Pike, Milton Oral History Interview: Parents of Baby Boomer Generation

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GR: Milt, tell me a little bit about your life as a child during the Depression and up to the war.

MP: I was raised on a very small Vermont dairy farm, which incidentally is still in the family. I never felt that we were ever short of something to eat, but things were very tight, especially during the Depression years.

GR: Do you think that farmers did well compared to industry families?

MP: On a dairy farm you have milk and butter and cottage cheese, whatever. And we raised a vegetable garden and so forth. Then we had an occasional beef animal that we could use during the winter. I know that things were very tight because my dad had a man that worked for him for a number of years, who I learned years later, was told at one point that my dad could no longer pay him. And Ray said, “Well I don’t have anything else to do, so you’ll catch up someday,” which he did. But I think he worked about two and a half to three years without any pay.

GR: Did your dad try to help keep food in his hands though?

MP: No, because he had a very small farm, and he lived with his parents and wife and daughter. So they were self sufficient from that standpoint. That’s loyalty.

GR: Benevolence on the employee’s part, then.

MP: That’s right.

GR: As a child, did you really feel the Depression, or were you just aware of it?

MP: Well, we were certainly aware of it. We knew that there were a lot of things that were not available to us. But, I didn’t really feel deprived as far as that’s concerned.
GR: When were you born?

MP: 1923. So by the time that the Depression rolled around, I was very much aware of it.

GR: As the Depression rolled through America and the war escalated in Europe, were there any feelings on your part as a young man about what was coming?

MP: I was very much aware of that because I had probably one of the best history teachers that anybody could have in high school, for two years running. We used the weekly New York Times and things like that to be up-to-date on what was taking place and then, of course, all the background going into that. And then in college, which I started in 1941, the same thing all over again. We had a required course that was called Contemporary Civilization, part of which was again the weekly New York Times and Time magazine articles and exams.

GR: So it wasn’t just all textbooks then?

MP: Oh no, it wasn’t. The second year of that was not a requirement, but I elected a political science course. By that time the man who was responsible for that was called back into the military. He had flown with Eddy Rickenbacker and was pretty well shot up and had a wired jaw and a few things like that. But his replacement temporarily was a man from France who had been at the establishment of the United Nations and taught part-time at Middlebury College where I went in Vermont. And part of the time he was broadcasting for the Free French out of New York City. So, I had a feeling that I knew exactly what was happening worldwide as much as a youngster could learn at that point. So, I was very much aware of it.

GR: So, you’re in college and all of a sudden you’re drafted?
MP: Well, Pearl Harbor was December of my freshman year, and a lot of my acquaintances were marine reservists and they left immediately. And then it was a question of how long can we survive without going into uniform. That became very evident. But at that point they were saying if you’re in college, stay in college. But that didn’t last very long.

GR: Where were you attending college?

MP: Middlebury College in Vermont. December of ’42 it was very evident that I would be drafted. There was no question about that; it was just matter timing. So I joined the Army reserve at that point which gave me one more semester before I was called into service.

GR: Were you doing any sort of training there at college?

MP: No, not at that point.

GR: Had you thought about doing OCS?

MP: The reserve program that I joined was one that presumably gave you additional schooling. They were opening a unit in psychology or whatever, which never happened. So after going through the basic training and that sort of thing, our group ended up as by and large engineering students at the Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina. So, I had six months of that, only to have the program stop in its tracks. We were all transferred to the infantry at that point, with a few exceptions—some went into language training, some went into medical school.

GR: What was your training geared towards?

MP: In the Army?

GR: Yeah.

MP: Infantry.
GR: Just infantry itself?

MP: That's right.

GR: So you were the basic soldier that saw a lot of fighting then?

MP: Right in the front line.

GR: Take me through some of the basic training travels you had to go through, different camps.

MP: I was assigned to Fort Benning, Georgia, which is not an infantry training place, it's designed for the preparation of officers and paratroopers, that sort of thing. They opened a special unit for the ASTP. What is that? Doesn't matter, anyway, it was the school boys. We did the basic infantry preparation—learning weapons, taking forced marches, and doing orientation at night in the woods with compasses and things like that. But it was physical fitness.

GR: How did you deal with that Georgia heat?

MP: Not very well. I am not a person who handles heat very well. I wasn't then, and I'm still not.

GR: The training sergeants have a little bit of sympathy for the men out of the north?

MP: Nope, not a bit. In fact, our cadre were people that had been in the infantry officers candidate preparation group. They sent us a group of non-commissioned officers, and said so and so you're the cook and things like that. It was a little rugged.

GR: How did you deal with some of the emotional things that must have been coming up in your own mind at that time? With the training, being away from home, being not sure of where you're going?
MP: Well, there’s always that question when you’re in the military. You’re assigned where you are assigned, and you really don’t have any choice. After the basic training—which stretched out much longer than usual for a variety of reasons, and we were at the Citadel—it became evident that that program was failing, and I tried to get into the Air Corps. Everything was set except the final physical exam, and that day they closed it down; they didn’t need anymore. So then I tried the ski troops, and by that time I had been transferred to the 100th Infantry Division.

GR: So was the infantry looked upon as the deadliest place you could be?

MP: Certainly one of them. I guess the ones that are probably the scariest are the Air Force in some respects.

GR: And the bombardiers?

MP: Right. Percentage wise, I think.

GR: So you finished up where before you were sent overseas?

MP: At Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Again, a second summer of very hot southern training.

GR: Tell me a little bit about your day at Fort Bragg. What was it like from start to end?

MP: I lose track of some of that; of course you were assigned to a barracks, as your place of abode, and usually a wake-up call at 6 a.m. or a little before, something of that nature. As I recall, we had to stand rally call, or whatever they called it, outside, to make sure that everyone was there and healthy, so to speak. And then we went to the mess hall for breakfast, and then came back and got ready for whatever the exercise was for the day.

GR: How was the food?

MP: Food at that point was pretty good. We had a mess sergeant who was probably one of the best in the outfit, in complete contrast to what we had in basic training.
GR: Which was worse?

MP: Terrible. It was these field officers that were sent over and “you’re the cook.” (laughs) That was not good.

GR: So you’d eat breakfast and where would you go then?

MP: It was either physical fitness training or a 25-mile hike or whatever.

GR: All before lunch?

MP: Pretty much, yes.

GR: You’d come back from lunch, have a break.

MP: Sometimes lunch was in the field if you were at a special location, a firing range or whatever.

GR: Had rations been given to you early on yet? Or was that only overseas?

MP: That would be overseas. Sometimes they’d say take a field kitchen out, or something of that nature.

GR: So by the end of the day, were you taxed?

MP: Oh yes. We had one march, I remember, in which several men were very badly hurt by the heat. In fact, one person never survived as a result of it.

GR: Heat stroke?


GR: Even the officers?

MP: Yes.

GR: Where there any changes made because of that?

MP: No. (laughs)
GR: Talk a little bit about the age groups you saw among the ranks. What was the degree of variance there?

MP: When we were in training, of course, the original training, they were all about the same age. They were 18, 20, in that various range. I was in the group that came out of college. So we were the "college kids."

GR: Where you looked upon any differently than the drafted?

MP: No, because we were not with those people at that point. When we got into the 100th division, then we were the college kids again. We were not the "veterans" that had established the division in training and went through winter maneuvers and all of that business. Of course, our group was looked upon as being pretty soft at first. But I think everybody would agree that once we got overseas we were the ones that survived.

GR: So even in World War II there was some sort of hierarchy in the kids that hadn’t been in college and the kids that had.

MP: Up to the point of combat. Once in combat, you learned that you were each other’s buddy, and you looked out for whomever. It didn’t make any difference what your background was, you had a job to do and you had to do it in conjunction with others.

GR: When and what boat did you take over to Europe?

MP: I went over in a convoy in early October ’44, the first convoy to go from the East Coast directly to France. We landed at Marseilles, which is in Southern France in the Mediterranean. The ship I was on was the largest; it was called the George Washington. It had been a German luxury liner in World War I captured in New York harbor when the war broke out, and then converted a couple of times for various reasons. But we had 7,000 men on board.
GR: Were you treated in luxury?

MP: No, I was not treated in luxury. Presumably, a lot of the men had duties on the way over. Guard duty or whatever. My squad drew a detail in the vegetable preparation room (laughs), and that was a Godsend. They served two meals a day, and you went through and had your ticket punched and so forth. And mess kits you carried with you, and they were sloshed and cleaned and then dripped all the way through you know. All the quarters were just slippery and wet. But I had my meal ticket punched only twice. The rest of the time we ate on the job, and we ate like kings. (laughs)

GR: You had a lot of fresh vegetables obviously.

MP: We had vegetables, we went through a crate of oranges a day, and apples. The bakery was right across the hall so we had fresh bread. When we left at night we had sandwiches that we took back to our bunks.

GR: So had you picked up some weight on the way over from basic camp?

MP: We might have. Sure.

GR: What was it like in the bunkroom where the men were quartered for the night?

MP: Well take an average ceiling height and put three bunks, one above the other. And you get into this little canvas bunk with all of your equipment.

GR: Pretty tight.

MP: Very tight.

GR: Were there lots of things going on emotionally throughout the ship? Were there people breaking down?

MP: Oh no.

GR: Scared?
MP: I don’t think so, at that point. It was a feeling and a sense of we’re finally going somewhere. Not knowing exactly where, but we could pretty well guess.

GR: Do you think the military did that somewhat on purpose? Put urgency into wanting people to travel over the ocean and get into the fighting?

MP: Well, you’re non-commissioned and commissioned officers were gung-ho. They were going to get there and they were going to get the job done. Sure.

GR: So you land at Marseilles. Tell me about how that whole process took place at the dock.

MP: We recovered from a hurricane mid-Atlantic, for one thing. And then we got into the Mediterranean, and it was actually rougher sea-wise than it had been in the majority of the voyage, except during the hurricane days. We landed as I recall, early evening, it was beginning to get dark. There were no docks left, they had all been bombed, so we were anchored in the harbor. We went over the side, on these rope ladders so to speak. Full equipment, full pack, weapon, everything. And I had a dozen oranges in my belt. (laughs) They didn’t last long. As soon as we got on the solid ground we started marching up through Marseilles to a staging area, which was probably 10 or 12 miles up into the hills. We set up our pup tents and protested that if it rained we were going to be in the draw, which we were. (laughs) You know things like that. Didn’t matter, this is the way the Army does things.

GR: Yeah, regardless if it made any sense. So how did that all go, very smoothly up to the top of the mountain to the staging area?

MP: Pretty much so.

GR: Had you been given any idea of what to expect upon landing, or even back at basic?

What to expect as an infantryman?
MP: Not that part of it at all.

GR: You didn’t have any war torn soldiers that had come back to tell you the horrors of it?

MP: No. We were all this new outfit going in.

GR: That outfit was again what, Milt?

MP: 100th Infantry Division.

GR: So you’re in the staging area. I’m assuming you are waiting to go into action. What was the next step?

MP: We had to be moved by GI trucks as a unit. It took less than 10 days to get us online and in northeastern France. But it was a 3-day journey by truck. Two overnights in different places. Then we were told we were going in to relieve another outfit that had been online for a long time.

GR: Now where did that end up being?

MP: Near Nancy, France. And then east from there into the foothills of the Vosges Mountains. So we were basically in mountainous terrain.

GR: Did it take long before the action began for you?

MP: Not at all.

GR: So the Germans were there and waiting?

MP: Right.

GR: Tell me a little bit about how that all took place for you.

MP: We were never billeted in building, we were always in the open. Each person carried a shelter half, so called; two of those put together could make a pup tent. Then the question became, “How do we use it?” We used it as a raincoat because we had a tremendous amount of rain and cold fall weather. Or do you use it in the bottom of the
trench that you dig for protection? It was basically mountainous, wooded terrain that we
would spend the night in. Or do you put it over the top of the hole to keep the rain out of
the hole?

GR: And you did all three probably.

MP: We did all three, and none of them worked.

GR: Did you spend lots of time in foxholes?

MP: We spent our nights there. In the daytime, we were either improving the situation for the
next day, should we stay, but mostly we were moving on. We never knew where we
were going, it was just follow your leader or whatever. It was pretty much up and into
the mountains. Small villages and some hilly terrain. Or we’d go around the village and
another unit would clear that village.

GR: Were the villages inhabited when you arrived?

MP: There were still people there.

GR: Hoping for you to show up?

MP: Some of the older people who didn’t have any other place to go. Unless it was a major,
which we ran into later, some major points where there was actually a fire fight for the
village, and then the residents had to get out. There was no question about it. Where
they went, I don’t know.

GR: So what was that like, the first time a bullet approached you and you had to squeeze one
off?

MP: Well, the one that approached me went through this cap.

GR: Oh, through the top then?
MP: Through the helmet, through the front, and out the back. This was worn under the helmet.

GR: So you were hit then?

MP: Right.

GR: So that was the first time...?

MP: That was early December. No, that was not the first time. We basically could not see the enemy. They were either dug in and camouflaged, or they were behind good defensive natural barriers. That's why this situation happened because we could not see where we were going. Our objective was to take such and such a hill. And the top was not only a regular forest, but also some small evergreens and they were hidden behind the evergreen hedges and things like that.

GR: So was that a little hard for you to recover from emotionally?

MP: That was rough. Fortunately one of my buddies was beside me, and he was hit at the same time in pretty much the same fashion. We were asked to withdraw and that point because we couldn’t dislodge the enemy. We need some artillery or something. Freddy’s injury was just over the ear and it hit a small blood vessel there, and of course, he was bleeding quite heavily, whereas I wasn’t. The aid man patched him up so that the two of us could go back to an aid station. They bandaged him in such a way that he couldn’t see. (laughs) So, I led him back. We were out of duty about six days.

GR: Was there a little bit of conversation about that among the two of you on the way back to the aid station?

MP: Oh, I’m sure. Our most important one was, “Let’s get out of here!” (laughs)

GR: Did you replace your helmet?
MP: Yeah, they stole it from me. (laughs) I’d like to have it today. This is all I have left.

GR: That’s interesting that it was that close. So you’re able to go back and push on through into Germany.

MP: Our outfit was shifted while the two of us were away. Instead of going east, they moved us to the north direction. Within a few days after we were on the German border in northeastern France. This was different kind of territory. It was what they called the low Vosges, and basically open territory there, so that any movement could be spotted a mile away.

GR: Did you find it harder to fight there than in the mountains?

MP: Only two kind of things that were involved there. Well, most of it would be at night, and so leaving at 4 A.M. to go out and do a patrol and that sort of thing. We had been hit on Christmas Day by the German advance. They were trying to push us back at that point, whereas before we were aggressors. Now we were back and forth. The units on our right and left withdrew. They were driven back quite some distance, especially on our left, because it was another division and then a free French back up and so forth. I ended up as a squad on the left flank of the entire division. So to our left we didn’t have any contact. We didn’t know where the lines were, or who was there, so we were doing constant patrols. You’d go out in the morning and perhaps be gone four hours and find somebody, or you didn’t find somebody. If you didn’t, then fine, you could move on.

We were so thin at that point in personnel because of the Battle of the Bulge farther north. They’d taken the entire Patton’s army from our left north, so we were stretched over a much wider perimeter than we should have been.

GR: The whole idea was to engage the enemy, right?
MP: Right. By this time it was the dead of winter, snow on the ground and so forth.

GR: How did you all adapt to that? Were you given special gear and training to get through the winter?

MP: We were finally given a different type of combat boot, which was so-called snow packs, which were big rubber and leather combinations with heavy socks which helped keep our feet dry. We were also given white coverall and cape of some sort so that we wouldn’t be as visible against the white snow background.

GR: So at this point, was there talk already of the war getting close to coming to an end, as you were steadily moving into Germany obviously?

MP: At that point, the US Army was not in Germany. Because the Battle of the Bulge was near Germany, but it was in the low counties, Holland and France.

GR: Were you aware of the casualties mounting at the Battle of the Bulge? Or was it just an ongoing battle for your unit?

MP: We knew that that was on and that’s why we were so spread out. But we didn’t know the particulars on it at all. In fact, you very seldom knew what your efforts contributed to the overall event.

GR: Did you ever see Eisenhower or any figures?

MP: No. But there was a very interesting drama taking place, which in my write-up about what was happening at that time. Eisenhower wanted the 6th army, which was on our right, to withdraw back into the mountains as a winter defense line. That would mean giving up the whole Rhine area. They were already in Strasbourg, for example, which is on the Rhine. The French put up such a fight about taking over that territory that he finally had to be persuaded no.
GR: Were there lots of cooperation issues going on with the French and some of the British forces that were there?

MP: Oh I’m sure. Yeah.

GR: Who is telling who to do what.

MP: Well at that point as I put in my write up, it came down to a meeting between Eisenhower, de Gaulle, and I’ve forgot the man’s name who is head of the French forces, with Churchill and Montgomery as advisors or look ons. Ike was saying “You withdraw from this French territory for the winter.” And de Gaulle said, “You do that, and you have no further use of the French railway.” And Ike says, “If you do that, you get no more gasoline.” (laughs) So they finally had to say, “leave it the way it was.”

GR: As you’re getting closer to Germany, was anyone aware of the camps that had been set up, both for labor and for death camps?

MP: No.

GR: Hadn’t run into those yet?

MP: No, see we’re still in France and whatever. Christmas Day I was on the German border in an outpost type of event. But two platoons up and one back is usually what they did or one up and two back in reserve. I happened to be in reserve that day and got a pretty good Christmas dinner. All of a sudden we looked out and here came the others running back. They were having their dinner in the open, at which point they were hit by a German patrol and they lost a jeep and a trailer with the food. You know, things like that.

GR: A demoralizing event.
MP: Right. They lost of equipment, but there was nobody injured in the process. So we did some re-grouping after that.

GR: I'm assuming the Germans had something to eat that day.

MP: I assume so.

GR: So how for you, Milt, did the war...

[End of side one, tape one]

MP: I didn’t get into Germany because we had been hit by one of Hitler’s last offenses. He wanted to make sure that they had a victory because the Bulge had been a disaster. So he sent several of the crack German troops down to bottle up the seventh army, of which I was a part. I was on an outpost line. That went on for better than a week, starting New Years Eve. I was with my squad on an outpost observation, ahead of the main lines, right on the border. We were hit by a major offensive of German tanks—Panzer tanks—and some crack mountain troops. After receiving a lot of artillery hits and so forth we were ordered back. And when it came time to get my men out of the observation fox holes, which we’d taken over that day, I discovered two of my men were killed and two were very badly injured from the artillery.

GR: So you had risen in the ranks a little bit to a leadership position?

MP: I was squad leader at this point. You can last about so long in a leadership position.

(laughs)

GR: It was a given.

MP: Yeah, right. So we tried to get back into the command post which was in the center of this community of...I lost the name right now. By daylight it was back and forth. In town the Germans were in one section, the Americans were in another trying to protect it.
We were coming around the backside to get into town, and discovered that without
knowing where our troops were, we’d better get out of sight. We found an old barn that we
went into for a few hours. Once in a while we could hear more German outside than
English. Finally I took one of our men with me and we managed to get to the command
post, which was in a home in the center of town. Trying to get some aid men to come
back and take care of the wounded. By that time it had heated up so much that they
wouldn’t let anybody back at all. So the rest of my group was captured about an hour
after that. Then all of us in the command post, the next morning at about 3 A.M., were
captured as well.
GR: So that brought you into a different way of looking at the war then?
MP: That’s right.
GR: How did that all take place? Obviously not surrender; but you had to yield your arms I’m
assuming?
MP: Right. They came to the front door of this home that we were using as a command post
with a tank with an 88 cannon on the front of it, pointing through the front door, saying
“Rasch.”
GR: There wasn’t much you could do at that point.
MP: Not much you could do.
GR: Is it for you, as a squad leader, a point at which you have to understand that the lost of
life is, at this point, not worth it anymore?
MP: You didn’t have that option.
GR: Because you could have fought, but probably would have been decimated.
MP: Well, you don’t take 7 or 8 men and try to fight a dozen tanks. That’s why we were called back, so to speak. But there was a major firefight in that city of Rimling, France. The town was pretty well destroyed by the time they got through with everything.

GR: How did the whole prisoner transfer take place into German hands?

MP: We were marched on foot, under guard, away from the battle zone so to speak and closer to the Rhine. We spent I think two maybe three days marching. It’s about 80 miles as I recall.

GR: Were there any thoughts at this point that they’re not even going to take us all the way back?

MP: No, not particularly. We didn’t have any weapons, and the guards were some of their older people. It was just a matter of “don’t leave the group,” so to speak. We were kept overnight for a few nights and finally all the rest of them were transported somewhere we didn’t know. There were only two of us left. Finally we were moved with others by boxcar. We were put in boxcars for a couple of nights and didn’t move, and finally taken off. We were at the Rhine River, so it was a question of getting across the Rhine. We were taken off and hiked across the Rhine on a bridge of some sort, I don’t remember what it was now, and put back on boxcars and eventually moved, again two nights and a day, or two days or more, all the way into eastern Germany, east of the Elbe River. We were in a very large encampment there, supposedly not for American troops because they segregated by nationalities and they also segregated by rank pretty much. But the transportation system was so broken down that they never moved us again. So we were billeted with British who resented us being there because we were so long getting into the war. Some of them had been POWs for three and four years. So you can imagine.
GR: Tell me a little bit about the conditions of the camp when you first got there.

MP: As I say, we were in with the British and they were very protective of their territory. Germans issued each of the new men coming in a brand new US army blanket out of International Red Cross supplies. The British, already having three and four a piece, held a lottery for the new blanket. And we got the oldest, dirtiest cast off that you can imagine.

GR: So you fell into a political system?

MP: Absolutely. They sat around on benches, wooden benches and wooden tables during the day to carry on conversation and whatever they were doing. And we had no place to sit. They were ordered to double bunk which they refused to do. So if we wanted a place to sit, we had to sit somewhere where somebody wasn’t at that moment. We had no place to sleep until everybody was down for the night, in which case some of us slept on top of the tables, or two of us slept on wooden benches that were put side by side—two of them—so we had a place about maybe fifteen inches wide and long enough so that if we overlapped our feet up to our knees or beyond, two of us could sleep.

GR: And this went on until the end of the war?

MP: That went on for I’d say six to seven weeks, something like that. Then finally they moved two hundred Americans from that situation into two transit barracks that had been used for turnover. Since there was nobody coming in, we got those. So we had two American barracks to ourselves, which was a Godsend.

GR: The record keeping that must have gone on, when you arrived, did that alert someone back at states that you had been captured?
MP: No. I was “missing in action.” In fact, the Army notified my family of being missing in action probably two or three weeks after it happened. They never knew that I was still alive until April.

GR: Then why at that point did they know?

MP: We were allowed either a letter or postcard a week, two postcards. We started writing those and finally were told don’t bother because it never leaves here, that sort of thing. So we slowed down, we kept up occasionally. One of those postcards got home in April.

GR: What was daily life like in a prisoner of war camp?

MP: Kill time.

GR: Did you have a steady diet?

MP: We had a very consistent diet. First meal I had there was the night we arrived, and it was oatmeal—porridge, so to speak. Three of us ate our meal out of my steel helmet with our fingers. That was probably the best meal we had all the time we were there. The typical meal was an ersatz type of coffee in the morning. Midday we would have a ration, so called, of some kind of soup, which was usually turnip or cabbage—sometimes with a little bit of meat but not usual. About every other day some very small walnut sized potatoes. And depending upon the supplies, a loaf of bread, which we had to divide among twelve men or something like that.

GR: Was there any black-market going on?

MP: Not in the winter. No.

GR: How long were you there?

MP: I was there until May, about four and a half months.

GR: Was there any sort of routine that the Germans put you through daily?
MP: Every morning stand outside the barracks and get a count, make sure everybody’s here and those that are not here get no rations for the day. If they’re not there, they are in the bunk because they were too weak to get up or whatever.

GR: Did you see any health issues arising?

MP: The main one was probably loss of weight by most of us. Those few individuals who could not do without cigarettes, who would sell their bread rations for cigarettes. The cigarettes would come from an occasional Red Cross food package. It was supposed to be one 11-pound packet of food per man per week through the Red Cross, and we had two of those in the period of time I was there. One was for 12 people or 11 or something like that.

GR: Where was the rest of it going?

MP: It just didn’t get through because their transportation system was so battered at that point.

GR: Did it surprise you that the US Red Cross was sending food into the prisoner of war camps and expected it all to get there? Or was it somewhat necessary, the stuff that did get through was it used the way it should have been used?

MP: I don’t know how much of it was taken by the Germans, but some I’m sure. When one of those shipments came in and we were aware of it, they’d ask for a detail to come and bring back the package for eleven men. They had a small warehouse with these items, but every package that might spoil had been punctured. Cans had a big hole put in it so you couldn’t store it, or make a break and have food to carry, that sort of thing.

GR: That was another issue. Where you ever expected to be doing something to get out?

MP: By whom?

GR: By escaping.
MP: We didn’t try in the wintertime. There was just no question about it. We did understand from people who had been there, that if you wished to make an escape plan and it seemed anywhere near reasonable to whomever, then you could probably get help along the way all the way to the Swiss border. But you could not get across the border. So there was really not much opportunity to consider that.

GR: Now the other nationalities that were segregated from you and the British, did you see any different treatment of those troops?

MP: We didn’t get into the main part of camp where the largest number of people were. That was where Russian laborers, by and large, and lot of them were sort of the Mongolian extraction.

GR: And you weren’t expected to do any manual labor?

MP: We had to take care of our own food supply once it was in our hands, so to speak, but occasionally they’d ask for people to take a trip outside of camp and pick up some firewood and bring it in for the kitchens.

GR: Was the relationship with these older German soldiers pretty amicable?

MP: Pretty much so.

GR: In your comparison to a very popular TV show of the same design, was it anything close to Hogan’s Heroes?

MP: No.

GR: Very rough?

MP: We were pretty well left alone to ourselves. Really the only contact we had was that morning thing. About once a month a shower for delousing, but then we put the same clothes back on.
GR: So there was some sort of health care being administered.

MP: Little, very little.

GR: When you were allowed to leave the camp, or it was liberated, how did that all take place?

MP: We knew that we had BBC radio in camp somewhere, we didn't know where it was and the Germans never found it. So we had a weekly update on where things were and we knew that we were right between the east and west forces. So we were pretty much aware of what was happening. As it became evident that we would be liberated by the Russians rather than the American forces, we were given the opportunity to leave camp and hike across the river to what would become American territory. The British and the Americans said no, we'll stay where we are because this camp is known and its located. From the air they knew what it was and it was used as a turning point in some of the bombings. Some of the French did get out and leave. But we were fourteen miles from Torgau on the Elbe, which was where the Americans and the Russians first met. We tried to get word to them, and eventually did, that we were there and they sent a two-truck convoy over with some medical supplies. But the Russians wouldn't let us leave. So about ten days later they finally asked the Americans, I guess it was a couple of weeks later. Incidentally they had doubled rations, that's about all that happened by the Russians. We were moved on foot about thirty-some miles south to the city of Riesa, which was still on the Elbe but was on the other side. Put up in better quarters there and slightly better food and so forth. Then they still wouldn't let us go, and we were farther from American lines than we had ever been. (laughs) Finally one of our military officers had come through with a convoy to bring some Russian wounded back into their control.
and tried to negotiate our release and he couldn’t get anywhere. It was the second or third time so finally he called everybody together and said, “I don’t know what’s going on, but anyway, it’s very lightly patrolled by the Russians between here and the next river, the Mulde River. If you want to chance it and you’re on the highway and we see you we’ll pick you up on the way back. But don’t everyone leave at once.” So fifteen minutes later five of us were out the gate on the way.

GR: So there was lots of activity, people just straggling.

MP: Oh yes. There were people going all directions in all kind of conditions including, obviously, German troops that were out of uniform except for their boots. You could tell who they were.

GR: Were they just looking to get home?

MP: I think so.

GR: Were their people volunteering to be captured and “please save us from the Russians”?

MP: No, because the Russians were already there you see.

GR: Were there lots of deportations going on at this point?

MP: No. It was just each person for themselves at that point. The only Russian contact that we had en route was the following day about late morning. We came into a small community and we were greeted by a Russian officer—“who were we,” “Amerikanski,” and “Buddy, buddy,” that sort of thing. He obviously knew that we were hungry, so he took us over to a farmhouse on the edge of town and asked the women to feed us lunch. Asked her? Told her to. (laughs) So we had something to eat that day.

GR: How are you faring at that point after your imprisonment?
MP: The hardest part that day was blistered feet because the Germans had taken our winter boots. And we were given in place, British Army hog-nail boots, which once again came through the Red Cross supplies. And they are tough, I tell you. Try to walk in those things...they don't flex or bend. (laughs)

GR: On the way back, are you thinking that the war is pretty darn close to coming to an end?

MP: We knew it was over at that point. It took the Russians about four or five days longer to declare that. So while we were in Riesa, in this army engineering facility on the fifth floor, the Russians were down in the courtyard with their Tommy guns shooting up into the air in victory.

GR: Where'd you end up at the end of that journey? Did you go and try to find your unit again?

MP: No. Soon as we eventually reached, the next afternoon, late afternoon we were greeted after crossing a railroad bridge in disrepair, across the Mulde River, by the military personnel just waiting for people to come. Didn’t matter who they were, whether they were British, American, whatever. The Americans were separated from the others a little bit...no they weren’t; we were all still together. And loaded on trucks and presumably taken to a rehab recovery place. The driver lost his way and took us to the airport instead. There was one extra plane, so here we are we were on our way to France again (laughs) and got into Nancy again that night.

GR: Was that really the end of it for you and the fighting?

MP: Yes, the war was over at this point.

GR: Did it take a while to get home?

MP: Took about a month.
GR: Quite quickly then.
MP: Yes.
GR: And you took a liberty ship home?
MP: Right.
GR: Did it have a name?
MP: I don't remember it, frankly. I don't think I ever made a record of that at all.
GR: Did you arrive in New York?
MP: Came into New York, but by this time I obviously had yellow jaundice. What's it called today? Hepatitis.
GR: How do you think you got that?
MP: The unsanitary conditions.
GR: So were you recovering on the liberty ship?
MP: Fortunately I had gotten onto the ship, otherwise I would have spent the summer in France in a tent somewhere in a hospital.
GR: So were you taken to a hospital once you got off the ship?
MP: Right.
GR: How long did it take to get through that?
MP: It took forever. I understood there were three barracks full of people with jaundice. All had been in POW camp except for one. We were told to put on a pound a day. I put fifteen pounds on the first week.
GR: What type of food did you ingest to do that?
MP: Well, steak for breakfast, steak for lunch. (laughs)
GR: Was it hard for you to mentally kind of re-acclimate yourself to being home and the war being over and having to sort out your future again, versus being told where to go that day?

MP: Not particularly.

GR: Did you have any plans as you sat there in bed?

MP: The biggest was to get home. Actually I was able to talk to my family, which was a relief for them as well.

GR: Did they come down and visit?

MP: They didn’t because we were told you are going to be moved any day. I had two visits from friends, but other than that I just kept on the telephone more or less.

GR: Were they surprised that were alive in the end?

MP: They had gotten one of the postcards in April, so they were aware of that.

GR: That was while you were interred though?

MP: Right. But I was moved ultimately after three weeks or so, to Fort Devins, Massachusetts, which was the closest base to my home.

GR: A little farther north.

MP: Right.

GR: Which had a huge hospital, correct?

MP: Oh yes, and of course in the hospital there. And you don’t get out of the hospital until you’ve had your teeth done and few things like that too.

GR: I heard people would take care of a lot of ailments that had accumulated because the military would pay for it, and the care was there. Was that true for a lot of other people you saw?
MP: I wasn’t aware of that at that time at all because most of the people were there were
casualties or whatever; it was focused on a particular need.

GR: So you were in a wing mostly for hepatitis. Did you see any of the veterans that had been
maimed?

MP: No.

GR: On the way back on the liberty ship, were you aware that there were men that had been
drastically changed physically?

MP: No, because I think all of us onboard that particular ship were probably pretty much in
the same category as I. In fact we were asked, “Did you ever see Eisenhower?” I didn’t
see him but he came to that ramp camp—Recovered Allied Military Personnel camp on
the coast of France. Did we want to go home right away or did we want to wait and go
home in style? You can guess what the answers were.

GR: So people were done with it. They were physically and emotionally just out of it.

MP: Right.

GR: I’ve always wondered, there were obviously men and women who stayed in. Was there
anybody you knew or had talked about making a career out of the military?

MP: I didn’t hear anything at that point, no.

GR: So you’re home and you’ve recovered and you go back to Vermont, I assume.

MP: Right.

GR: And here you are, an older person. You’ve been through quite a life-altering experience.

What’s the next thing you did?

MP: Went back to college.

GR: At Middlebury?
MP: Yes.
GR: GI bill?
MP: Right.
GR: I’m assuming you started dating again, now that you had a chance. Did you meet anybody?
MP: I met this gal over here.
GR: At Middlebury?
MP: Yes.
GR: How long before you and Laura-Lee were married?
MP: Let’s see...about two and a half years?
GR: Because of the college?
MP: Right.
GR: So you made a conscience effort to wait.
MP: Right.
GR: Was Laura-Lee doing anything at that time?
MP: In college.
GR: Did you both graduate the same year?
MP: We did. She calls me a slow learner because it took me so long to get through. (laughs)
GR: How long after graduation from Middlebury did you decide to get married?
MP: We each took another year of schooling for our master’s degrees, and were then married.
GR: That was kind of unusual to go on that quickly into a graduate degree?
MP: May have been. Part of it was because of the availability of the GI bill.
GR: That covered grad school?
MP: Oh yes.

GR: So you become married. What date was that?

MP: June 18, '48. Thought you could catch me on that, didn’t you? (laughs)

GR: What was the next step as a young family for you two?

MP: I decided to continue my graduate work and eventually we came out to Michigan State where I worked on a doctorate.

GR: In what area?

MP: Counseling and Higher Education Administration.

GR: So the psych thing that you had talked about before the war had stuck with you a little bit?

MP: Right.

GR: Was Laura-Lee also pursuing graduate work at Michigan State?

MP: No. She was supporting the family, so to speak.

GR: What was she doing while you went to school?

MP: She had a variety of opportunities. She worked for the YWCA in Lansing, and a consortium of churches had a program for college students on the edge of campus that she worked for.

GR: So Laura-Lee had been at school while you were overseas?

MP: Yes.

GR: After you finished up at Michigan State, Laura-Lee is still working, I am assuming. Did you decide to start a family? Or was it her turn?

MP: My first job year was at Washington State University. I knew somebody there who invited me to join their staff. Had a year, but I still had to do a dissertation for my
degree, and we had too good a time out there. So, we came back for another year at
Michigan State to finish up.

GR: Laura-Lee was working also at this time?

MP: She was technically as a graduate student at Washington State University. Then she
came back to East Lansing and did some work there.

GR: So she really filled the role as breadwinner, even though you were getting money from
the government.

MP: Right.

GR: Did Laura-Lee ever go back to school even though she was technically a grad student?

MP: No.

GR: You had children?

MP: They started arriving in '53.

GR: What was Laura-Lee's position at that point, other than being a new mother?

MP: That was it.

GR: Did she decide to not work anymore?

MP: Right.

GR: Was that a decision that both of you had hashed out earlier?

MP: Right.

GR: And you now had become the breadwinner of the family?

MP: Right.

GR: Did Laura-Lee ever work after that?

MP: Yes.

[End of tape one, side two]
GR: So Laura-Lee is home raising the kids and you’re working where now?

MP: Northern Illinois University, where I spent a ten-year period, the majority of the time my title was Dean of Men. Instead of being in the Army, I was signing vouchers for monthly educational benefits for 550 veterans.

GR: So you still had a connection to the war in some way.

MP: Indirectly, yes.

GR: Was there any reminiscing going on then?

MP: Not a whole lot. I think that there’s been more reminiscing probably in the last ten years than there ever was before, among those of us that were in the military. We came home, that job was over with, we’re going on with our lives.

GR: You mentioned off tape that while in the internment camp there was some men that didn’t have it as easy as you did. Even though that wasn’t easy. What happened to them?

MP: The young man that I spoke about—Freddy, who was injured the same time I was—the last time he was seen, on the day that we were all captured and so forth, he was seen on top of a German tank across from a young German soldier who was killed on that by our forces. Fred survived that, and all I ever knew until a year or two ago was that he didn’t come home. Just in the last couple of years I’ve discovered that he died of starvation. He was in a group in which about a dozen people from my company died also while they were in internment. They would have been forced to work daily. They would be up before daylight. They would be given a cup of ersatz coffee and probably marched five miles to a work site, which was usually digging rock out of an underground encampment of some sort where they were going to do some experimental work or something, for a
good twelve hour day, and then marched home again or wherever they were billeted to get the one meal a day that they were given. Very poorly cared for, so to speak. That is where Fred died of starvation.

GR: Were you aware of any of this as it was happening?
MP: No.
GR: Why were they separated from you?
MP: Because they were not non-commissioned officers. They were privates. Privates and corporals were required to work.
GR: So the Geneva Convention had been totally ignored in that case.
MP: In that case, yes.
GR: Was that something that you were ever able to find out if the German government had been punished for that?
MP: No.
GR: So American GIs did die in labor camps?
MP: Oh, yes.
GR: So as your helping these other men achieve their educational aspirations with the GI bill, are you spending lots of time away from the family at the university?
MP: It wasn’t too bad at that point. It was an eight-hour day type of thing and some evening things.
GR: When you arrived home some nights, did you find your wife somewhat frantic and a little overwhelmed by the child rearing years?
MP: She did a pretty good job. (laughs)
GR: Were there ever any conversations that you had about her needing a little time away once in a while?

MP: No, I think what we did at that point was we wanted to do things as a family more than time out, so to speak.

GR: So your leisure time as individuals was spent more with your children?

MP: Right.

GR: Did you find yourself associating with other families?

MP: Yes. We had three other couples when we were at Washington State University that we still keep in touch with and see when we can. One is in Alaska, one is in Montana, so it makes it hard. And then in Illinois we had lots of people from the campus and the community.

GR: How many children did you end up having all together?

MP: Three.

GR: They all survived?

MP: Yes.

GR: And Laura-Lee was just trying to be a mother at this point?

MP: Right.

GR: When you did find time, or allotted some time as a couple, what would you guys do as leisure entertainment?

MP: Well, we did a lot of reading. Occasionally we would have an evening in Chicago or something of that nature.

GR: A babysitter would be hired?

MP: Right. Or something on campus, some campus event we would go to.
GR: Did you ever have your own individual hobbies that you would do outside the family unit? Golf or woodworking?

MP: We both played golf for a while. But when the kids came, that was the end of that.

GR: You didn’t have a particular one day a month or one day a week?

MP: No.

GR: As you steadily added family members to the family and dealt with different situations, did you ever ask for any advice or receive any unsolicited advice from parents or siblings? To help you adjust to maybe a different situation?

MP: We were assisted with finances while I was going to school, particularly and ultimately in buying a home by Laura-Lee’s parents.

GR: Did they offer any advice on how to raise their grandchildren?

MP: Oh, behind the scenes, I think. (laughs)

GR: Did you periodically ask for a little assistance in that area?

MP: I’m sure there were times when we would say, “What do you do with this?” (laughs)

GR: How was that different from your family when you were growing up, this 1950s and ‘60s family that you were a part of?

MP: Well, times were very different. We still didn’t have a lot of financial leeway as far as that’s concerned. The kids were not involved in working on a farm. Our daughter, who was number three, was probably the most energetic in finding something to keep herself busy.

GR: So you were like a lot of families from that era, encountering different situations politically and socially, I assume?

MP: Right.
GR: With the women's movement gaining speed as the '60s approached and Vietnam, how did that come across to you, being born in the Depression and seeing lots of deprivation, not only there, but during the war? And now seeing lots of people trying to build a bigger home every year, or a better job. How did you view all of that?

MP: I think the major impact for me was after I had moved to Central Michigan University. I went there as Dean of Student Personnel. After a few years, the president that I went to work with there retired and a new person came in. He was of a later generation, so to speak, and allowed the protestors to occupy the ROTC building and make a shambles out of that. So we were right in the middle of that whole protest era.

GR: How was that going on in your own family, if at all? Did you have any radicals?

MP: No. Our kids were still too young at that point, so that was not a factor.

GR: Were your children involved in anything in the protest era or Vietnam?

MP: No.

GR: Were you happy about that?

MP: Very much so.

GR: As you know, Korea followed shortly after World War II. How did that affect you as a recent veteran who had just been through some terrible times, to see this all coming back up again? How did that strike you as a...?

MP: The primary concerns that we had at that point were the people that we knew that went into that because they were reservists primarily. The majority of the people that fought in the Korean War were too young for World War II, except for their leadership and the reservists and that sort of thing. We knew some of both. I am always unhappy to see this sort of thing continue.
GR: Being home stateside and seeing how war is covered from the other side of the ocean, is that easy for you to read the paper and leave it at that? The patriotism obviously wasn’t there that they had seen in the last war. In your feeling, how did America really deal with the Korean War from this side of the ocean?

MP: I don’t know that we dealt with it very well. We certainly didn’t deal with it well with Vietnam.

GR: How did you view that war? You’re an older veteran at that point.

MP: That was a tragic period in our history, really. You’re not successful going into a situation of that sort without 100% backing, and we certainly didn’t have it.

GR: As you got older, the Vietnam War came to an end and a lot of the unrest went with it. Was that a point in your life...you probably were approaching retirement or you were to the point where you were thinking about retiring, and your kids had probably left the house. Did things in your mind get a little easier politically in America? Was it an easier time than with the last twenty years?

MP: Oh, I think probably, yes.

GR: Especially in a university setting, you must have seen lots of acting out because that’s expected.

MP: Right, very much so.

GR: And you just dealt with that as best you could as an administrator.

MP: Right, that’s correct.

GR: After the kids had decided to move on and go to college, you and Laura-Lee probably were faced with being alone again. What was that like for you as a man in the family?

MP: It probably affected my wife more than me.
GR: Was it one of those, I'm now retired and you've kind of re-entered the home where Laura-Lee has been holding court for many years. Is that how it happened to you two?

MP: To some degree, I guess.

GR: Was it hard for your schedules to be worked out?

MP: No, no problem.

GR: Did you continue to do separate things as a couple?

MP: Laura-Lee was back to part-time work at this point. And, of course, I was still employed at that point.

GR: Now, she'd returned to work at some point. Was that a decision for financial reasons or was it more for her?

MP: That was primarily financial as our kids were entering college.

GR: And that was something that you talked about as a couple as necessity?

MP: I think it was her decision more than mine, but that's alright.

GR: Was there any sort of eagerness on her part to do that?

MP: Oh, I think so.

GR: And you were okay with that?

MP: Right.

GR: As a family, what kind of activities did you enjoy? This is when the children were smaller.

MP: When we came to Michigan, we decided that it was time to teach our kids how to ski, which we had both enjoyed. As I say, we had given up golf. (laughs) One of the first times that we went to a small place to introduce them skiing, our daughter was four, and I had taken her down the hill very carefully, actually between my knees. We got onto the
bottom and we were just barely moving, and I said “You’re on your own,” and she sat
down and broke a leg. (laughs)

GR: That was the end of that.

MP: No that was the beginning of the skiing.

GR: Being raised in Vermont was that something that was natural to you?

MP: Yes, that’s correct.

GR: Did your kids—not only recreationally—did they pursue careers around what you and
Laura-Lee had been doing?

MP: No, not exactly. Our oldest son, when he was a senior in high school, in January, came
down with a brain tumor. So it took him several months to recover. He went on to
college and in that process decided that he wanted to enter the ministry. So that was his
career direction. Our second son went to college at Middlebury and pursued an
environmental studies type course, which they were just creating at that particular point.
And he’s worked with the Environmental Protection Agency. We envisioned him being
in a uniform in a public park situation. So he wears a suit coat in the middle of
Philadelphia because he works in the regional office. Our daughter went to college and
became a nurse, ultimately a nurse midwife. So they each had their own directions and
own careers.

GR: Very different than what you and Laura-Lee ended up doing.

MP: Oh yes, right.

GR: When Laura-Lee returned to work later on, what was that position?

MP: She worked in elementary school libraries as an aide.
GR: As they raise their children, do you find yourself offering advice periodically or being asked for advice?

MP: No, we don’t get asked. (laughs)

GR: Do they talk a little bit about why they do certain things, or do they mention “I appreciate what you guys did in this area of our bringing up”? Or do you see it even in their relationship with their own children?

MP: Not a great deal. We don’t see them very frequently for one reason. Their families are their own creation.

GR: Do you miss not having a little bit more contact with the next generation?

MP: Right. We have one family coming in later today for the weekend.

GR: So there is some sort of connection, when you can.

MP: Oh yes, once or twice a year.

GR: What geographical places are they at now?

MP: Two families are in the state of Wisconsin and one is in New Jersey—lives in New Jersey, works in Philadelphia.

GR: Has your experience with your own kids, like later today, do you sometimes seek out one of your grandchildren and talk them a little bit about where they’re going in life? And do they periodically ask you about your time in the military or growing up during the Depression, or raising their parents? Do they ask you those questions?

MP: I don’t think those have come our direction yet. They’re still pretty young.

GR: After the war, Milt, lots of men and women joined different service groups that helped maintain that connection with fellow veterans. Did you ever do that?

MP: I never did.
GR: Is there any reason why you didn’t do that?
MP: Well for better than 30 years I was never asked. And then the invitations from there on, like one I received this week, “According to records that we have discovered, you are…” you know, whatever. I don’t know what that organization was, it wasn’t one of the ordinary ones, but I could get a lapel pin if I sent them ten dollars.
GR: So VFW and the Legion really don’t attract you?
MP: No.
GR: Do you march at all in any of the patriotic parades?
MP: No, I have not.
GR: Is there any feeling, good or bad, about that? Or just indifferent?
MP: I’m indifferent in that. One of the things that happened to me when I was in the military results in saying I don’t need that anymore, so to speak. Our division, 100th Division, has a yearly reunion, and they are attempting to record events and that sort of thing. They’ve done a good job of it. They are now looking at children of veterans and inviting them to become part of the association so that that can continue on. What happened to me in the military was that as soon as I got close to somebody, then we were split up. It eventually reached a point where I said it is not worth the effort to get to be good friends with somebody and then have them disappear.
GR: So you saw a high casualty rate in your division?
MP: Not only that, but we were separated for a variety of reasons. Some of us that were in basic training together were split up into different companies and regiments within the division or they went somewhere else.
GR: Is there any contact today with people that you knew then?
MP: No. That’s just a chapter back there.

GR: Is there anything, for instance when projects like this come up or the 100th has its own project, does that help you reflect? Or have you always been very comfortable with what happened and able to talk about it? Or was it something that until recently you really didn’t want to have much to do with?

MP: No, I think I’ve been able to talk about it. I’m not quite sure.

GR: But today you did very well. Obviously you are adjusted with the questions and the events and quite lucent about how it all happened and why.

MP: Right.

GR: Is there anything you want to leave us with after this time?

MP: Four years ago this fall we were in Europe and made arrangements to go back to the territory that I’d been in in the Army. We had a young man assigned to us with a car, which was by arrangement ahead of time, which was very fortunate. He spoke pretty good English, he spoke German and French, and so forth. He was an excellent driver, but he also had his master’s degree in modern European history. So he was familiar with the campaign of which I was a part. He was able to take us places that we hadn’t even thought about. We went back to these little communities that I had fought through, and it gave Laura-Lee a feel for that time.

GR: Did you return to the town where the camp was?

MP: No, that was too far away, we didn’t get into there at all. Just into the combat area. We went through several communities in which there are community monuments dedicating their liberation to our division, which is nice to hear.
GR: Did people notice that while you were there and say anything to you? Had they had lots of veterans?

MP: The one place where we really talked with somebody, was when I tried to find a location that had been written up in our division newsletters about a young man who was killed and whose body was never found for 25 years. They made a big event locally about that. Somebody had a vision and they were going to build a monument, you know, this sort of thing. We were going through that immediate area, so it wasn’t exactly where I had fought, but it was in the same general area and in our division. So we stopped to inquire about that monument to see if we could see it, and we were told at the city hall that nobody could find it—it’s way back in the woods. When they discovered that I was from the division that had liberated them, this woman got up after showing us pictures and said, “I’ll take you there.” So that was very rewarding from the standpoint of appreciation on someone’s part that we had gone through. The second was when we were in the wine country in Alsace. We stopped to get a picture of a family picking grapes for the wine harvest. Our driver told them that I had been in the military in that area, and all of a sudden I had so many grapes in my hands that I couldn’t take any pictures. (laughs)

GR: Where you surprised that the local community still has that much admiration for the Americans that came and went?

MP: I don’t know. They went through some very rough times because they had been occupied by Germany for several years. So there was a “who are we?” kind of thing in the background. Once the Americans liberated them, I think they were very much
appreciative. One friend who was just there, wrote to us their comments with this older
group, our generation so to speak, "You bombed our cities, but you liberated us."

GR: Very interesting thought.

MP: Yes.

GR: Well thank you, Milt.

MP: Thank you very much.