my thirty-ninth mission.

BEN: Okay, flying a medium bomber, of course. Did you ever fly more than one sortie a day?

REE: Oh no.

BEN: And you arrived, when did you arrive there? Was it in May? Is that what you said?

REE: Yes. It was...well, here's what they did. When we first got to England, they sent us over to Ireland, Northern Ireland, for about two weeks. I was stationed down in Southern England, but they sent us over there to familiarize us with the types of aircraft that the Germans would have and so forth. It was kind of a waste of time.

BEN: Was there any escape or evasion classes at all?

REE: No.

BEN: Nothing like that. So this was all aircraft recognition?

REE: Aircraft recognition. I guess some other things, I don't remember. We had no way of getting around except bicycles. And the group that was coming in from the group

that was going out, they'd buy their bicycles. So it was really quite a traffic problem.

They had all these bicycles running all over.

BEN: Anyone's bike ever get stolen?

REE: No. Well, I don't ever remember locking mine.

BEN: How about locals, dealing with actually the—What did you think of the English people? Did you have a chance to interact with them?

REE: Oh, yes.

BEN: Did you ever go to any of the pubs outside?

REE: None of that.

BEN: Did you ever eat at anyone's home?

REE: No. I met a few girls here and there, but nothing.

BEN: Nothing particular stands out about your interaction with the British locals.

REE: Not particularly. Let's see, what was it?

BEN: Did you ever get into London?

REE: Yes. Every now and then. We weren't too far and I'd go into London.

BEN: Anything specific about that? Did you go into any of the clubs?

REE: Not too much. I don't remember too much about that. I went to Cambridge. We weren't too far from Cambridge. And I met a girl there. I went to a show. She wanted to see an American show, and I wanted to see an English show (laughs). She said, "Our shows aren't as interesting as yours." So I told her—now Cambridge must be about twenty or thirty miles from London—I said, "You been to London?" "I've never been there." "What? You're twenty-two years old and never been to London?" I said, "Boy,

you don't travel much, do you?" But I found out that was true of others. They just didn't seem to travel much. I don't know why, because they had trains.

BEN: Where did you meet British girls? Did they have dances that you'd meet at or officer's clubs?

REE: No, I don't remember where I met this one. This one, I met her in Cambridge. I think I just met her in the streets (laughs). I don't know where it was. But we didn't have, as I recall, we didn't have...I wondered when we was going to, while I was in this cavalry unit, we used to have dances. We had a dance, a band that was very good and they'd play dances for us. And they'd take the trucks out, at least at this one place we were stationed, they go out and these girls, local girls, felt perfectly secure, because the Army would put them in their trucks, bring them to the dance, when they were through, take them back. So they were perfectly safe. So we would have some pretty good dances there. Met a lot of girls. Go from one place to the other and they had this thing, and I'd get acquainted with two or three girls here, and two or three. But finally one day they had a big dance that included all these places. I'd been dancing with about six girls. By the time the evening was through, I didn't have any of them (laughs). They were all...they thought I was theirs.

BEN: So you don't remember any dances like that when you were over there?

REE: No, nothing in England, France. One time, I don't know, one time in France, when we moved to France, I don't know how we got acquainted. Well, there was this, when I was in France we used to have the *Follies Bergere* and some of these shows. I got acquainted with this lieutenant, an infantry lieutenant, who happened to be in Paris while we happened to be stationed there. They had places where you could go. And he said

there were some girls there, and he met this one girl and she was really a good-lookin' gal. But this guy, he was from the front lines and he didn't want to waste his time. So right away he said, "We're going to bed." And then she invited a friend over for me. And I said, "I'm married." I wasn't married. She looked at my hand; she wouldn't believe me (laughs). But, anyway, this other girl left me. So, anyway.

BEN: When did you get over to France? You actually were in England for a while?

REE: Then we moved over to France.

BEN: How soon? Did you fly several missions out of England?

REE: Yes, quite a few.

BEN: So those were all pre-invasion?

REE: Yes. Then it was after the invasion and after they had moved—it wasn't right after the invasion, because they had to take a while to drive the Germans back. I didn't mention that there.

BEN: When did you go over there? Was it '43 when you got over there? I mean '44?

REE: No, it was '44. I think it was around May of '44.

BEN: So you were there just prior to the invasion?

REE: Just prior. Actually, a few days afterward, I was in a plane flying over and I remember they were really hitting those hard, because first of all, this particular place was supposed to have been hit by artillery, and then the B-17's struck. Then in the afternoon, we went over. As we were coming back, it was just about dusk, those British bombers were going over. This was, all after, a few days after. I thought, "Boy, oh, boy. They're really getting hit."

BEN: Did you participate as part of the Normandy invasion?

REE: Not really. By the time I got over there, they were off the beaches.

BEN: So before you flew your first combat mission, they were off the beaches.

REE: They were off the beaches, yes.

BEN: Were you nervous about your first combat mission? Do you remember your first combat mission?

REE: I do (laughs). Now, see, we're flying in formation. Now you're supposed to be tight in formation. It takes a certain amount of skill. I had those turbo charged engines, so you weren't supposed to be too radical. When I got over that first mission I was going like, boom, boom, boom, I was over-controlling, terribly, when we were over the target. When we pulled off the target—now this is cold, I mean you're flying about 8,000 or 5,000 feet, so it's cold—and I could feel the sweat dripping from my armpits. So I said, "Boy, this can't happen." So I said, "If I get hit, I'll get hit; if I get killed, I'll get killed, but there's nothing I can do about it. So this is not going to happen again." So after that, with that attitude, it was able to sustain me through that thirty-ninth mission.

BEN: Would you say you adopted a fatalistic attitude?

REE: Some sort of fatalistic. If I got hit, I got hit. If I didn't, I didn't.

BEN: On your first mission, did you encounter a lot of...

REE: I don't think we did. I don't think we encountered a lot of flack.

BEN: But whatever it was...

REE: Whatever it was, we was over that target—boy!

BEN: With medium bombers, what size formation do medium-size bombers fly in?

Were you in groups of twelve, just like the heavies? Or was it smaller?

REE: We were usually flying in groups of eighteen. There were six planes, six planes, and six. They were echelons of six planes. And I was on the right wing on this first target.

BEN: Did they give you any briefing of combat? Did anyone try to tell you what it would be like? Some of the guys, I assume, had been there for a while.

REE: They didn't particularly. They didn't particularly do that, but they would give us a briefing before we took off. Usually we'd take off, say, at daylight, five or six o'clock in the morning. But they'd get us out of bed about two or two-thirty. Jiminy Christmas! We'd have some kind of breakfast, and then we'd go into the briefing room. They'd have somebody up there with a board and they'd be charting what we're going to hit and how important this was, or what we were hitting it for, whatever. Then they would have an alternate target. Then they said, "Now you've got to be careful for fighters, or whatever." That was a bunch of nonsense, because I flew thirty-nine missions and never saw a fighter.

BEN: An enemy fighter?

REE: Never saw an enemy fighter. I saw plenty of flack, but no enemy fighters. But they'd tell us all, "Well, you might hit some fighters." But, anyway, then they'd finally give you an appraisal of the flack that you might hit: "Possible flack here; possible flack here." Now, when we were flying over England...excuse me a minute.

[turns tape off]

REE: Actually, there's not too much interest. You got over there and you'd get shot at or something like that, but they're really kind of not very exciting. But, then, there was one, they had a West Point fellow who went into flying. He was kind of one of those who'd carry an extra gun or he'd carry a knife in his boot, stuff like that. One day I was

on flight with him and there was an airplane out there circling around. We were over the target getting shot at, and here was this guy over here circling around. And it was this guy. When we got down to the ground, I said, "What were you doing out there?" He says, "I didn't see any point in my going through all that flack." How that guy got from not being court-martialed, I'll never know.

BEN: Before we get to you actually getting shot down, before then, did you have any specific incidences that stand out about flack, encounters with flack?

REE: No.

BEN: Did you have any severe flack encounters or missions that were particularly difficult?

REE: Not particularly. I don't remember any particular ones. I know that when the flack come up, it would be black puffs of smoke when it exploded. Now, of course, there's quite a bit of noise in the airplane. But if they were close enough to where you could hear that explosion, you're likely to pick up some holes in your aircraft. Let me explain to you about what I know about it. You see, at our altitude, they would shoot, they were much more accurate, and they would shoot right at a particular plane. Now it was my understanding, on the B-17's, where they were up 18,000 feet or whatever it was, they couldn't, they weren't accurate enough to shoot at a particular plane, but they would sort of blanket the whole area.

BEN: Shoot box patterns.

REE: Yes, box patterns. But they didn't do that.

BEN: You were low enough where they could actually single you out?

REE: Yes. So they singled the planes out.

BEN: That's comforting (laughs)!

REE: Yes, so anyway, that's the way I understood it.

BEN: On any of your missions, did you see other planes around you go down?

REE: No, I never did.

BEN: So for the most part, you were...

REE: Well, I don't know. We'd lose some now and then, but I didn't see them go down. They may have been behind me or in front of me.

BEN: Any targets that you recall, any names or places that you remember?

REE: No. Usually it was supporting the ground troops, like bombing bridges and things like that. One time, toward the end of the war, they were getting kind of short of targets. If we didn't hit this target, go and hit this other target, this place here. And I said, "What's in that place?" "It's a small village." "What's that for?" "Well, it's got a road crossing in there." Now, this was the alternate target. We're going to fly clear over there just to hit a crossroads at a village? You know.

BEN: When did you make the transition to the A-26?

REE: That was when I was in Tampa, Florida. Remember, I mentioned that I was supposed to pick up a crew for a B-26, and I didn't sign in until they took the last twenty of us that signed in. They just shoved us in and said, "You're going into A-20's."

BEN: But you were shot down in an...

REE: A-26.

BEN: When did you switch from the A-20 to the A-26?

REE: Oh, that one. That was in France. I don't know how many, exactly, it was two or three months.

BEN: Did you have many missions in the A-26?

REE: Not too many.

BEN: So, most of your missions were in the A-20?

REE: Yes. I only made two or three—maybe more than that, I guess. We had a supply officer that wanted to, he felt a little conscious that he wasn't...he got half drunk and wanted me to take him up in the A-26. It had a room, kind of a little jump seat over there. I said, "I'm not going to take you until you get permission." Of course, he couldn't get permission. But when I got back, I went over to the unit and I said, "Good thing you didn't, because," I said, "there was a hole right in that plexiglass right where you'd be sitting" (laughs).

BEN: So he actually wanted to fly on a mission with you?

REE: Yes, he wanted to fly a mission with me.

BEN: Flying over England, was that pretty difficult? I can just imagine that there's planes forming up every day from every...

REE: I'll tell you a little story.

BEN: Hold on a second.

END OF SIDE B, TAPE 1

BEN: Tape two with Reece Robertson. Okay, you were going to tell me a story?

REE: Well, one time they wanted me to do some night flying in England, just fly around a little at night. They got all kind of fields, of course, in southern England. And this was one reason I wanted to have a navigator, but I couldn't figure out where I was,

and I couldn't figure out where the field I wanted to land in was supposed to be. So I cut my engine. There were so many fields you'd almost cut down in there. I got out of the plane and I said, "Where am I?" And "where's this place?" He'd say, "Well, you're so and so and you get up here and it's north..."

BEN: Did they clear you to come in?

REE: They didn't clear me; I just flew in (laughs).

BEN: This was at nighttime?

REE: Nighttime. I says, "I'm lost."

BEN: Did you have to do it again, or did you make it the second time?

REE: No, next time...well, when he told me where to go.

BEN: Was that your job to know navigation at all?

REE: Well, we were trained on navigation.

BEN: When you got over to England, they have a different navigation. They have a G-Box, or something like that. Did you have to take training on that?

REE: No. Well, my understanding, see the Americans had what they call the Norden Bombsite. So we would always go during the day, or at least we thought we did (as far as I know they all did) because this Norden Bombsite was very accurate. The British didn't have that. And it's my understanding that they would come in on, I guess, what you'd call a radio beam. You know how it is. Where these lines crossed, that's where they dropped their bombs. You've heard about that. So, you know, it wasn't accurate bombing.

BEN: Did you encounter bad weather while you were there?

REE: No.

BEN: You were there during the best time you could be.

REE: Well, if the weather was too bad, we didn't fly. We were trained, of course, to do instrument flying.

BEN: The move from England to France, was there an advance group that set up your base for you?

REE: There must have been, I guess.

BEN: So when you got there, was there an established base?

REE: Oh, yes.

BEN: Were you in tents or did you have established Quonset huts?

REE: We were in tents.

BEN: Whereas in England you actually had...

REE: We were in buildings. But in France we were in tents. I think they had four men to a tent.

BEN: Did they build the air field, or was it an air field that was already in place? Do you recall?

REE: I don't know.

BEN: Any other missions that you recall? Did you ever lose an engine or anything like that?

REE: No.

BEN: No mechanical problems?

REE: No mechanical problems.

BEN: Taking a lot of damage to your aircraft?

REE: No, not a lot of damage. Maybe a hole now and then, but not really very much.

BEN: Did you ever get, after thirty missions or so, did your nerves ever act up?

REE: No, after I adopted that attitude, if I get hit, I get hit.

BEN: How often would you fly, do you think? Was it depending on weather, or did they have a rotation?

REE: They had a rotation. They were supposed to rotate you and every so often you were put on what they call a loading list, at least that's what they call it there. So you had to stand by. You couldn't go into town or anything. When they were ready to fly, they'd wake you up in the morning and send you.

BEN: So the loading list was...

REE: The loading list was so many...I kind of goofed up there. So they put me on the loading list more often sometimes than others (laughs). I guess I deserved it.

BEN: So the loading list, that means you're going to fly?

REE: That means you're going. The next time we're flying, you're on.

BEN: So how did you goof up? Do you want to relate that one?

REE: Well, one of the things I did...

BEN: One of them?

REE: There are several of them (laughs). I figure, well, we're in combat and I was kind of careless about saluting a superior officer. I got in and got chewed out about that. Screamed at me. Then I went into town to London on leave, and we were supposed to be moving out in the next few days, but I went in and I missed the bus back and it was kind of late, and I didn't call in or anything. And I came in later—I was actually AWOL. I got called in by the commanding officer he chewed me out again. Things like that. But somebody notices, "Hey, they're putting you on the loading list pretty often" (laughs).

Anyway. See you had to fly, with the medium bombers, you had to fly sixty missions. I had thirty-nine, so I thought maybe I'd get these things over with.

BEN: So that's what they were thinking, possibly, just get you out quicker or get you down quicker.

REE: Either knocked down or out (laughs).

BEN: When they told you sixty missions, did you run the statistics on that at all?

REE: I did, and I figured that the chances of going back were not all that great. Say they had eighteen ships, suppose we lost an average of one a mission. You know.

BEN: Eighteen missions.

REE: We didn't lose one each mission, I guess we didn't, but at one time I was figuring this was not all that great.

BEN: Like you say, you adopted that attitude of if you get shot down, whatever. But did you actually think you were going to be shot down? Did you think you were going to make it back?

REE: Not necessarily. I figured I was going to make it back.

BEN: You did?

REE: Yes.

BEN: Did anyone that you were actually quartered with, did any of them not come back before you left? Did you ever lose of your roommates?

REE: Yes, there was one guy. He was on his sixtieth mission and got shot down. Sixtieth mission.

BEN: Do missions get more, I don't know, are they more nerve-wracking the more you get?

REE: It didn't make any difference to me.

BEN: Did he survive? Did you ever get word back?

REE: I don't know what happened to him.

BEN: Did you divvy up his stuff? There are certain things that go his family, of course, but there are other things.

REE: They're supposed to have a fellow that took care of that. What he would do is gather up your stuff and ship it back to your home. But there was some stuff that didn't get to my house. I had one of these short jackets that I bought extra and things like that, my raincoat, didn't make it back.

BEN: Short jacket, like the military Ike jackets or the leather one?

REE: It had about a three-quarter jacket. I didn't have the Eisenhower jackets that are up to here. But I didn't have one of those.

BEN: Interesting. Okay. How long did the move to get to France, how long did that take place? As a pilot, did you just go from one day being here and the next being there?

REE: That's right. Just flew the plane over and the next day we were there.

BEN: The technical aspects were taken care of by all the others?

REE: Right.

BEN: So it didn't change much for you, other than having to reorient yourself to that new base.

REE: Right. We were located not too far from Paris.

BEN: So you had the occasion to fly over Paris, I guess?

REE: Yes.

BEN: Was it liberated by the time you got there?

REE: Yes, well, wait a minute. I'm not sure. I guess it was liberated when we got there. See, with the medium bomber, you could only—Our range was limited. So we had to follow close to the...four hours going and coming was about as far as we could go, four, maybe five hours.

BEN: So eight hours total?

REE: No, about two hours going, two hours back is all.

BEN: Do you remember the max load you could carry? Do you remember the size of ordnance?

REE: As I recall, and I'm only recalling, we had four 500-pound bombs. I think that's the same thing a B-26 carries. We were supposed to carry the same bomb load as they did with a lot less men.

BEN: Okay.

REE: Now, this is where I mentioned it was one of these, while I was still in England and I was scheduled to fly on what they call a milk run, that's when the deputy commander took over my plane—but they didn't ever hear from him again. But I was walking down London two or three months later, and all of a sudden I heard behind me, "Lieutenant Robertson, Lieutenant Robertson." Turned around and there was one of my gunners. They'd been picked up by the French underground and they got back to England. The French underground was, apparently, quite efficient.

BEN: So one time they just took your plane? In the rotation they decided to take your aircraft?

REE: He said, "I'm taking your place." "Help yourself."

BEN: Then they got shot down on that mission?

REE: They got shot down on that mission. As I say, I never did hear from him. This picture there on the bottom is my two gunners that I had. They say a couple of buddies; well, they were my gunners.

BEN: Do you remember their names at all?

REE: I don't even remember their names.

BEN: So how did you take that? Did that affect you in any way?

REE: No, not a bit.

BEN: You just remember that he took your plane and he doesn't come back.

REE: No, I didn't think a thing about it. It was just one of those things.

BEN: Is there anything else before we get to where you were shot down? Anything in France that you recall?

REE: Not of any interest. There was one kind of, I had some goofballs, you know this guy flying who didn't want to go through all that flack? There was another mission, there was, I guess, the Germans were shooting us or something. I didn't see the plane, but they got some guy. He dropped down to about 6,000 feet and opened up all his 50's and sprayed the countryside (laughs). He got mad at the Germans because they were shooting at him. He dropped his plane down from about 10,000-8,000, down to about 6,000-5,000, hit the switches on the 50 calibers—sshhhhhhh.

BEN: Were there tactical targets?

REE: He wasn't looking for anything. He was just spraying the countryside.

BEN: Were there certain people you got to know pretty well there? That you would kind of pal around with? Were there other flyers?

REE: Not too much. Not really too much.

BEN: Where was this infantryman that you got acquainted with? Didn't you take someone up eventually?

REE: This fellow that I took up was when I was in South Carolina, he was a fellow from my hometown. His name was Smith Shumway. He was eventually...a mine on Normandy blew up and blinded him. But he was the one that I took up.

BEN: That was stateside.

REE: But this other fellow, he was the supply officer. It was when we had the A-26's. He wanted to go up.

BEN: What, in your opinion, were the major differences between the A-26 and the A-20?

REE: They carried a heavier bomb load. That's about the main difference. A bigger plane carried a heavier bomb load.

BEN: Still dual engine, right?

REE: Yes, still two.

BEN: Okay. If there's nothing else specifically about that, then, let's go to your thirty-ninth mission, right?

REE: Right.

BEN: What happened on that one, then?

REE: That's the one where we got over the target and we had a new bombardier in the flight that I was in, this six-man ship. I think I mentioned that we flew straight and level. They said when I got liberated and got back, they said that he was eventually shot down later on. But they said he flew straight and level for two minutes. And then he closed the bomb bay without ever dropping the bombs. Now, I should have dropped the bombs.

BEN: Now, that wasn't your plane. Once again, you were flying...

REE: I was a wingman; I was on the right wing. So I should have, but you're not supposed to drop the bombs unless you know the lead ship drops, and, of course, since I got hit I should have dropped them. I guess sometimes you do things automatically.

BEN: Were you in the IP when you got hit, or were you pulling off?

REE: No, we got hit while I was over the target.

BEN: So you remember which one it was?

REE: No, I don't remember. I'll tell you, now, I didn't know, as I say, I was really in a dilemma; I didn't know what to do. I had a problem with the engine. There was a fire in the bomb bay and I was afraid it was going to reach that high octane. If it had got—I don't know whether it could have done it or not—but there was this high octane reserve tank was in there. I didn't know what to do. So I called the gunner—his name was Marine—I said, "Marine, this looks like it." I didn't know what to tell him to do. Shortly thereafter...

BEN: What exactly was wrong with your aircraft?

REE: Well, it was on fire.

BEN: You could tell that?

REE: Yes. It was in the bomb bay. I could see back there. They had a fire in the bomb bay.

BEN: So where did you get hit actually?

REE: I guess it was in the bomb bay. I don't know, to this day, what there was in there that was burning. But it was burning. It wasn't a big flame, but it was burning. I don't know whether it was an oil line that contained some kind of oil.

BEN: Hydraulics.

REE: Hydraulics, I don't know what it was.

BEN: But what did you say about your engines?

REE: The left engine was smoking, and I wasn't sure, it looked like it was on fire, but it was still, apparently, getting power. And I was trying to see whether my other engine was running. The prop seemed to be running. So I was trying to make sure what was the situation with these engines. So about another minute, I heard another frantic call say, "Gun to the pilot! Gun to the pilot!" And I was busy, so I didn't answer him right away. Then the next thing that happened was this whole cockpit was like a big blow-torch. This fire was coming right up in the cockpit. So then I then screamed in the thing, "Bail out! Bail out! Bail out!" I only give him a few seconds where I couldn't take it much longer because the confounded fire was burning me.

BEN: So the fire, as you say, was actually coming up in the bomb bay, and it was now...

REE: It come to the bomb bay and shwwwsh, shwwwsh. So I bailed out and I just got...the bailout was kind of, they were afraid with this type of plane that there might be trouble bailing out. So I thought, *Great! Great!* So I got out about this far, and I had a flack helmet on, and it ripped that off. And I got up to about where my chest was, and the slip stream from the plane—they travel about 250 miles per hour, 230, something like that—flipped me like this, and it was spinning so fast I could hardly think. But you know, you rehearse the things what you should do. So I straightened up my body, quit spinning, and then pulled the rip cord. So if I'd have pulled that rip cord when I was spinning, I would have got tangled up.

BEN: So once again, on the A-26, the canopy, does it blow off?

REE: Yes, it blows off. You pull the thing and, pssst, it goes right off.

BEN: So now you're open.

REE: You're open. So I'm up there...

BEN: And as soon as you got up to about waist level, it tore you out of there?

REE: It just flew me right out of the airplane, about this far.

BEN: Did you get hurt at all?

REE: No, no I didn't. No problem. As I looked around, I'm floating down here, I looked around and I saw this parachute about a half mile away behind me. That was about the most beautiful sight I ever saw in my life, because I knew he got out. But I was afraid he might not have.

BEN: It happened so quickly. So it was a clear day, then?

REE: Oh, yes.

BEN: The parachute, do you remember the actual snap of the parachute?

REE: I don't remember hearing anything.

BEN: Once it does open, do you hear anything? I mean, I hear it's pretty quiet.

REE: Oh, you're in this noisy airplane. It's so quiet. You're peacefully floating down toward the ground. Then, I began to look at the ground, and I can see a whole bunch of people, some people coming toward about where I'm going to land. I got out of my chute.

BEN: How was the landing?

REE: There was no particular problem. I just landed. Took off the chute and I'm looking...I should have—I carried a pistol with me because I didn't usually carry one

when I was over France, but I heard that in Germany sometimes those civilians would be so irate that they would tear you to pieces. There'd been instances of that. So I carried this .45 with me. I also carried my wallet. Now, you're supposed to leave your wallet at the base so when you get shot down and you're picked up, they don't have your wallet. Well, I didn't want to go through all the trouble of checking it in, checking it out, so I'd take my wallet with me. I thought, gee, I got this identity card here. So I tore it up into little pieces and couldn't find any place to throw it. It was right in the flat. These people were coming toward me about 200 yards away. I thought, "What am I going to do with this?" I told you I read about this spy that ate his papers. So I thought I'd do that. So I chewed on that thing and I thought, "Ah, this is nonsense! (laughs)." So I spit it out and I scattered the stuff around there. Of course, they come up. There were civilians and soldiers, and I was betting on that little, I think there was a sergeant and a non-com, and he was out in front. And I was rooting for him to come on and get to me first (laughs).

BEN: So as soon as you touched down, you knew it was over for you?

REE: Oh, yes.

BEN: So you had no, you never even considered trying to...

REE: No. And I guess I wasn't quite, I got thinking later, you normally, I guess, when you surrender, are supposed to raise up your hands. I didn't think about that, so I guess I wasn't very on the ball about that. But this little sergeant came up to me, or corporal or whatever he was, said, "Your pistol, please." I pulled out my pistol and handed it to him. They pulled my watch off, my wallet, they even took my little pencil away from me. They decided, I guess, that it wasn't holding any secrets, so they gave it back to me.

BEN: Did they pick up the papers you spit out?

REE: Oh, yes. They were picking up all these little papers, these Germans were picking up all these papers and were showing me, "Hey, we've got all these papers." Anyway.

BEN: Did you watch your aircraft?

REE: No. I didn't see it after that.

BEN: You don't know what happened to it?

REE: I don't know what happened to it.

BEN: It might have kept on flying.

REE: Might have kept on flying for a while.

BEN: So what happened then? You mentioned you got burned somewhat.

REE: Yes. When I was going out, the flames were right up my back, that's why I got my hair burned.

BEN: Were the flames coming out when you were standing out of the aircraft there?

REE: Yes, maybe they got partly burned then. I don't know. But it flipped off, as I say, I had a flack helmet that got ripped off. And it was probably between there and when I got off.

BEN: Was it down to the skin?

REE: It just sort of singed my hair. It didn't get down to the skin.

BEN: On the left side there.

REE: Yes.

BEN: I don't know, this was a long time ago, but do you recall, though, what it was like to be taken there, that you're out of it and are now in hostile territory?

REE: Well, of course, I was somewhat concerned. I was shivering, shaking, because the plane was so hot and when I got out I was so cold I was shivering. They probably thought I was afraid, but I didn't...they marched me through this village.

BEN: Did he say anything else to you? He spoke English?

REE: No, he didn't say anything else to me. They took me to two or three places, then by nightfall they took me into this German headquarters, this little unit, and they asked me a few questions. I didn't know what he was talking about. So I said, in French, "No, no, I don't understand." I didn't learn French, but I said, "No, no." So the guy started talking to me in French (laughs). I didn't know that either. Anyway. That's when I saw my gunner.

BEN: So they brought you together eventually?

REE: They brought us together. So I said, "Well, I'm glad to see you made it, Marine." About that time they grabbed me and shoved me across the room. Then I realized that they didn't want us communicating, I suppose, to get together on our stories or whatever. But they didn't want no communication between us. So there was Christmas Eve.

BEN: So you were shot down on Christmas Eve?

REE: Christmas Eve. The 24th

BEN: Okay, you didn't mention that earlier. So that was Christmas Eve. So how was Christmas day for you?

REE: I said, "Look, I'm just delivering you some presents"(laughs).

BEN: So you were brought together that same day?

REE: Yes.

BEN: And they knew you were together, I would assume.

REE: Yes, I suppose they would, because the parachutes came down about the same time. Well, the next day, or that night...

BEN: So were you in a city or a town?

REE: A little town?

BEN: Was this like the local little jail, or was it like not a prison at all?

REE: No, this wasn't a prison at all. The first thing, I think I was in a chicken coop for a while, then they put me in this, they marched me through the village, and, of course, to see this. I think they called us terror flieger or whatever they called us. It would have been pleasant under different circumstances, because the whole village was out to see me (laughs).

BEN: Any violence toward you at all, or anyone spit at you?

REE: Except that guy that kicked me in the pants.

BEN: When was that?

REE: I mentioned that in there. I was going along. I had this one fellow guarding me and the little fellow was burning weeds on his farm, a farmer, and they exchanged a few words, something in German. And this guy had a pitchfork in his hands, jammed the pitchfork in the ground, turned around, run up and give me a good big kick in the pants. Now, I had this heavy leather seat on my bottom; I hardly felt it. And I thought, well, this guy can now go down to his neighbors and tell them how he kicked this American flyer in the pants. So I didn't care. That's the only thing. One thing I didn't do, as I may have mentioned, there was a lot of infantrymen picked up because that was right after the

Battle of the Bulge, and they had a lot of infantry prisoners. So I was put in with some of these infantry for a while. And we were in one place.

BEN: How many days are you on the move here?

REE: It must have been two or three weeks before I got back to the main camp. But I had this one fellow, I was in there and there was a bunch of others around, and this guard asked this one infantryman what his unit was, and he wouldn't answer him. And he turned back and he slapped that guy as hard as he could, right the side of the head. The guy says, "Ninety-ninth", or whatever it was. And I thought, "Gee, I wonder how much of this I can take before I start talking."

BEN: Was this before you had actually been officially interrogated, then?

REE: Yes.

BEN: So they're just rounding you up. Are they feeding you all right?

REE: They were feeding us, but not a lot, but they were feeding us.

BEN: You mentioned your boots. Does that come later? You were walking in your flight shoes?

REE: Oh, those were when I was walking...that was before. This was on Christmas Day. This sergeant had me and my gunner and he had one private and another private. And it was kind of warm that day and I had these big heavy flying boots on and kind of a really light insert in my boot. So I took off my boots, and that little SOB made me put them back on again. Now with this sergeant, I had a lot a trouble. He offered to shoot me.

BEN: Tell me about that thing.

REE: We were going along and there were some American planes flying over, and I looked up at these planes and I guess he must have read my mind, because I was, "Give

'em hell, boys." Anyway, he must have read my mind because the next thing I know he had this pistol in my face and he was screaming at me. Of course, it startled me a little bit. I said, "You may shoot me and you may not, but you're not going to scare me to death." So I completely ignored him after that, because he did that a little later on. But we passed a bunch of these little boys, I mentioned there, that they were dressed up in uniform, about fourteen or fifteen, and he pulled out his pistol and kind of indicated, "You want to shoot this guy? Here's a pistol." I was more afraid of that than I was this guy, because I thought one of the little gooks might do it. But, anyway, so he turned me in.

BEN: Is that when you said your gunner, eventually...

REE: I can't remember when that was exactly, but it was during that time that my gunner was killed. We were in a kind of a little wooded area. One of our fighter planes came over.

BEN: Was it just you and the gunner, or had you picked up some other...

REE: No, just me and the gunner and these other two people. There were some soldiers around there in the wooded area, and some civilians in this wooded area. And this plane came over and at this time, this little sergeant, whatever it was, had sent my gunner up ahead, because he didn't...for whatever reason, the stupid ___[unclear]___. He was about forty, fifty yards ahead of me, and I could see him. So when these planes came over, everybody hit the ditch. I wandered over and hit the ditch. One incident there was kind of unusual. There was a fellow about seventy-five, eighty years old. He was standing behind a tree, which was more than about six or eight inches wide. And he was just petrified, and he couldn't move and he was just, uhhhh, uhhhh, uhhhh. So finally

when it relaxed up a little bit, one of the guards went over and grabbed him and jerked him in the ditch there. I could see my gunner was laying out in the middle of the road. I was afraid something...I said, what's he doing up there in the middle of the road. And I was sort of afraid what had happened, and he had been hit. He was the only one in that area that had been hit. It was from our own aircraft.

BEN: Was he killed?

REE: He was killed. It took a piece of his head right out.

BEN: You just moved on, I guess?

REE: Just moved on.

BEN: Was that pretty difficult? Did that upset you?

REE: Well, I was really kind of sad, because he was really a nice clean-cut kid. No problem with him. A farm boy from Kansas. Really nice kid. He'd been wounded once before. He was a B-17 gunner and he had been wounded before, and I guess when he got well they reassigned him to our unit.

BEN: That's kind of a strange twist of events.

REE: That was the only sad part of my experience.

BEN: Later on, after the war when you were released, that's the kind of information you reported on, right? They debriefed you on that kind of thing.

REE: Yes. What they did was...his parents didn't even know about him, I guess, till I wrote them a letter.

BEN: Was that after?

REE: Yes, after I got back to the States.

BEN: Was that on your own?

REE: Yes. Well, later on the war department wrote me a letter trying to find out where he was when he was hit. I told them I didn't know where he was or where I was. I said I don't know. Maybe if you checked the records and it might show where we were flying on that particular day because it was near that area that we were supposed to be bombing that it happened. I think they eventually did find his body. That was my understanding. I communicated with his mother back and forth, and I guess they found the body.

BEN: Really. You did that for a little bit. And was that just something you did on your own choice, or write?

REE: Yes, every Christmas I wrote, and finally I quit getting letters, so I don't know what happened. But his sister came to visit me, and her husband, paid me a short visit from Los Angeles.

BEN: Let's go back where you're grouping up with more people. You have infantrymen with you now.

REE: Well, they then begin to separate us to airmen, because they had a place where there was supposed to be expert interrogators. Their job was to interview or to talk to these downed airmen, apparently some special place, I guess. I'd heard about it. They said they'll do anything to try to get the information out. They'll try to butter you up, or whatever. I thought when I was there, I thought, "Boy when are they going to give me this good treatment they talked about, to try to get me to...." Now in here, I mentioned a train ride. Actually, I think it was before that train ride. They had a bunch of us there and they lined us all up and they said, "All the fighter pilots step one pace forward." Nobody moved. So later on this fellow called me over and he said, "If you tell us where your crew is, we'll see that you all get put together." Now, of course, my only crewman had been

killed. This was a couple of days later. I was afraid. I didn't want to tell him that was my only crewman, because they would know that there was a new type of plane.

BEN: So the A-26 was fairly new at this point?

REE: Oh, yes. We were the first ones, I understand, to get them. I think I was the first one to go down, as far as I know. So I in my most snarly voice I could, I said, "I don't care where they are or what happened to them. They'll take care of themselves." The guy looked at me. He didn't ask any more questions. Well, apparently, they concluded that I was a B-26 pilot, because when we got out, when the war was over, we got our records from this prison camp. They had this sheet on me. That's where I got these pictures from. They had listed me as a B-26 pilot. And that was what I wanted to do. I didn't want to come out and say "B-26." I thought, well, they'll...so anyway, that's what they did.

BEN: So did you go through any interrogation of any sort?

REE: Oh, yes.

BEN: So after that they did, they somehow decided that you had a crew, at least.

REE: Whatever they did. But we got back to this interrogation. Well, I got on this train that was to take us to this interrogation point, and I was on that train, I think it had gone clear across Germany. I was on that for part of three days and two nights. What they would do, at one time they would stop. What they'd do is they'd lock you in and then put barbed wire all around the cars.

BEN: Just the boxcars?

REE: Yes, just a boxcar, a plain old boxcar. Of course, we didn't have any—silly—there was a two-by-four, and we decided we'd put this up here and this will be the latrine up in this corner here. And, of course, some of the juices would run down the train. Of

course, you couldn't sleep because you'd get up and have to keep warm. I was there for two nights and part of three days.

BEN: How many inside, do you figure?

REE: It wasn't very crowded, it wasn't jammed together. I understand some of them were really jammed together. There was only about six or eight.

BEN: And all of you all flyers?

REE: All flyers. We got up to this...now this is the time, and I said in there that we got some snow. Actually, what happened was there was a little kid out there by the car and there was a rusted tin can and a little water in kind of a sewage ditch or something. So I said, "Waser, waser. Give me some of this."

BEN: So during those days they didn't give you anything to eat or anything?

REE: No, all they had to eat was I did have this little tube of cheese. But I was thirsty. I was so thirsty. So he handed it to me and I got diarrhea or dysentery from it. Boy, what a mess that was. So I still had the problem when I arrived at this place. So they kept me there for two or three days, and I finally got over it, but they wouldn't let you out. Once a day they'd let you out to go to the toilet. Just once a day. So I didn't have any toilet paper, so under this pillow they had, which is made out of burlap, I ripped off some pieces, and decided I'd use that for toilet paper. So they called me in for interrogation, and as I mentioned there, this guy was a very nice guy and spoke excellent English. And he was showing me—they had books about that thick—and he was showing me. And I told them I was a medium bomber pilot, because I thought they knew, because they shot me down in broad daylight. He said, and he would watch my eyes to make sure if I would particularly focus in on a particular item. And sure enough, they had our unit there. They

had our commanding officer and they had a lot of stuff on our unit. But I didn't act or show indication. So that's when he said, "just to make sure you're not a spy, we have to know something about you." And I said, "Do spies usually enter your country by jumping out of burning airplanes in broad daylight?" He didn't ask me one more question about planes or anything else. We talked for a little while.

END OF SIDE A, TAPE 2

REE: So that was the only thing he asked me. I said, "After all, this war is going to be over in about three or four months." He said, "Oh? Who's going to win?" "What do you mean who's going to win? We will." He said, "Why do you think it will be over in three to four months?" I said, "It will be springtime and Patton won't run out of gas this time." I heard that he'd run short of fuel, one of the problems he'd had. So I said, "He's not going to run out of gasoline this time."

BEN: (laughs) That's what you told him?

REE: That's what I told him.

BEN: Did they give you any medical assistance there at all? You had dysentery. Did they give you pills or anything?

REE: Oh, no. One place, I did have it, one of those places before I got to that place I had a kind of a rash on my arm. They put a little salve on it, which took care of it.

BEN: So did he discuss where he learned his English or anything like that?

REE: No, I didn't ask him anything about it.

BEN: So he never pinpointed who you were or said anything about what squadron?

REE: Well, I'd given him my name, rank and serial number.

BEN: Right, but he did say "You did this" or "You were going to this mission"?

REE: No, he didn't say a thing about where I'd been going.

BEN: It's interesting to note a lot of Air Corps POW's, most of them that I talked to, they already knew everything about them. It was kind of strange. They knew where they were going and everything by the time they got to them. So only one time in front of the interrogator, then?

REE: Right. Well, I say when they asked me questions, before, like the guy who asked me about would I like to be with my crew, he wasn't a regular interrogator. He was just one of the ordinary schmoes trying to get a little information from me. But he wasn't the, so called...they're supposed to be really experts at this stuff. But this guy, when I gave him that question, he didn't ask me another thing.

BEN: Were you concerned for your health or safety that you recall? Or were you getting accustomed to any of it? Or were you still concerned of what's yet to come.

REE: No, I was getting a little more bold since I talked to this guy (laughs). And this other guy, "I don't know where my crew was. I don't care what happened to them." I got to where it looked like I might make it. I figured I was going to make it.

BEN: So you were wearing the sheepskin flight pants?

REE: Well, I should mention this. They took those away from me that same day or a day later.

BEN: They did?

REE: The sheep-lined pants they took away. They left me with a jacket. It was not leather, but it was a jacket, a flight jacket.

BEN: Was it a fur collared one?

REE: Yes, a fur collared one.

BEN: The olive drab one?

REE: No, it wasn't olive drab. I think it was pastel colored, something like that.

BEN: But it wasn't the sheep one?

REE: No.

BEN: But it was a warmer jacket?

REE: It was a fairly warm jacket.

BEN: Did they take your boots, too?

REE: They took my boots.

BEN: What did they give you in return?

REE: Nothing. So I had my little liner. A few days later a guard took me to a place where they had some shoes. So I got a pair of shoes from there. They wasn't quite the right size, but it was good enough. They come up to about here. They weren't oxford or anything.

BEN: Were they Red Cross?

REE: They were Red Cross, I'm sure. One thing funny happened over there. I say, as this guard was taking me over to get those shoes, there was a bunch of people that was in a fence, they were fenced in. And while I was waiting there they brought in one of these kind of two-wheeler carts, flat carts, and they dumped a whole bunch of garbage in this area that was fenced off. And all those guys dug in this garbage and they were eating. And I thought, "Gee, who are those people?" So I asked the guard, and he said, "They're Romanians." And I thought, "Wait a minute. The Romanians are supposed to be on your

side,” because Hitler did have Hungarian/Romania troops there. I thought, “Whoa, that’s kind of interesting.”

BEN: And that was on one of your transitions?

REE: Well, that’s in these places where I’ve been before I get to the main camp.

There’s several places where I was at before I got to the main camp. One time—now this was early—I had this lieutenant from the infantry, so we decided we’d go together for warmth and everything. So we went in this one area where they were giving out, we called them the Russian blankets; they were burlaps. We went around and got one each. And I said to this fellow, “They’re not keeping track. Let’s go around again.” So we went around again and got another blanket. So I said, “Let’s try it again.” So we went around a third time. The third time, the guards looking at me, “Haven’t I seen you before?”

BEN: Did you get the third one?

REE: We got the third one, oh, yes. But this guy was looking. I thought I better not go around again.

BEN: Was there much talk amongst the men you were with?

REE: You know, when I got back to the main camp, all the officers were put in this one room, except this one guy. He was a Jewish fellow; he wasn’t an officer. They said, “Don’t bore us with your horror stories.” So I didn’t tell them. I just told them what I was flying. I didn’t tell them very little about it. They were kind of interested because it was a new plane. But we didn’t exchange stories.

BEN: Well, how about going to the main camp, like in the boxcar, was there much?

REE: Not really.

BEN: You were just kind of left to reflect on your own? What's going to happen to you?

REE: I guess so.

BEN: So you were finally designated to Stalag Luft 1, up by, is that Barth up there?

REE: Barth. Barth, Germany. That was the name.

BEN: So, that's quite a distance, I assume, unless you...

REE: No, we were in a train. Actually, what happened that day, we were put in another train, boxcar, but this was a lot more pleasant. So as we were going in, we got into, apparently, Berlin, and we heard the sirens going. Now one of the favorite targets of those B-17's was to hit those trains. So there was a navigator who'd been in a B-17, and he knew what was going to be, so he became frantic. And he was going...really. And I said, "Hey, don't worry. Sit down. If we're going to be hit, we're going to be hit. If we get killed, we get killed. There's nothing you can do about it." That didn't help a bit (laughs). I said, well, I guess I'll turn in my amateur psychiatrist...

BEN: Did anything happen? Did anything come close?

REE: No.

BEN: So in all your train rides, no strafing?

REE: No strafing.

BEN: As you're heading north, are you picking up more prisoners?

REE: Well, I don't know. All I know was what was in that particular boxcar. But we got up there and we marched into this stalag. Now I was in one of the newer sections; they had four different sections. These were the kind—you've probably heard of them—

they're about six feet off the ground—so we can't tunnel. So that's the kind we were at. I don't think of anything particularly interesting happening there.

BEN: Did they start feeding you right away? You were shot down at Christmas—was it the twenty-third you were shot down?

REE: Twenty-fourth.

BEN: When did you arrive to the camp?

REE: I'd say two to three weeks. Then at the camp, they would give us a bowl of soup a day and I think a seventh of a loaf of bread, something like that.

BEN: Was there any introduction? You mentioned they took the officers into one room. Did they lay it out to you, how it was run? Any kind of instructions?

REE: Well, the first day we were there, we had a fellow who came in and he says, "Don't any of you clowns try to escape. We've got an escape committee, so if it's absolutely necessary to get out, you can work through this committee. But don't you try it." So I said to myself, "Boy, I've been through enough. I'm not going to try to escape." Besides that, I got to thinking, "If I get outside that fence, I'll be in a sea of Germans. And if I manage to get to the front lines, if I don't get killed by the Germans, I'll get killed by the Americans when I'm trying to get across the line. I'm not about to escape."

BEN: Was there an order of command? Was there a line of authority?

REE: Sure, oh, yes. In charge of our compound, there was this ace fighter, Gabreski. He was a colonel. He was in charge of our camp, our unit. Then they had a fellow who was above. He was a colonel. He was in charge of the whole camp. And we were organized just like we were in the army. We had a captain for the barracks we were in,

and we had our own MPs. I mentioned when the Russians took over, we had our own MPs there.

BEN: What were the barrack arrangements, then? Were they a long row-house type deal?

REE: Yes, just a long row-house. They had it...

BEN: Sectioned by room?

REE: Sectioned by room. I don't know how many rooms there were. But they had a hallway, rooms on both sides. Right directly across from us, they had some enlisted men. Most of the people in there were officers, but they had enlisted men. And the Germans were very conscious about rank, so they had these enlisted men would go out of the compound and pick up some charcoal. They had these little bits of charcoal and they'd give us, oh, two a day or so often. While they were out there, I said I'd like to be on the crew, so I could get some of these extra briquettes. So I would go out there, and I would stuff these briquettes in my jacket and I would come back with six or eight or nine briquettes all in my jacket, because I still had that. But then one day I got a little too greedy and my zipper broke. And here I am with this guard around here, and this confounded little German guard there was just talking to me, just chatting away in German—I couldn't understand a word he was saying. I turned around here, and "get out of here." So as I was pulling these briquettes, and getting them back on me—I didn't know whether they'd do anything to me for taking them, but anyway, I put them back on the wagon. So that ended that detail. They took another one from our room, who took over the detail of getting these.

BEN: So that was kind of the plan for the room? Go out and get more?

REE: Get more.

BEN: How many in your room?

REE: Twenty-four.

BEN: And there's several rooms of twenty-four?

REE: Yes, as far as I know.

BEN: And there's only one door in, and that goes to the hallway?

REE: Yes, into the hallway. What they'd do is lock us up at night.

BEN: Any windows?

REE: We had a window, one window on the side.

BEN: And do the beds run along with the corridor?

REE: Well, they ran, as I remember, there was a line of beds. They're three high.

There's the door here and they had a little stove over here, and then they had along the one side of the room, and then some over here, the rest the time, then they had some over there. Wherever they had the space they'd put them, but then they had to have the room for this little stove that we had, or whatever it was. What we did—you probably heard about the Red Cross parcels—when they took those, they would take all the cans in there and they'd hit them with a meat cleaver because they didn't want you accumulating stuff so you could escape. So we didn't want to use these, so what we'd do in ours, we build a little shelf on the outside of the room where we'd stick these cans in there where it'd be cooler, so it kept them cooler. What they did is, they told us when we got there, how to open a can up. You could take a can, you stretch it out, lay it out, then you put a little, oh, bend it a little bit like this, then they take the other end of the can and bend it like that, then they'd put them together like this and then you'd hammer them and they made pretty

good...we had this one fellow, the whole time he was in there, every day, he took an ordinary little knife that you had, and he was hitting those things and he made all kind of pans for it. All day long he was hammering away on those. He had a little bench there.

BEN: What kinds of things did you end up making with those cans?

REE: They made kettles that you could hold stuff in, various pans that you could use. I never did make one, but he was...

BEN: How about washing facilities and just general sanitation. Was there a bathroom inside or was it out?

REE: What they did is when they locked you up, you had a toilet-like thing that was in the barracks.

BEN: Did they lock your room, or just your building?

REE: They locked the building.

BEN: So you could go in between rooms if you wanted to for whatever reason?

REE: Every night, when we were locked up, they would pass around this one sheet of paper with the BBC news broadcast. And I never could figure out. The Germans had a speaker and they were all giving the propaganda.

BEN: Did they do that in English?

REE: They did it in German, so I didn't understand what it was anyway. What was I going to say?

BEN: The BBC News, you said.

REE: Yes, the BBC News. I said, "Where'd they get that radio?" They must have got some radio in there someway, or some parts. But I never did know, until about five or six years ago. I made a cruise to Alaska and this fellow had a book on POWs and what they

did. What they did, they had this fellow in charge of the POW camps. When they would...see the prisoners would help open up these Red Cross parcels. What they would do, they would send through a message saying, "This is coming. Watch this careful," because they'd send through money, maps or anything else. So they must have sent radio parts through those and then they'd tell them there's some coming through here. Watch this one. So they'd distract the German's attention while they got this thing out and so forth and so on.

BEN: So you'd get the news every night? You'd get an update of what was happening?

REE: Every night. So in our room, somebody decided they'd make a map, so they made a map and they would show where the front lines were. And the Germans, of course, on their inspection tours, they'd come in and look at that map. Now this map was different than what Hitler was telling them where the lines were. But they really believed those maps. But finally our commander says, "I think I better take down those maps. Don't have them hanging on the door" (laughs). That's the way it was.

BEN: How about sanitation, then?

REE: That's right. They had some—I don't remember too much. They had some cold running water out there. You could wash, wash your clothes, if you wanted to. Of course, if you did that, you had to go out and stand roll call twice a day. You wouldn't have any pants on or shirt or whatever.

BEN: Was there a shower facility?

REE: No, they had a big room, probably as big as this house here, that had showerheads in. They'd turn on the warm water for about three minutes. They'd put two men under each shower, so you really had to scrub.

BEN: Be efficient and go fast.

REE: Go fast, that's what they would do. Sometimes we'd try to bribe them with giving them bars of soap, or whatever. About every three weeks, approximately, I don't know if it was two or three weeks, they'd give us that shower. Now there was one fellow in our room who wanted an extra shower, so he claimed he had some lice. Now, what they would do, they would steam the clothes, we had to take off all our clothes, they would steam them, and then they'd put them in this shower. That would kill all the lice. Of course, we didn't have any lice, this guy just wanted an extra shower. That's what I think, anyway.

BEN: During that time, I guess you were there in January, and of course, the war ends in May. So you were kind of on the tail end where things weren't exactly in the best shape for prison camps, I guess. Food supplies were just kind of...if you got a bowl of soup, would there be anything in the soup?

REE: No, just vegetables. I think once in a while, there'd be a little piece of horse meat, but I don't think I ever got any, because they'd kill these horses.

BEN: You got that black bread, of course.

REE: Yes. The one thing about it, it was thick and heavy. You know, I would want to mention that—it has nothing to do with me—I was surprised, when I got shot down, the amount of horses the Germans were using. You thought this was a highly mechanized,

but it wasn't. For a lot of transports and things, they were using horses, a lot of horses.

That's what really amazed me.

BEN: During those months, did any kind of education or entertainment programs, did they try to organize some kind of morale-type things at all?

REE: Yes. We had one fellow who was giving us a class of Spanish.

BEN: Really? So an organized class, kind of?

REE: It was a POW. They'd get a bunch of people in wherever they could get this hall, I don't remember...

BEN: Kind of a commons?

REE: Kind of a common thing. They gave us that, but that was about the...I don't know whether there was another class or not. You know, when you're hungry, you don't think about too much going to class, which I went to the class once, but it was hard to concentrate. We weren't really starving that much, but when those Red Cross parcels didn't come, we were kind of in bad shape. Oh, another thing about these rooms I might explain, at least the way we did. Our room had twenty-four men. All the Red Cross parcels, all the food, everything, was shared. Sometimes, some of the rooms, they would have groups of four or five or six, they'd have their own little thing. But we had the best system. Everything came in and sometimes we'd cut the crust off of the bread, and, of course, with these briquettes, we could toast the bread, so we'd save up these little crusts until Sunday, and on Sunday we would have a ___[unclear]___ breakfast. So for once in a week, we'd get our stomachs full.

BEN: So what was generally for a ___[unclear]___ breakfast. What exactly? Did you have bread crusts?

REE: It was bread crusts; that was it. We did have a little Clem. So we'd mix a little milk with it.

BEN: How about cooking? Was there cooking rotation, water gathering?

REE: We had a couple of fellows who took charge of the cooking, but they were kind of snitching things on the side, so we changed cooks (laughs). A very nice guy we got in charge; he was the cook. So we'd stretch out this food as long as we could.

BEN: So was that a rotational chore?

REE: No, the guy agreed to do it, and he was very honest and everybody trusted him.

BEN: Was there anything specifically you were looking forward to in your Red Cross parcels? Was there any items that were of higher commodity?

REE: Well, they had the D-bars. I don't know if you've heard about those?

BEN: Yes, the chocolate things.

REE: They were chocolate, and they were, of course, the best tasting of the stuff.

BEN: How about, you'd get cigarettes, of course, in there, too. Were you smoking at the time?

REE: I didn't smoke, so I had all kind of cigarettes.

BEN: And did that give you a certain amount of bargaining power?

REE: Well, there wasn't much to trade, but I'd be willing to trade any of my cigarettes if they'd give you something to eat. I saved a lot of them and I used them to, when we were out in France, when we came over to France, I had these cigarettes that I used to give the French farmers for food. See...I'm taking up too much of your time.

BEN: No. I've got as much tape as you've got time to talk

REE: I don't know who's going to listen to all this stuff. Well, those Russians, the Germans moved out just ahead of the Russians. So one morning, I think I mentioned there, I woke up. The German guards were gone. Our own MPs didn't have any arms, but they were up in those towers; nobody gets out. We don't want all you guys running around. So the Russians, apparently—so the rumor goes, I don't know; we used to depend on rumors—but rumors were the Russians thought we were Nazi sympathizers because we didn't tear the place up. So the next morning, I heard a big shout, and it sounded like a bunch of Indians, and they tore these fences down, they went out and there was a little flack school there. They went around there and they kind of hammered up all that stuff and I thought, boy these guys, they really went wild, put on quite a show. So I guess the Russians figured, well, I guess they're all right. But as I say, we had an air base right close to that camp. The Russians wouldn't let us use it for a long time. I don't know why, but they wouldn't let us use it. So I guess, finally, they let us in, but we had to sign some kind of a—I think it was four, five o'clock in the morning—and we had to sign this document in Russian. I don't know what it said, but apparently it was kind of a substitute, because we didn't have passports. I grumbled, I said, "We didn't have passports to get in there. Why do we need a passport to get out?" But, anyway, it was kind of a document we had to sign to satisfy the Russians for something, I don't know what it was. But those guys were crazy. I felt sorry for the Germans, they just treated them...

BEN: For the Russians or for the Germans?

REE: The Russians treated the Germans. Of course, the Germans had treated the Russians badly. So Stalin said, apparently, you can get even now.

BEN: Yes, that's right. Before you get liberated there, was there any entertainment in the months you were there?

REE: No.

BEN: Any camp shows?

REE: No, not in the compound I was in.

BEN: How did you pass your time, generally, besides thinking about food?

REE: (laughs) That's about it. Yeah, we would concoct these recipes of what we were going to eat.

BEN: Do you remember any of those?

REE: Oh, yes.

BEN: What were you missing the most? Was there anything specific that you had a craving for?

REE: Well, steaks. We were going to eat steaks three times a day. What the Russians did, they dumped a bunch of potatoes, they took a truckload—I don't know where they came from—we had a truckload of potatoes that they dumped in there after. When the Germans had gone, they dumped it in there. And we were cooking potatoes all day long. We were eating potatoes until they were running out our ears. I think I told you about the milking I did in there.

BEN: About what?

REE: The cows. See, we said to the Russians, "We'd like some meat." So the Russians went out and rounded up about fifty, sixty head of German cows, milk cows. So they put them in the pasture right next to the camp. Of course, those cows were milked eight hours, ten hours a day. So I said, "Look, let's get..." There was one other person in

the room that knew how to milk. I said, "What we'll do is get up about three, four o'clock in the morning, I'll take three or four fellows with me, four or five fellows, and we'll corner these cows that are kind of wild, that nobody else can milk, and we'll milk them, I'll milk those." So it worked out fine. We'd get a couple of containers, couple of buckets of milk every morning.

BEN: How long did that last? I mean, how long between the time you were liberated before...

REE: Well, it wasn't too long, maybe two weeks. But during that time we were milking cows, milking cows.

BEN: Just for your room?

REE: Just for our room (laughs). We weren't going to share that milk with anybody. There was one guy from Texas, he says, "Boy, this Clem is good. When I go home, I'm going to have a can of Clem all the time." When he started drinking that milk, I said, "You still going to have that Clem?" He said, "No way!" When he got that fresh milk, he said no.

BEN: Quite a bit different. Interesting. Could you tell the war was ending?

REE: We knew the war was ending from the BBC.

BEN: Could you hear the Russians actually advancing, as well?

REE: We could hear the artillery from the Russians, the Russian artillery. It was kind of a thud, but you could hear it.

BEN: When you first got into the camp, was there optimism right from the start that things were wrapping up? Or in January, was it still kind of in question there?

REE: At least I was sure things were going to be wrapping up soon.

BEN: Did you ever fear that they may not let you go, that they may take out prisoners before they give up?

REE: We were kind of worried about that, somewhat. We had the rumors that they were going to move us out, and that kind of bothered us too. Because they did some of those camps, they moved them out, and they put them on those marches, and they were in really tough shape. We didn't hear about those, but we were talking about, well we're going to make something where we could carry food. Some guys were trying to make some kind of a jacket where they could haul food in case they did. But I think there was possibly too many in our camp to move all that, because I heard a story about these SS, you know, they had a bunch of prisoners and they locked them up in a barn and with gasoline razed the barn and burned all those people alive.

BEN: So those rumors do circulate and were of certain concern.

REE: No, they didn't exactly, we didn't hear about those, but with Hitler you couldn't...those SS. We were afraid that they might do something to us.

BEN: Were there any SS in your camp?

REE: No, not that I know.

BEN: What were the guards like?

REE: They were, well, the guards in the towers were these really old fellows. They were older than I am, I think. But we had the fellows who worked in the guard that made these spot inspections, they were younger people, and they never gave us, they were really pleasant.

BEN: So did you ever have any interaction with them?

REE: No, we were told that we weren't supposed to be trading cigarettes, or trading

anything with those guards. Not hands off, but, I don't know. I would have liked to trade my cigarettes for some food, but...

BEN: They didn't want any of that?

REE: They didn't want any of that.

BEN: Interesting. How about just general attitudes. When you lock up a bunch of men like that, do tempers get thin? Plus you being a little bit hungry, too, were there any problems that you witnessed.

REE: No, our room didn't have any trouble. There was some people who were more likeable than other. But we didn't have any fights or anything.

BEN: Were there any sports played?

REE: No, we didn't. Our room didn't anyway.

BEN: Did you ever see American flyers go over?

REE: No, not that I know.

BEN: They were pretty high, and to the north, I think.

REE: Yes, that's right, so we didn't see any at all.

BEN: So with the spring warmth, was there mud or was the camp okay or did it get pretty muddy?

REE: Well, very interesting. We knew that, even the last two or three weeks we were in that camp, we knew the war was just about over, the Russians were coming. Do you know what the Germans were doing? They were building up the walkways all around. And I said, "What in the world? Can't they tell that the war's just about over, but they're building up walks and things around there?" Somebody said, "Well, maybe they're going

to use them for something else.” But then almost to the very last day they were building walks.

BEN: To stay out of the mud?

REE: Yes, stay out of the mud, I guess. Well, we didn’t really have any mud. They were building up these walks.

BEN: Were you ever sick inside the camp at all?

REE: No, I never was. I don’t know of anyone that was. I heard that one fellow, when we were liberated, one fellow ate too much and died. I don’t know if that’s true or not.

BEN: Okay, so the Russians came. Did they stick around? Did they guard the camp, or did they move on?

REE: They didn’t guard the camp, and we didn’t see too much of them. See, when we were out of the camp, one time we were walking about, us and some other fellows, and we run across some Russians in a boat and they came up, in kind of a river-like thing there. We couldn’t communicate with them, but this one guy had kind of an automatic guns. So we kind of indicate that...we show interest in them. So this other guy’s, he’s going to show us how they work. So he puts up this gun, sprays the whole countryside (laughs). I don’t know how many people he killed. I did run across a couple of dead Germans out of our camp. I don’t know what happened to them.

BEN: Were they some of the guards, you think?

REE: No, they were German civilians. I don’t know what happened to them. I don’t know what they died of.

BEN: Were they females or males?

REE: Males.

BEN: Interesting. The Russians were kind of a rough bunch. They went through a lot of bad stuff.

REE: Now here's another rumor. The rumor said that the Russians would send in these half wild Mongolians and so forth to scare the population to death, so when the regular Russians come in, they were all going to be docile, and so forth. That's just a rumor. I did start my own rumor, once. I went out and come back about an hour later. They said, "Hey, did you hear anything?" I said, "Yeah, we're going to get Red Cross parcels tomorrow." I have no idea if we were going to get parcels or not. But, sure enough, the next day we got them. Now my rumors were really Grade A (laughs).

BEN: Did the Red Cross parcels ever stop, or did you have them all the way until...

REE: We had them all the way up just about until...they claimed the reason we didn't get as many as we should have is because of the transports. What they said was the Germans wanted the American force to furnish trucks to haul the stuff up. And they said, "We're not going to do that." That's according to the rumor.

BEN: When did you finally see your first American again? Or was it the British? Or who came first, other than the Russians?

REE: We didn't see anybody.

BEN: How were you taken out?

REE: We were taken out...well, the Russians gave us permission to land in that air field. So we marched in and we came in. They were transport planes and they came in and took us over to...they had these camps in France that were kind of rehabilitation situations. See, I'd go around for seconds all the time till I got...between that and I'd get

these big egg nogs and I'd have some of those, so by the time I got out of that camp I was pretty good.

BEN: How did they decide who flew out first?

REE: I don't know.

BEN: Your turn just came up eventually.

REE: We just marched out.

BEN: Were you pleased to be back in the airplane? Was that a pretty good thing to be back in the air?

REE: Well, I didn't...all I was interested in was getting out of there. I wasn't interested in the airplane.

BEN: They took you back to France, to the Lucky Strike camps, I guess.

REE: Lucky Strike camps, or those kind of camps. Then when we got back to the United States, they put us up in some of these fancy hotels in Santa Monica, in California. We were there for a couple of weeks. Got further rehabilitated or whatever.

BEN: You were there with guys who had obviously been there longer, I guess, some of those POWs had been there a good while.

REE: Oh, interesting, one thing. I met one of these fellows that I'd gone through the final training with. And he was one of those, when they asked him what he'd like to do, he wanted to fly transport or utilities. Of course, a lot of these fellows didn't want to go to combat. So what had happened to him? They put him in as co-pilot (laughs) in a B-17.

BEN: And you met him in the camp, or in the Lucky Strike?

REE: No, I met him in the camp (laughs). See, he would have been a pilot, I guess, if he was chosen, but they put him in as co-pilot.

BEN: Interesting. Did you collect any souvenirs coming out of Germany at all?

REE: No.

BEN: And in France, how long were you there? And did they ship you home on a boat? Or did you fly home?

REE: Went home by boat. Well, I don't know. I guess I was there two or three weeks before I went back.

BEN: Did you meet any people local that you had known from home?

REE: No.

BEN: They gave you new uniforms, I guess. Did they delouse you and everything?

REE: They gave us uniforms. Well, they didn't even, when you'd change your underwear, your shorts and shirts, these POWs would throw away the others and take the new ones. So I kept some of mine.

BEN: So how was the ship ride home, then?

REE: Great. Since I was an officer, I got to eat up in the officer's quarters. And the officer's quarters on the ships were very good. We got servants, waiters, that took care of us, and it was great. It took us about eight days to come back. I thought, "Great! I should have joined the Navy (laughs)."

BEN: (laughs)

REE: But they had the enlisted men down in the hold.

BEN: Was it an official military ship, or was it a converted cruiser or liner ship?

REE: It wasn't an armored ship; it was probably a transport of some kind, because we didn't have any guns onboard. So it was a transport of some type, I guess.

BEN: And were you all POWs on there? All from the Lucky Strike camp?

REE: That's right, from the various camps.

BEN: Okay. How did you pass your time going on over? It was six days?

REE: It was about six or seven, eight, something like that. I just enjoyed life. Meals. Eating.

BEN: I guess you'd have three a day on that, or at least two.

REE: Three a day. But the enlisted men only got two a day, poor guys.

BEN: I didn't ask you, how did you pass that six months in prison? What occupied your time? Or did I ask that?

REE: There wasn't too much to do.

BEN: Any books?

REE: They had a library. And I signed up for a book and the next time, it was some time in May that I was to get that book. There wasn't really much to do. I did learn a little about playing bridge. I never played bridge before, so I played some cards and things like that sometimes.

BEN: So there was an established library, though, but you had a substantial waiting list.

REE: The waiting list was...

BEN: You were liberated before your time came up, right?

REE: Liberated before my book came up. If I'd have got somebody...well, we used to sleep with our clothes on, fully clothed, and two of us would usually get together so we'd have more warmth, because in this main camp, we got one of these straw ticks and, of course, they're lumpy. But then they'd give us either one or two blankets each, which

BEN: And those were always good blankets too; it was like money to them, I guess.

wasn't very much, so we'd get together, at least I did—I think most of them got together. And they'd sleep with their clothes on, fully clothed.

BEN: The ticks were like solid pieces? They weren't like the British biscuit types, where three or four of them would make a bed?

REE: No.

BEN: Just one big thing.

END OF SIDE B, TAPE 2

BEN: Okay. Tape three with Reece Robertson. So they issued you all new clothes, you said. That's one thing they had done?

REE: Right.

BEN: At the Lucky Strike camps, was there one food that you'd been talking about in camp that you had been craving, that you finally got a hold of?

REE: Not that I remember.

BEN: But you did mention you were able to carry out the things you did have from the camp. So you were able to bring out your stash of cigarettes, then?

REE: Yes.

BEN: And then you were able to trade those in France?

REE: Yes, I traded those in France. I could eat, going around those once or twice around, and then I'd go out to the farmers and I'd trade them some cigarettes for vegetables, like carrots and whatever.

BEN: And those were always good commodities; it was like money to them, I guess.

REE: Oh, yes. Those French, they liked those American cigarettes.

BEN: Okay. Coming back stateside, where did they take you? Did you come into the New York harbor?

REE: I guess it was New York.

BEN: The Statue of Liberty, did you pass that?

REE: No, I don't remember that.

BEN: Was there a welcoming committee, any kind of band for the POWs at all?

REE: No. I brought a rifle back with me.

BEN: You did? A German one?

REE: No, an Italian one. In France they have what they call the FFF, Free French Fighters. A bunch of young punk kids. I think they were more juvenile than anything. They said they were looking for the boss, "Where's the boss?" One of these guys had this Italian rifle. I said, "Hey, you want to sell that?" So I gave him a carton of cigarettes. This was before I went down, of course.

BEN: Before what?

REE: Before I got shot down. How I ended up with that rifle, I'll never know, because they normally would have taken that away from me. But at least, anyway, I got my rifle and they come out with my rifle sticking out of my bag there. So I was afraid to bring over any ammunition, afraid they'd really give me a lot of trouble. But the best bargain I ever had.

BEN: Wait. You lost that after you were shot down, right?

REE: No, I didn't. I had that with me when I got shot. It was in my things, and that's one of the things I recovered. I don't remember how I recovered it, but they didn't ship it home, but when I went back to my unit...

BEN: Oh, did they actually take you from the camps in France to England?

REE: No, we were in France.

BEN: Oh, but you actually were able to report back to your outfit?

REE: I actually went back and visited with some of the guys. They were going to give me medals, Silver Star and some of that stuff, but I told them, "Don't bother." I found out that it didn't depend upon so much what a person did that got a medal; it depend upon the person that wrote it up (laughs). It took a lot of ingenuity sometimes to create a medal.

BEN: Yeah, I guess so. And it's not about medals, of course, and everyone should have deserved something when it comes down to it. I mean, there's a lot of those situations, sure. So they did have some of your stuff still stored there. But your other personal effects were shipped home.

REE: Yes, they were shipped home, what I got, anyway. Some of the stuff I didn't get. But, then, that's all right.

BEN: So there were still a couple of people there that recognized you?

REE: Oh, yes, there were some people there. That supply officer, as I remember telling him this, I said, "Lucky you didn't go on that trip." He was the one I told you there was a bullet hole right in the windshield where he would have been sitting.

BEN: How long were you in France, then, from the time you got released. The war ended in May, of course. You were liberated, actually, how much before the signing?

REE: I don't know how long. It was two or three weeks, I would estimate, before I got on this boat and went back.

BEN: Okay. Just a couple of weeks.

REE: Two or three weeks; something like that.

BEN: So, during this time, of course, you're collecting your flight pay the whole time, right?

REE: Collected the flight pay for all the time I was in camp. When I got out, I didn't collect it anymore.

BEN: Right, you didn't have flight time anymore. But during that whole time you were collecting. So where did you pick that up? Stateside?

REE: Yes. They give me my money. I think before I got paid... I think I got paid just a little while before I got separated. They brought me back, and I was in California during this rehabilitation.

BEN: So you got to the East Coast, and then by train they shipped you over?

REE: Yes.

BEN: Did they let you stop in Wyoming to see your parents at all?

REE: I think I stopped there for a while, and then I did go back to this rehabilitation thing.

BEN: Okay.

REE: They said there was an Air Force field right there close to where I was going, so I went out there to see if maybe, I thought maybe I ought to go out there and fly. If you flew four hours a month they'd give you flight pay. They said, "Yeah, we've got a plane out here. We got a B-25." "But," they said, "You've got to take up ten men with you." I

got thinking, “I haven’t flown a plane for six months, and I haven’t flown this one for longer than that.” I said, “No, thanks.” I’m sometimes glad I didn’t do it, but anyway, ten men, I suppose I could have got it done, but I just didn’t want to take any chances.

BEN: Did you ever fly again?

REE: Never flew again. Never flew anything again.

BEN: Up to this day?

REE: Up to this day.

BEN: Never kept a private license?

REE: They give me a commercial license. I don’t know how much good it would have been, but they gave me a commercial license—they said it was a commercial license—for a twin-engine plane. But I don’t know whether it would be any good or not.

BEN: So the last time you actually flew an airplane, you jumped out of it (laughs). Well, you were pulled out of it, I guess.

REE: (laughs) Yes, that’s the last time I flew. Not that I particularly was opposed to it; it didn’t bother me, but I just didn’t do it.

BEN: Did you get to telegram your parents from the East Coast? Did you telegram from France? Or at what point did they realize that you were...

REE: What happened with my parents was they said that, first of all, they said I was missing in action. Now, my brother, he knew the plane I was flying and he apparently told my father, “They don’t know how to get out of those planes.” So my father was real upset and he says, “Then he can’t bail out.” Now I did, of course, when we were in camp, they’d give you a little postcard that you could send home. So I sent it home, but they didn’t get it for a long time. Well, what happened was, they had these people who used to

listen to the German broadcasts, and they'd get people to listen and they'd list prisoners of war. So somebody on the East Coast picked my name up, and my parents' names, and he had one of these radio things...what do they call them? A radio where you receive things? Well, he told my parents that I was alive in camp.

BEN: Did the Germans announce the parents, or did they announce the name?

REE: They announced the names, and somehow they got...well, they could have known. Maybe they did say theirs because I'd written some of these postcards and I'd addressed some of these postcards to my parents. So, maybe they did.

BEN: So some stranger they didn't know actually contacted your parents?

REE: Contacted my parents.

BEN: That's interesting.

REE: "He's alive." That was a real deal for them.

BEN: How soon was that before you actually came home?

REE: Well, it was still while I was in camp.

BEN: So that was good news, then. It wasn't a longer period of time.

REE: I can't remember exactly when they had it.

BEN: Did they get any of your postcards eventually before you were released? Or did they show up after you came home? I've heard of that, too.

REE: I think my parents had one postcard; I can't remember. I wrote several of them, but I think only one got through.

BEN: So you were able to confirm it in your own handwriting that you were there?

REE: Right.

BEN: And did you ever receive anything from them?

REE: No.

BEN: From what I understand, they could write too, but they rarely got there.

REE: No, they didn't. I don't know of anybody that got any postcards from home, or anything from home.

BEN: So you think you were able to stop home before you went to California?

REE: Yes, I think so. I remember I got a couple of weeks leave.

BEN: What do you remember of that reunion?

REE: Oh, man, everybody in town was talking to me, wanting to hear my story. There was another fellow with me in that same camp, well, not the same camp, but he was POW. They'd invite us both out to some affair, and I'd let him do all the talking (laughs). I got tired of telling my story. I didn't think it was that interesting, anyway.

BEN: So in California, then, did they want you to stay on? Did they offer you...?

REE: I didn't ask. I had plenty of points to get out. I'd been in for just under five years. So I had plenty of points.

BEN: So they never approached you to try to get you to stay in?

REE: They never asked me to stay in, or I never volunteered to stay in. I was discharged, actually, at Santa Ana.

BEN: So then you were just separated, and that was it?

REE: Well, I stayed in the Reserves. They didn't discharge me from the service, but they discharged me from active duty, I guess. Anyway, about 1949, they told me to either get active in the Reserves or get out. I decided I'd stay in, so I stayed in. And the way they did it in the Reserves, to get a good year, you had to make fifty points, as I remember. They gave you twenty points, I don't know, various types of points,

something like that. So I would like to have gone on active Reserves, where you get paid. You go one weekend a month; you go in and get paid for four days. But I couldn't find anything like that. So I took some correspondence courses that I wasn't interested in, but I managed to stay in. One interesting thing, one time I had this correspondence course and it was in electronics, something about electronics. And I was having a tough time. And I used to be, when I first went with the Immigration Service, I used to examine aliens for citizenship. The alien would come in with these two witnesses. So finally, I took my little questionnaire down to the office with me, and so I got electronic engineer. So after I got all through, every one was trying to make a good impression with me. So I said, "Say, by the way, how would this work out?" And this guy, he told me exactly what it was. So I answered the question.

[turns off tape]

BEN: So you got involved with the Immigration Service in the late '40s?

REE: Well, after I got out of law school, the '50s.

BEN: Oh, I was thinking about correspondence courses. That was later on? That was much later?

REE: Yes, that was much later that I was at the Immigration Service. Then I think I went to work for Immigration in '55.

BEN: So it was much later.

REE: Anyway, I finally got in active duty.

BEN: But never working with aircraft again?

REE: No. Pilots, they were a dime a dozen. They had so many of them. So what I did was I wrote up a request. I found an opening for a captain, which I was by this time, a

captain, of Intelligence. So I give them a snow job. I said, "I'm with the Immigration Service and we examine aliens, and I'm classified as secret", which I was, and I told them all about those things which would be confidential, and all this stuff. So they give me a slot as captain in Intelligence (laughs). I didn't know anything about Intelligence. So I finally stayed there until I got a slot on active duty for a Reservist, at March Air Force, and I stayed there until I retired from that.

BEN: Where was that?

REE: March Air Force Base in California. It's near Riverside, California. So I was the judge advocate there for one of the groups. So I stayed on. Anyway, then I was able to draw my retirement from the Air Force.

BEN: Just wrapping up on your World War II experiences, it's been a lot of years, how do you look back on those? How do you view your experiences overall?

REE: I don't know. I don't think about them too much. I didn't have any really bad experiences. I was glad I had the experiences. They gave me, well a few years ago, they passed a law where POWs get free medical from the VA. So I guess I was kind of lucky there.

BEN: Overall, did you view your experience as positive, then?

REE: Well, yes, I would say so.

BEN: Is there anything specifically that you took away from your experience that helped shape who you are at all?

REE: No, I don't think so. I find that there's some people who say they're interested in my story. I don't find that too many people are interested. That's why I was kind of surprised when you called.

BEN: Well, how about, did you ever have any nightmares from being in POW camp, or even jumping out of the airplane? Did that ever reoccur in a dream?

REE: Well, since you mentioned that, there is one thing. When I came here, when I was at Los Angeles, California, I heard about this, so I went in there and they had me fill out an application for this medical. And they said, "Was this service connected?" I was thinking about hayfever, allergy. So I said, "No." They said, "Do you have insurance?" I says, "Yes." "Can you pay for this?" "Yes." This girl says, "I don't think we can." She calls in the supervisor. He goes over the same thing. Finally...

BEN: Is this for the POW benefits you heard about?

REE: Yes, that's right. He said, I heard him say to himself, "You sure you can pay for this?" He had his pen held up there. If I had said, "Yes," he would have put that down. But he looked at me and he said, "What dope are you?" So I said, "But I did hear about this POW. I was a POW." "POW!" He put POW across my application in letters two inches high. So ever since then, you know. So I came up here and I had a broken ankle, so I went in there. And I had a girl in there that said, "We're going to get you disability." I said, "What?" She said, "Yeah, fill in this form." I said, "I'll fill the form in." So I filled the form in and they said that, oh, I had this one fellow who says, "You got to remember one thing if they question you about disability. Flashbacks. Remember that flashbacks."

BEN: (laughs) Who told you this?

REE: This was a POW; he was a Filipino. I can't tell of flashbacks. Anyway, I filled the form out, which they wanted to have a record anyway. So I received a letter that they'd gotten my thing, and said, "If you want to apply for disability, you're going to

have to take it up with so-and-so.” And I thought, “I can’t claim disability.” So, anyway, that’s my experience with disability.

BEN: Interesting, so your POW involvement seems to be coming up more in the last couple of years.

REE: Right. In the last few years. The insurance pays a lot of times what I get at the VA Hospital anyway. But they treat me real well at the VA. But this one gal, she wanted to sign me up for disability.

BEN: Interesting. With Brokaw’s book *The Greatest Generation* that came out a couple of years back or whatever it’s been...you’ve heard of that book?

REE: No, I didn’t know about it.

BEN: Basically, there’s been kind of a resurgence in people wanting to know about the Second World War, especially over the last two years that I’ve seen. And then Brokaw, the anchorman, came out with his book called *Greatest Generation*, and that really just sparked all kinds of things. I ask that because most people have heard of it. Do you feel as though you’re part of a generation that has done something that shines or anything specifically about...

REE: Not particularly. As I said, I trained for what I did, and they paid me for what I did. I knew there would be chances, but I was lucky. I got out of it alive.

BEN: How about, having seen so much of the world, having come from Wyoming and having a little of experience in Chicago for a little bit, but going to several different countries, and then being locked up for a couple of months there, did that change you on life in America at all?

REE: No, I don’t think so.

BEN: Did it make you appreciate small town, big town or anything?

REE: Not necessarily. Actually, I think about it sometimes, but I don't think it changed me or changed my attitude or anything.

BEN: No opinions on freedoms, understanding freedoms better that was taken away from you for a while, anything like that?

REE: No, not that.

BEN: Okay. You mentioned the GI Bill. Did you participate in the GI Bill?

REE: Yes, when I was in the service, I was in there, as a sergeant. I was making sixty dollars a month. And I had some friends who were in the cavalry, and they were out there making ten times as much as I was. And I thought, boy this is sure some mistake of mine. I could have stayed out of this thing and went to work in the defense industry and make all this money. But then when I got out, when I went to school, the GI Bill was what really put me through, because I didn't have enough money to put me through school, or at least I would have had to work a lot. So I figure that everything considered, I was glad that I did my service and I got the GI Bill, put me through law school.

BEN: And law school, where was that at?

REE: I went to law school at the University of Utah.

BEN: Oh, right here?

REE: Right, pre law, I had four full years, so I had enough to put me through pre-school and law school, and I took the bar.

BEN: So the GI Bill extended the whole time you were in school, then?

REE: Right. It was all the time I was in school.

BEN: Would you be under review every year? Did you have to specify credits, that kind of thing, to show that you...

REE: Well, I didn't know. I didn't have to. I was going to school and they were buying my books. And since I was married, I think they paid me \$105 a month.

BEN: When did you get married? How soon after? What year?

REE: I got married, this is my second marriage. My first wife died. I got married the first time in '48.

BEN: So a couple of years after the war.

REE: Right.

BEN: So then after graduating from the law school at the U here, then you went to California?

REE: That's right. Well, you know, being a lawyer, you have to have the clients. And if you don't have the clients, you can make good if you've got the clients. But here I was, I had no background, no ins with anybody. So I met a friend of mine. I was out collecting bills and things like that, which was really tough, being a poor practice. So I met a friend of mine who went to law school also down in Salt Lake. He says, "Hey, the Immigration Service, I'm making an application for that. Why don't you go down and try it." So I went down to the Immigration Service—they have a district office here—they gave me an application and I filled it out. The guy called me in and interviewed me and got one of those, "Don't call us; we'll call you". I forgot all about it. About eight months later, I received a telegram: "Report to Los Angeles for a naturalization exam." So my first wife, she had all her family here and everything, and she didn't want to go. I said, "Look, I haven't got anything here." So I started working for Immigration.

BEN: Starting what year, did you say?

REE: It was about '55. I worked for them for...

BEN: And your job was what, exactly?

REE: First of all, I was a naturalization examiner. They had upgraded that to where you had to be an attorney to be an immigration examiner.

BEN: So if I come into the country, I come with witnesses?

REE: Yes. You come to me with witnesses, I ask you questions. I go through your application, and I decide whether or not you're eligible. Then I make a recommendation.

BEN: How do you decide if someone is eligible?

REE: Well...

BEN: Were there quotas back then.

REE: Well, there were quotas to get in, but not to be naturalized. So if you've been arrested or...they give you an easy test.

BEN: So you're dealing with the actual citizenship.

REE: Yes. I'm dealing with citizenship.

BEN: So it's not the immigration part at all?

REE: No. The immigration service was part.

BEN: But you're just dealing with the people who've already gotten into the country, obviously, and now they're applying for citizenship?

REE: They're applying for citizenship. I can tell you all kind of stories about that. So then I went into, they opened up another thing, what they call the trial attorneys. So I would represent the government in deportation hearings. The other side would have their lawyers and so forth, and I would represent the Immigration Service. Then I was at that

for about seven years, then they opened up, a position became available for Immigration Judge. So, of course, it paid more than the other. So I got that job. So I finished up with about ten years as Immigration Judge.

BEN: So you retired from that what year?

REE: That was the year I retired. I think '87. January '87, as I recall. So I was with them quite a while.

BEN: So you saw quite a bit of change then, I would assume.

REE: Oh, yes. When I first went to work, we were looking for all kind of leads on illegal aliens. But when I left, they had, the aliens were lined, they'd start at five o'clock at night, and you'd wake up in the morning and they'd have a line clear back around the block. There were so many; so far behind; so rushed. It's still that way, I guess.

BEN: I don't know if they're going to want this on these tapes or not, so I'll go ahead and wrap these down.

END OF INTERVIEW