Snow, Robert Oral History Interview: Parents of Baby Boomer Generation

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GR: Bob, tell me a little bit about where you grew up and how old you were when the Japanese bombed us.

RS: I was born in Sioux City, Iowa. Lived there for five years, but I don’t remember an awful lot about Sioux City, Iowa. In 1929 when they built the chapel at Hope College—that’s when it opened—my father was hired to be the organist. So I lived here from 1929 to 1949—grew up in Holland. I was seventeen Pearl Harbor Day, December, '41, and I enlisted December ’42 because I was eighteen then.

GR: Had there been lots of thoughts on your part for that whole year before you enlisted?

RS: Yeah, that was an interesting year. My history teacher was Jerry Breen, who was the high school football coach also. He really impressed us, what was going on. He kept telling us, “You know you guys are all going to be in this.” We kept saying, “Yeah, ha, it’ll all be over before we get there.” As it turned out, he was right.

GR: So was that hard for you as a young man thinking about going as soon as you graduated?

RS: No, we’d been in school all our lives, and we’d been through the Great Depression. We were still in the Great Depression, really. This was kind of an adventure; this was something different. You didn’t think about what it all entailed.

GR: Were there people not willing to go that talked about it?

RS: I think everybody had periods when they didn’t want to leave. Military life isn’t all that much fun. I had one friend who just went into seclusion. He went into his room and
locked the door until he had to go. It turned out he went and it wasn’t bad. He had some good experiences, and he talked about it quite a bit after he came back.

GR: Were there recruiters approaching you as things got closer?

RS: Well, they gave us all these tests. We didn’t know it at the time; this was a precursor of the ASTP. And those that did something or other, I don’t know what, were given a specialized training, and we were given a deferment. I enlisted in December, and I was deferred until June, until the year was over. I finished my freshman year at Hope. We knew that they had something in mind, but didn’t think much of it. And we got into basic training and found we were in an Army Specialized Training Battalion—ASTB. We were all trained; we were all apparently headed for this. And then when we got out of basic training, we went off to various universities and schools. So we kind of automatically got into that. They said run down to Lansing and enlist. Of course, it was that or wait for the draft. And anything was better than waiting to see what the Army thought was best for you. (laughs) So, people were enlisting. I think it was more self-motivated. There weren’t a lot of recruiters around our campus.

GR: Were families pushing young men and women?

RS: I suppose some did. My mother wasn’t.

GR: Were there any World War One veterans around that really helped people?

RS: There were quite a few, of course, that was only twenty years after the World War One. Or twenty, twenty-five. The principal of the high school, Jock Riemersma, was a World War One vet. I still remember the parades, he always rode a horse. Right after I enlisted, I got a note “Come and see me.” Well, I was out of high school then, so I didn’t worry
about it. I went over there, and what he wanted to do was tell about his experiences in France. You know, a little advice, here's things you should do.

GR: Which was probably totally different than what you saw.

RS: Yeah, it was a different war entirely.

GR: So you're off to your first encampment. Where was that?

RS: Well, first was Battle Creek down here—Custer. I might add that at Hope College things went into kind of gear. Jack Schouten, of whom you've probably heard, was going to get us ready (laughs), and there was a huge sand hill at the end of where the student center is now. There was a practice football field between Van Raalte Hall and that corner, and on the end was a big sand hill. He'd put half of us on top and half on the bottom, and said, "Take the hill." Get up there and get it any way you could. He got into some rather rigorous training. We all had to marksmanship. There was a rifle range in the basement of one of the gas stations down here on 8th and Columbia, and we all went down and took a course in rifle, safety and marksmanship, this sort of thing. So we kind of geared into it.

GR: Was that unusually for a town and a college to spend that much preliminary training time?

RS: I don't think the college did it. I think the people themselves did it. You know, I'm going to get you guys ready. And it's a good thing we did because basic training is a rough change of life.

GR: So what was it like for someone that had spent a little bit of time just preparing for that? Was it easier for you, do you think, compared to some you saw?
RS: Yeah. I think Jack was kind of a militant guy anyhow. I mean, he wasn't didn't stand very tall, but you paid attention when he talked. And the gym classes all of a sudden turned military; we stood at attention and all this kind of stuff. I realize now what he was trying to do. He was trying to get us a little bit into the flow of the thing. I think it helped, it helped considerably. Of course, we were kids, you know, this was adventure.

GR: Had there been any...of course Britain and most of Europe had been involved in it for a few months. Did you see any images coming back or newsreels that kind of made you aware that it wasn't as glorious as they thought it would be?

RS: Yeah, we saw all the newsreels of the bombed out cities, and this sort of thing. We felt it was remote, we didn't think it would happen to us. Kids go to some awful movies now, and I don't think they identify really with it.

GR: So even the media was being pretty honest about what they saw and they weren't glorifying it?

RS: As I say, we were coming out of the Great Depression and here's a cause. We were shabbily treated, and we were going to treat them shabbily if we could.

GR: So you think it was, not a good thing, but something that America needed, this common cause?

RS: Certainly the uniting of it. It brought a rapid halt to the Depression, and actually pushed it the other way.

GR: You were in town long enough to see some activation of the companies towards the war effort. Do you remember seeing anything particular that caught your eye?

RS: Well, Western Machine Tool Works, which is now in their final stages, became an official war industry—with guards, barbed wire, the whole thing. They were running
around in uniforms, and you know, these were people we knew. All of a sudden they're guards. I don't know that anybody else in town—Heinz Pickle, it wouldn't be a big deal there.

GR: Do you remember like Holland Racine making shoes for the effort?

RS: No, I think that got going after I was gone. I left in June of '43.

GR: So there was kind of an employment surge probably?

RS: There was an employment surge. But Holland wasn't as depressed as a lot of towns, they made do. We had enough, we didn't have anything extra, we had enough to get by.

GR: What do you attribute that to?

RS: Oh, I'd say the Dutch work ethic, the diversification of employment as there still is, small but well run companies. Hart and Cooley, I remember, was keeping people on, but they were only running them maybe one or two days a week—giving them enough to eat, pay the rent.

GR: So the companies were making efforts?

RS: There's a benevolence in companies which has disappeared today, but it's been around.

GR: Do you remember any companies going out wholesale because of the Depression?

RS: That went out of business?

GR: Yeah.

RS: Oh yeah, Bush and Lane piano factory, which is where Baker Furniture is now, near Prospect Park up there. That was a big piano factory, and they just flat out went broke. Limbert Furniture over here limped along for a while, but finally went under. A whole bunch of furniture...Holland Furniture, Bay View Furniture went out of business
eventually—a lot of them did. But there was something going, and I don’t remember any bread lines or anything of that nature.

GR: I’ve always wondered how did Holland deal with the “poor” poor. But you said there weren’t any obvious…?

RS: Well, there were some, but I wasn’t aware of them.

GR: Like you said, you didn’t see any large, public relief efforts going on?

RS: No, no I didn’t. But that isn’t to say they didn’t go on. I didn’t know about them.

GR: Now you’re through Custer, and you’re sent where?

RS: We were shipped off to Fort Hood, Texas. It’s the base for the tank destroyers. But we had an infantry basic. That was pretty common in the Army, you had an infantry basic whether you were going to push pencils or whatever. They put you through that. That was tough because we were all northerners. We started basic training on the Fourth of July, and Texas is hot—this is the center of Texas. They had a lot of trouble, the northern kids passing out, heat exhaustion, this kind of stuff. The cavalry was mostly conditioned to it. They pushed the guys a little hard, and they lost quite a few—disappeared to the hospital, we don’t know what happened to them after that. This, I think, finally got upstairs, and they finally realized, well we got to do something different. So they started doing a little more night problems. After three or four weeks we began to get more conditioned to it. One thing about the desert, it’s hot in the day, but it’s cool at night. So we learned to live with it—drink a lot of water, and we began to learn the tricks of living down there. We had some southern guys with us that gave us some tricks—take an old sock and wrap it around your canteen, pour water on the sock, and just carry it around
with water on the sock. Every so often slop a little water on that sock, and the water will be cool. You know, just little things like that.

GR: What was it like emotionally for all these men, pushed together into one area as they prepared to fight?

RS: Well, we weren’t prepared to fight. Once again, that was something over there, we didn’t worry about that. We were young kids and it was an adventure.

GR: Were there any drill sergeants putting the fear of God into you about this isn’t going to be an easy thing?

RS: We had some that tried, poor guys. (laughs) They kept saying, “You guys are going to be over their fighting one of these days. Come on, take this stuff seriously.” And some did, I guess, but...

GR: So for the most part you guys just kind of rode with it.

RS: If you can look back on it, I will say that I appreciated later what these people did for us, because when the first 88 millimeter shell came in, I was on the ground when it got there. But that was just instinct. I was taught, when you hear something like that, hit the ground. So that was conditioned into us.

GR: What kind of things did they do to make you prepared for the inevitable?

RS: Instead of hearing a shell coming in, which is a very distinctive sound, they’d holler “shell” or something like that. Well, I mean it had to be artificial. So we thought it was kind of funny. They were lying there laughing, and it wasn’t until...but we had no trouble knowing what it was when we did hear it. So somehow they got that to us.

GR: So you were drilled in hand-to-hand combat and wire crossings?

RS: And crawling under the wires with a machine gun shooting over you and all this jazz.
GR: What about gas practice?

RS: Yeah, we had that. We had gas masks, and we had to go into a Quonset hut that had gas in it. We had to actually take off our gas masks in it and then put it back on. Most of that was tear gas, of course; it wasn’t the stuff that would kill you. So we had the training. And those darn gas masks are hot in Texas, I’ll tell you.

GR: I imagine. So you’re finished with that, they think you are prepared, and then where did you go?

RS: They sent us to our various schools. I got off at Pennsylvania Station, New York City, and we walked up to NYU and down at Washington Square on the Square. We lived in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh floor of the Commerce Building on Washington Square—that was our barracks. And we went through two semesters of school before they washed us out.

GR: What were they preparing you to do?

RS: We were going to get an engineering degree—a bachelors in engineering—and become commissioned.

GR: So you had been targeted as being officer material?

RS: The engineer officers, yes.

GR: How did that all come about, the choosing of the officers?

RS: Well, of course there was ROTC, people that had gone through ROTC and began got a commission through four years of college—West Point, Annapolis and all those people. You could apply, I guess, if you were regular Army; if you were in the service, you could apply for OCF, Officer’s Candidate School. You had to pass tests in one thing and another. They were called ninety-day wonders because they had three months of
training. A lot of people went that route. They were hard up for officers, you’re aware that the first ones to go in combat are the lieutenants.

GR: Because they target them?

RS: Yeah, they have about the shortest life span of anybody in combat—the junior officers. So they had a great need for them. We were not eligible for any of that. We were to go four years to college and get a...literally an ROTC, except we were in a military college, and thus it was more like VMI or something like that. So that was to be the deal. But the other part of the deal was there were no promotions until such time as you graduated. So we were buck privates for four years. And when they ended the system, after two semesters, we were buck privates. So generally in the Army, you go through basic training, very often a good number of PFCs, private first class, are handed out at the end of basic. Sometimes it’s automatic, sometimes it’s selected—it depends on the unit, I think. Then they put you in a unit, and if the unit was forming, well you had a pretty good chance as they filled in...they would give you cadre, you’d get your sergeants and your corporals and everything from somewhere else. Then they would gradually move on to something else, and you would replace them from within in the ranks. That’s how the promotions got going. But you see, that was all closed to ASTP, we didn’t have any of that. I’m not really familiar with the promotional procedure because it never happened, to me.

GR: You never rose in rank?

RS: Well, I got a PFC one time. This was in combat, and our truck driver went AWOL. They took away his PFC and gave it to me. (laughs)
GR: So you’re in New York, and you’re learning, but you said you were washed out. What does that mean?

RS: Well, the program finished. Now the Navy had one, B-12, and this was A-12. B-12 had one and they kept it going. They realized that this war wasn’t going to go on for four years, we’re not going to get all these people, and they needed replacements. So that’s what happened really.

GR: So where did you end up going next?

RS: I was sent to the 104th infantry division, the Timberwolves, which was just forming in Colorado Springs—Camp Carson—and for some reason that I’ll never know—you don’t understand why the Army does things—all of a sudden one day I was called up and they said, “We’re sending you to the engineers.”

GR: They must have figured you had the aptitude for it.

RS: Well, I don’t know. They never did anything by merit in the Army. (laughs) They flipped a coin or something. And I’d had a little bit of trouble with one leg, and they may have figured that I wasn’t any good for the infantry. I don’t know what happened. Maybe I ticked off a sergeant. I don’t know. But all of a sudden I’m put on a truck and sent off to the engineers, which was fortuitous, anything is better than the infantry. We arrived there...Camp Carson’s a marvelous place, you’re right under Cheyenne Mountain. It’s just beautiful country, but it’s also very hard to breathe out there.

GR: Because of the lack of oxygen?

RS: You run around the block there, and you know it when you first get there. But they sent us there. The company commander where I was sent was very unhappy about the ASTP thing. These kids were in school lounging around while we were doing all this. Their
basic training and their unit training, maneuvers and all that. So he gave a speech to the company before we got there saying, “Don’t give these guys anything,” you know. They won’t get any promotions. He passed out all promotions that were available so we wouldn’t get them. The guys told us this a little later. But guys are guys, you know, if you come in and you do your job, they like you, they didn’t cold-shoulder us. There were a few around that had no use for us, but for the most part the guys accepted us very well, and it went pretty well. It was interesting, the combat engineers is an interesting setup. It was a whole new thing, and I kind of enjoyed it.

GR: So were there senior staff there that helped you?

RS: There weren’t an awful lot. Most of them were young kids. They were younger than we were because they were drafted after we were. But we had spent two semesters away at school. Most of the older ones...well, our platoon sergeant was a regular Army, he had been in for several years and had dragged his way up. Probably was a private first class or something when the war started and all of a sudden he’s a sergeant.

GR: I always wondered, did they have anybody in these training units that had seen experience in battle and had come back?

RS: No, we got training from people like that, we were hauled up and these guys would come and talk to us. So we did hear from them, but I don’t think any of our officers or cadre were combat trained. When were in New York City, our company commander there was a paratrooper, broken his leg, was washed out of the paratroopers, sent to run this bunch of school kids. He could have taken it very rough. He was unhappy that he got washed out, but he could have taken it very badly. But he didn’t, he took it on to himself to get us in as good shape as possible. We ran in Central Park every Saturday. When we went
off to the infantry, we were in pretty good shape. He saw to it we were. So there was
some good experience that we got out of these people. But I don’t think we had any
battle hardened people in our battalion.

GR: You talk about these physical demands they put on you, once you got to combat, was it
something that you really understood was a valuable thing? Were you in better shape?

RS: Yes, I think so. I was just sure that when I got shoved out of doors and stayed out there
twenty four hours a day, for seven days a week, that I’d have pneumonia and be in the
hospital in a week, and I’d be out of there.

GR: Why did you think that?

RS: Because that was my experience that I couldn’t take a lot of cold. But I was never so
darn healthy in my life (laughs), and I ate that awful food.

GR: Tell me a little bit about what it’s like just to live in a camp. What happened every day?

RS: What happens is the bugle goes off at an ungodly hour in the morning. You get up and
you’ve got about a half an hour to get your life in order, shave if you have to—I didn’t
have to at that time—shine your shoes, make your bed so that it would pass inspection,
have everything ready. Then in a half an hour you were off to the mess hall. In a big
camp that mess hall took a while, we had about an hour. So actually it took about half an
hour to eat and you got a half an hour nap. You got to where you could lie down
anywhere and sleep, for as long as you had to sleep.

GR: Which you probably found to be valuable in combat?

RS: Yes. So then you’re out training all day.

GR: So the food was bad? What kind of food would you see everyday on your plate?
RS: It was good, solid food. We complained about it a lot, but it was powdered eggs, scrambled eggs, and bacon. Oh my gosh, that breakfast—bacon and eggs, and a big pot of oatmeal, slabs of GI toast—they’re about an inch and a half thick—marmalade coming out your ears, and coffee. If I ate that breakfast now, I’d be good for all day. I wouldn’t have to eat again.

GR: But they were working it off you?

RS: Oh yes, they worked it off real well. And it Texas they sweated a lot off too. We drank a lot of water. Then we come home at noon...the feeding problem took some time. So we were in about an hour, hour and half at noon. And I was in the second shift for eating so I’d head off for the PX...I remember I’d buy bottle of Orange Crush and a quart of milk and just pour them down. I suppose that was the worst thing in the world for me, but I got a lot of liquid at noon. Then we got in the mess line and they handed us salt tablets. We had to drink water in front of them, and ate a big...a dinner really. And then at one, one thirty were back out training again until suppertime. Then we’d have dinner. If we were lucky we had the evening off. There were no passes of course. If not, we went out on night problems. Whereas we’re running around in 115, 120-degree temperature all day, the night in Texas was cold. We were chilly.

GR: What would you do at night for practice?

RS: Practice a maneuver, taking over a town, or taking over a...

GR: Which probably was not a bad idea, really.

RS: No, it was good. Some sort of made up scenario for us to go through.

GR: How long did you spend in Colorado preparing?
RS: I was talking Texas before. Now we’re back in Colorado. I got there in June and we shipped overseas about August.

GR: It wasn’t too long then.

RS: I would learn a whole new… I had infantry basic, and engineers had a whole different thing. I was assigned—not because of any ability—I was assigned because there was a hole there and they needed somebody. I was assigned the demolition specialist for our squad, which meant that I took care of the…we had a big chest full of primer cord and fuses and dynamite caps, and all this stuff to explode TNT. I was in charge of that chest, to keep it in order. I was in charge of the TNT, which there were two cases in our truck. One was my seat. We got our demolition problem, I was the one that was called to send out. But I wasn’t anymore proficient in demolition than anybody in our squad. Anybody could do it, but I was the one that was assigned the duty. We did quite a little bit of that. When we took out land mines, we didn’t stop and defuse them an inch at a time. We took and put them in a pile and put a quarter pound of TNT under them and blew them up.

GR: So you were in charge of also finding them out in the field?

RS: Well, we all did that.

GR: How would you go about doing that?

RS: Very carefully. (laughs) First of all, when you put in mines, generally speaking, they put them in a pattern—one every three feet, this sort of thing. That’s as much for…it’s for full coverage, but it’s also so that…you always assume that you have got to come back and take them out. The lieutenant would make a diagram of just where they all were. And the Germans did the same thing. So if you went into a field of mines, you’d be right
down on your hands and knees and probe for them. You’re supposed to use your bayonet. We found if we got a smaller knife with a smaller blade and a bigger point, more delicate, you were better off than these great, big, heavy bayonets. You literally probe for them, and as I say, very carefully. After you begin to find half a dozen of them, then you begin to see the pattern. And when you know the pattern, then you go right to the mines and take them out.

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GR: You said that you would have a pocket full of nails. Why was that?

RS: Well, they all have safety pins. When you’re putting them in, they’ve got a safety pin in them, so when they are all installed and everything, the last thing you do is pull the safety pin out.

GR: So what would a mine look like when you found it, a German one?

RS: Well, there are several different kinds of mines. That’s about the size of a schu mine [pointing something out]. It was just a little wooden box with a hinge on one end, so it would come down like this. The other end of the box would be resting on a safety pin, which was sitting in the detonator. The box was full of TNT. So when you stepped on the box, it would downpush the safety pin out and you lost a leg. If you’re lucky that’s all you lost.

GR: Were they maiming mines or were they meant to kill?

RS: That was a personnel mine. That’s a schu mine. The S mine was the jumping betty, and that’s one that would explode, jump up to about chest high and then explode. Just ball bearings everywhere.

GR: But then that was for large mass?
RS: Once again, that was a personnel mine. That was detonated usually by a little fuse that had three little prongs sticking up that looked, for all the world, like grass or anything else. Just step on one of those and it came up on you.

GR: So it not only took out you, but the people around you?

RS: That’s right. Then the other one…of course, Teller mine was a mine for tanks. Generally you could walk on those and they wouldn’t go off. Then there was the R mine which was both personnel and tanks, well, variations on all those things.

GR: You probably were putting the same type of mine into the ground, for the Americans?

RS: We were putting one similar to the Teller mine in…I don’t remember implanting an awful lot of personnel mines. We did put flares in too. Trip wire would trip off a flare and then you’d see they were coming. It was just a detection if somebody was coming. There were a lot of variations and it changed during the war. We sometimes ended up putting in things we didn’t know anything about, we’d never seen before. And when you try to do that in the dark, we had some accidents.

GR: You were shipped over in August ’42. What was your first…?

RS: We went to England, spent two weeks there in a camp on hill. It rained every darn day, so we didn’t see much of England. I did go into London once or twice, but they took us in at nine o’clock at night and we were in blackout; you couldn’t see anything. You just kind of wandered along the street, see a light and go on in. They’d have coffee for you and all this.

GR: Could you tell that the war had come to London?

RS: Well, we couldn’t see anything. We did see a lot of V-1s, rockets. What do they call them? They puttered over on wings and then they ran out of gas and came down, and
then blew up. Buzz bombs. We got to where we could almost set our watches by those things coming over. So we saw a lot of those. Then we saw an awful lot of airline planes going off to bomb Germany.

GR: From American bomber bases?

RS: Yeah. But for the most part, England was pretty quiet at that time.

GR: So the blitz had kind of been through...

RS: The blitz was over. Then we got on a liberty ship and bounced across the channel. They couldn’t figure out where to drop us; we went to Omaha Beach and two or three different beaches, anchored and sat there. Finally they took us ashore. I think we went ashore on Omaha and got on our trucks. We were engineers, we had trucks, because you do have to carry some equipment. On our trucks, we went through Paris. We got through Paris just a week or so after it had been liberated. And they were still having a party. So we were treated like we had liberated it. Then we went on up through northern France, Belgium, Luxembourg, into Holland, and the further we went up, the louder the artillery got. So about Holland we caught up with the war. We did all kind of things that engineers do—they build roads, fill up pot holes (artillery holes that are made in roads), built little bridges—did what we had to do just to help out.

GR: You said you also had to put some detonation devices in the ground and bridges?

RS: Yeah, that was about Bulge time we got into all that. See the war was...first they landed in Normandy, and then there was the breakout at St. Lo, and then there was a rush across France over to borders of Germany. That’s when we got into it, when they were rushing to the borders in Germany. Once we got to Germany, we ran out supplies, and everything bogged down for about three or four months.
GR: Moved too fast for the Army.

RS: So we lived in one place for about four months while they resupplied. During those four months, they did that Bridge Too Far, the Operation Market Garden, which we weren't just a few miles from where that started. But they went north, we went east. And the Bulge took place during that time. Otherwise, it was a phony war, everybody was shooting at each other a little bit just to make sure they knew we were here, you know, this kind of thing. Keep their attention.

GR: You had to cross probably large rivers at some point?

RS: That's how we started. That was our main job, putting a bridge across a river. When the infantry went across, we were there to get a bridge in as quickly as possible.

GR: Were they taken across rivers in boats too?

RS: Went across in steel boats, yeah. Paddled with their rifle butts.

GR: Did you ever have something called a storm boat that was drop shipped in from the air?

RS: No. Well there might have been at the Rhine, there was an awful lot going on at the Rhine.

GR: Yeah, I think it was at the Rhine.

RS: The other rivers we crossed, we were the ones. We were it, we were building the bridge. But at the Rhine, everybody was in the act—including the Navy.

GR: How did you build a bridge out of...did you carry a bridge with you?

RS: No, they would bring them up. You talked about the blacks having menial jobs, they brought up the equipment we needed. Whenever you were crossing a river, there's a lot of artillery around, everybody is shooting at everybody else. They had to bring those bridges up and unload them. They were good drivers.
GR: So was that an engineering division?

RS: No, that was transportation, I believe.

GR: They called it transportation?

RS: Yeah.

GR: And you saw lots of minorities in that role?

RS: A lot of the truck drivers were, yeah.

GR: You talked about African-Americans being part of that, did you see any other minorities?

RS: Not as separate units, no. The Mexican kids and all that were part of our...in the infantry.

I had three bunkmates on all sides of me that didn’t even speak English.

GR: They were Hispanic?

RS: The whole squad. They had themselves a squad leader who was bilingual. We didn’t communicate. They stripped down to their skivvies to their underwear to sleep, but they all had knives on their legs and stuff like this. But it turned out, they’re like anybody else—treat them right, and they’ll treat you right.

GR: Did you ever see any Japanese Americans that were there?

RS: I never did. We went across the channel with a black battalion. They had white officers, but they were all black. They were on the boat. Once again, there was no problems. I don’t really know what they were, you know, what their...

GR: There wasn’t a lot of association on the boats and stuff?

RS: No, well there wasn’t association anyhow. You stuck with your unit. They did not encourage anybody to run around and make pals. Because once you got overseas, the Germans were not above shipping somebody into your outfit that spoke English real well,
and moving right on in. They didn’t like strangers of any sort. They were very unhappy with somebody you didn’t know.

GR: So were you putting bridges in and fixing bridges and roads while the fighting was going on around you? Was that how it is worked?

RS: Well, we crossed four rivers—we crossed the Rohr, and the Rhine, and the Weser, and we put a bridge across the Leine, up near Hanover. Three of them were on assault days, that’s when they were going across. You got them across in boats, and then you build a little footbridge, which was about four or five feet, say a foot square, cork filled. It was a little float. They put a thing like an erector set on it, shove it out onto the stream, put another one on it and shove it out in the stream. Somebody had to get on the other side and pull, and you pulled these little footbridges across and the infantry would run across those. The trick is to get enough of the enemy away from the shore so you can go at a little bigger bridge. And then we used pontoons. The trucks brought them up. They were either metal or they were inflated rubber. We did have an air compressor to fill the pneumatic ones. Put those in there, and lay a thing on them and shove them out, you know, this kind of thing.

GR: And then would they pick them back up and take them to the next one?

RS: We don’t know what happened. Our job was to get them across the river. And as soon as that was done, we were on our way to the next one. There was a heavy construction battalion, a regiment or something of engineers came behind us with all the big equipment and all that stuff.

GR: That was the seabees?
RS: Well, it would be the army equivalent of the seabees, heavy construction. They had the equipment to do it, and they would put in a more permanent bridge, take ours out. What happened to ours, I don’t know, they took them out.

GR: So you were engineers that got the infantry where it needed to go?

RS: They called us combat engineers. It sounded like a rugged name, but it just means that you went right with the infantry, and you did what you could with what you had on your back and what you could lift. We did build a bridge at the Leine River that you could run a railroad train across. All by hand. Have you ever heard the term, Bailey Bridge?

GR: No.

RS: Well, it’s a prefab bridge, comes in panels, and the heaviest panel is a thousand pounds. That’s the big I-beam that goes across, is a thousand pounds. And the next one is a six hundred pound side panel, which is...you’ve seen metal bridge with the crisscross and all this stuff? Well those panels were reproducible panels, they were all the same. You simply lifted them up put them in place. There was a hole at the end, shove a couple pins in there, and that connected it. And you know, you moved on to the next one. Those, as I say, weighed six hundred pounds. We would do that...with six hundred pounds would be about six guys. They’d take a pole, run it through the panel, one guy on each side and three pairs, and you’d lift up this panel, take it over and put it in place, someone would bang the pins in, and you’d go get another one.

GR: So this all took place in the water?

RS: This took place on land.

GR: Okay, then you shoved them across.
RS: They had them on big rollers. You'd build and build and build and then shove them out. Build and build and build and shove them out. This was all done by hand, unless you're lucky enough to be able to get a truck across, then you could put a winch on it and pull a little bit that way. So you always had more bridge on land than you did over the gap. When it got far enough, they'd just lift the back end, plunk her down and take off the excess, and you've got a bridge. Obviously there is a limit to how far you can do a thing like that. We had a gap in the Autobahn that we had to fill near Hanover, and it wasn't...see, I've got a picture of it down there, maybe a hundred, hundred fifty feet. Twenty, thirty yards is all it was, well, it was more than that, must have been about fifty yards. Pretty good size bridge. We put that in—that was our outstanding achievement—we put that in in the dark. No light at all, we were under blackout. And we're lifting these six hundred-pound and thousand pound chunks. Moving them around in the dark.

GR: So this went on all through Europe until the end?

RS: Yeah. Well, we had the four bridges we did, and that was our big one. We did some mine work, taking out mines. Engineers do most anything that nobody else wants to do. We did a lot of shoveling dirt on roads for wintertime. As one of my more erudite buddies said, “Spent all day today scraping off the dirt we spent all day yesterday putting on. And it wasn't even worn out yet!” (laughs)

GR: Did you ever have any accidents where people were trying to clear a minefield?

RS: We were very fortunate. Twice we had a case where we should have lost some people and didn't. One, the guy was checking the pattern, you know, here, here, here, and he was standing on one. He was literally standing on an S-mine with the three prongs depressed, and it didn't go off. The other one was a bunch of guys were taking mines out
and a rabbit took off across the field, tripped a trip wire off, and up went the jumping betty and they all stood around looking at that thing, up there at shoulder height, didn’t go off. The Germans, wonderful machinists. The fuse on an S-mine was a thing of beauty. It just looked pretty and very delicate, but sometimes they froze up. Now the Americans had a cheap thing—it a firing pin with a spring, then you had a pin hole and you pull the string out and put a pin in to hold it, and then they just stamped a zinc cover over the thing—very crude. But doggone it, if you knocked that pin out, it went off. We never did take out a minefield we didn’t find a German body or two around it. They had killed themselves putting them in. During the Bulge is the only time we ever put mines in. I will say that that’s the most depressing thing you do is retreat. That’s terrible to back off. We were going ahead all the time, except that one time...

GR: So you were diffusing because you were pushing, most of the time, pushing through their mines?

RS: Yeah, that’s right, we were taking out their minefields.

GR: You talked a little bit that you encountered death along the way, which is inevitable. What was that like for you to see your first body, or hear your first bullet whiz by?

RS: Depended on what color uniform they had on. We saw a lot of German bodies. You know, they’re bodies—it’s hard to identify with them. When I saw one with an American uniform on, it was kind of devastating.

GR: Well, like you said, you talked about the first eighty-eight going overhead. Was that rough for a while, just getting acclimated to that?

RS: No, the rule of thumb is the longer you last in combat, the better chances you are of lasting longer.
GR: You talked about lieutenants being targeted by the enemy. Tell me a little bit about that. How was that possible?

RS: Well, if you’re shooting, you’re shooting at the enemy. A lot of the time I didn’t carry a gun because we were busy building things. But you’re shooting at a bunch of people, you try to pick out the leader and get him.

GR: How were they able to identify the American leaders?

RS: Well, they had their brass on—bar on their helmet, you know.

GR: That was for your sake too though, right?

RS: Yeah, that was so we knew who we were listening to. But that was a target. You’d have to talk to an infantryman about that sort of thing. We had a lot of mortar fire, we got a lot of artillery fire. We were straight, we were bombed. But small arm fire, very seldom.

GR: Did you start seeing some emotional breakdowns going on around you as this constant attack...?

RS: Well, you say constant, you’re talking about being in combat all the time. We didn’t do that. We went in, did the job and got out. Or went to another job. During the Bulge, we did twenty-four hour duty in the fox holes, so I had a taste of it. But we weren’t attacked at that time so... 

GR: Were the engineers being targeted at all?

RS: Well, if we were building a bridge we certainly were. We put in seven bridge across the Rohr, two survived. Five of them were destroyed on the way. You know, they don’t want you to put the bridge back.

GR: And they knew if they shot you, that would be helpful.
RS: Well, yeah, but as I say, we were out of small arm fire. We were strafed (airplane) and artillery and mortars, they tried to get it that way. You get to where you can hear an artillery piece going off. You can hear the cannon shooting the thing. There’s a thump, you can identify it. And the nature of the thump you hear gives you a good idea whether it’s in your direction or not. Now it doesn’t mean it’s coming right at you, but it means it’s heading your way. You’ll hear a thump sometimes just ignore it, because you know it’s going the other way. But you know it’s coming your way and you’re generally on the ground well before it gets there. So you lie down, you’ve done all you can. You’ve just got to hope that you’re not too close to where it lands. We were under constant shelling in this little German town we lived in. We had it sporadic all the time. Very concentrated at breakfast time, lunchtime, dinnertime, and bed time. They figured we’d be out. What we did there is, we lived bankers hours—we didn’t eat till nine in the morning. (laughs) We didn’t come in at noon, never even went back there at noon, we were staying in the fields. And we came back at supper, had supper at four o’clock and went to bed. Then you just don’t go out when they figure you’re going to bed. You know, you learn to play the game.

GR: Did you associate at all with the German people?

RS: The German people, no. There were no German people in the town we lived in. The town was disserted. Incidentally I went back there to see it; it’s all a thriving town again. It really was a joyful thing to see people up and around, because to me it was a ghost town.

GR: What town was that?

RS: Geilen Kirchen. I have a picture, would you like to see it?
Sure. Now Bob, you said that at the time, people asked you questions about where you were and stuff, and you’ve gone back and done some of your own history research. Why would you do that?

Well, curiosity. I learned four, five years ago—this is fifty years after the fact—that my commander was Bernard Montgomery. I thought I was with the American guys, but I was in a group assigned to Montgomery.

What was the name of the unit you were in?

171st Combat Engineers. It was a battalion, a thousand guys. And we were not part of anything. We were a loose group. We were assigned to somebody that needed us for a specific purpose at a specific time. Very often it was to put a bridge across a river during an assault. Every infantry division has its own combat engineers. But they move right along with the infantry, and they don’t have time to stay and build a bridge. Their job at a river crossing was to paddle the guys across with the boat and maybe put a footbridge across. But that was it, and then they were gone. We came in and put more footbridges in and a pontoon bridge. This sort of thing.

A little more elaborate, for the supply lines?

As I pointed out earlier, the small arm fire was pretty well over by the time we got there. We had the artillery and the strafers and all this other stuff.

So the Army moved across Europe in a very systematic way?

This was Eisenhower’s...you know, Montgomery and Patton and these other guys all wanted him to give them all their men and let us press through to the heart of Germany and kill this monster from the heart. Eisenhower says, no we move across as a wave. Everybody moves right along, and when it’s done, it’s done. There’s a little danger in the
spearhead thing because if they close in on you, they cut you off and your dead. That’s what happened to Hitler in the Bulge. Spearhead, they cut it off, and then they wiped out the best part of his Army. So yes, very systematic.

GR: So as things moved steadily towards Berlin, where did you end the war?

RS: We ended the war on the Elbe River, about fifty miles from Berlin. The political agreement was that when we got to the Elbe, we’d quit. Actually our unit was at the Elbe two weeks before the war was over. We ran around and did other things. There was plenty to do. There were Germans swimming across the Elbe River to get away from the Russians.

GR: Why do you think that was the case?

RS: Get away from the Russians. They wanted to be captured by the Americans, not by the Russians.

GR: Had you heard stories already?

RS: Yeah. Very often I took prisoners. They’d come by, a whole bunch of them in a beat-up old truck. They were getting away from the Russians, and they’d stop and surrender. We couldn’t do anything. We’d make sure they didn’t have any guns with them. Drive back, someone will get you, you know. Because we didn’t have the facilities to handle them.

GR: Was there lots of that going on?

RS: Yeah, there was quite a few. To a degree, sometimes we’d help them get across. We were also putting in posts, dividing the Russian zone from the French zone from the American zone, and the British—line posts. I spoke a little bit of German, and a “little” bit is an exaggeration, I didn’t speak that much. But enough to where I recognized a few words. So I was given a Jeep and a guy, and we went around and all these little
villages—farming villages, like Graafschap and Groningen, all these places around here where the farmers tended to come and retire—to take a survey. Did they have a central water supply? Do they have a sewage plant? Do you have a doctor here? Do you have a hospital? A survey of all these little towns. Filled out forms, turned them in. That was interesting duty.

GR: What was that in preparation for?

RS: That was just getting organized, what do we got here? The information went back to somebody who was going to organize it. A good part of where we were at that particular time became Russian zone. That was tough; I had to tell them they were going to be in the Russian zone, and they didn’t care for that. But it was interesting duty. I could have certainly done better with a little better German.

GR: Did you take a plane home out of the Elbe?

RS: No. We got in the trucks and drove back to Paris to get ready to go to the South Pacific. While we were there, the war in the South Pacific ended. Then it was just a matter of waiting our turn on the boat. And, you know, it was ten million guys over there. That’s a lot of boats.

GR: So had you gone to the South Pacific yet?

RS: No. Now I mentioned earlier I had a little problem with one leg, and they told me I was going to have to have it taken care of before I got out of the Army. So we’re sitting in France, nothing to do. They put us on guard duty, they give you something to do. So I said, well, it’s a good time to go to the hospital. So I went to the hospital, and I ended up spending three months there. Army doctor messed me up, and it took me three months, but it was the best three months of my life. Clean sheets, chocolate sundaes, you know,
the whole works. It was just great. But while I was going, my buddies were being put on planes and sent back home to be sent to the South Pacific. They were all in the states, they got out a lot earlier. So by my goofing off in the hospital, that cost me about three months of my life.

GR: What was it like when you got home? A big change?

RS: As I told you before, everybody went. So, when I got home, “Oh, you’re here. Have you been away?”

GR: Did you come back to Holland?

RS: Yeah, I came back. I had one year at Hope; I finished three more.

GR: So you did a GI Bill?

RS: Yeah, I did the GI Bill.

GR: Had you met your wife, or had you become married yet?

RS: No, my wife was several years younger. She was in junior high when I went into the Army.

GR: Did you know each other before?

RS: I hadn’t known her. After I got out, I finished Hope, went off to Colorado, did some graduate work, decided not to stay for a degree and picked up a teaching certificate. I was teaching in Denver, and I came home for Christmas holidays on the Denver Zephyr, met her on the way back on the Denver Zephyr. So was teaching in Denver but lived back there too.

GR: In Holland?

RS: No, she lived on a farm in Illinois. We took the Zephyr out of Chicago.

GR: So you struck up a romance on the Zephyr to Denver?
RS: Well, we got to talking at least. I was teaching, she was teaching.

[End of tape one, side two]

GR: So you're travelling back to Denver and you meet your future wife. What happened after that?

RS: We were both teaching, but as we discussed very much earlier, the job market was terrible. Ten million veterans looking for work. I was lucky. One of the indirect, great benefits of the GI Bill was that kept a lot of veterans out of the job market for a few years until they got their degrees.

GR: How did that work with civilians that had gone into the plants and other things to fill in? How did that work with all these returning GI with a promise of employment?

RS: You can imagine. You came back and this guy that really wasn't worth toot when you left is your boss. And this happened a lot. It happened to me in a different way. I was in the chemistry department over here at Hope, and I was the lab assistant. When I went away and came back, there was a lab assistant helping me in the advanced courses. (laughs) So this sort of thing happened. Some people took it real well. I imagine on the line, it hurt you at work because that's strictly seniority, especially the union end of it. And to find this guy that got out of the draft, nobody knows why or how, is now your boss...

GR: What about the fact that the women that were largely employed during the war...did you see any of that going on?

RS: I think for the most part, many of them were just happy to go back home and do their thing. A few caught the bug of being in things, but the promotion wasn't there for them at that time.
GR: Your wife Rita was a teacher in Denver also?

RS: Yeah, we were both starting out. But as I said, the job market was terrible. I was a chemist. I had four years of chemistry and a year of graduate work, so I was very heavily, very well trained, to teach chemistry. Well, there weren’t any chemistry jobs available; I’d have to teach general science. After about a year of that, I wasn’t using my training, and it wasn’t going to stick with me very long if I didn’t use it. I had a job in a chemical plant at night to feed myself, because the pay was terrible. I just took full-time chemical plant, because I was making three hundred dollars a month in the chemical plant and two hundred dollars teaching.

GR: How much does that compare to what you were receiving as an enlisted man?

RS: Enlisted man made sixty-four dollars.

GR: A month?

RS: Actually I was making more. We talked about promotions earlier, and you probably would like to hear this part of it. You mind going back a little bit?

GR: No.

RS: When we were into France, after I got out of the hospital, I was sent to a labor supervision corp. What they did was you had so many points—so many points for time in the service, some many points for time overseas, so many points for any medals, etc., etc., etc. They added all those up and those were your priority numbers for coming home. They tended to group you in groups that had your number, so that when your number came up to come home, they’d take this group and put you on a boat and bring you home. It was a vehicle for getting you home. I was stuck in labor supervision, which was, in fact…we served as the non-comms and the officers in German prisoner
encampments. I was a non-comm in a company of German prisoners. And we worked with German prisoners.

GR: Why were they still there?

RS: Well that, like everything else, took time to get everything done. This wasn't that long after the war. So I got on a truck everyday, went out in the countryside and worked on a project with German prisoners. I was the GI and they were the prisoners. I had a gun; I didn’t use it, never carried it. They were safer with me than they were running around loose. They didn’t want to try to escape, because they were going to be repatriated anyhow. So actually I lived eight hours a day with a German prisoners for several months.

GR: What was going through some of their minds?

RS: Well, mostly they didn’t know...I knew where my mother was, I knew where my brother and sisters were. They didn’t even know if they had a mother. They didn’t know if they had a wife yet.

GR: So they had no contact with their families?

RS: They were completely out of touch. They’d been in the Army six, seven, eight years, whereas I’d only been there three. But they were anticipatory. They were really thinking about the day they would be going home.

GR: Did you hear any talk of the other camps around Germany, and Austria and Poland at this time, the labor camps that the Germans had set up?

RS: I saw one with the bodies still there.

GR: Which camp was that?
RS: It was Gardelegen. It was a satellite camp where they, I suspect, had laborers that they were giving out to farmers. But it had turned into an extermination camp just about the time we started approaching. They had been murdering people rather rapidly by shooting them. And then finally when we were right on their doorstep, they herded them all into a barn and threw gasoline on them, and lit it. And then shot any that got out.

GR: Were these Jews, Poles, Italians?

RS: We have to assume they were Jews and Poles and, you know. I didn’t know an awful lot about it. I wandered into camp and saw it.

GR: Did you have any idea what had gone on?

RS: Yes, we knew what had happened. But see, we had no idea of the whole picture. We thought this was a massacre. It was terrible, but it was a massacre. We found out it was part of an overall program. Once again, after the war, I began to read on these things. I’ve been through three of the others. If you ever have an opportunity to go to one, go to Auschwitz. That’s the one that still is foreboding. The Germans have prettied up the others to where they’re nice little parks almost. But Auschwitz still looks mean. I’ve got a picture of the one I saw, but I’m not quite sure where it is. It was in Life magazine. But anyhow, I spent all these months with these Germans prisoners and got to talk with them. I’d like to get them, if I could, to tell me about how they were captured. That was always an interesting thing.

GR: Were they pretty sociable?

RS: Yeah.

GR: They were being fed, I assume?
RS: The real hardcore were the Africa Corps, they were picked up early. The ones we had were old guys or young kids—people that had been pushed into service just the last minute and their heart wasn’t really in this thing. But we did have some, as I said, that had been in six, seven years. My personal truck driver, who spoke English fortunately, was a medical student of Heidelberg. So quite a well educated guy. He and I became pretty good buddies. I thought at the time, maybe I should get these people’s names and addresses and keep up correspondence, and I decided not to. I think that was the better decision.

GR: Relationships were definitely not the best?

RS: Better than I not interfere in their lives. They had enough problems already. I should have given them my address, and then if they wanted to they could have written to me. But I’d probably have gotten a lot of requests for money. And as a college student, I didn’t have any money.

GR: Sponsorship too, to come to America.

RS: So probably the best thing. The outstanding memory I have is this one guy said to me, “You know, you Americans don’t even know what hell is. You could wander around...the German Air Force would not send a plane down to strafe you unless there were at least a company of men and have at least two, three hundred people before they’d even send one fighter down.” He says, “The darn Americans, one guy walks out in the field and they’ll send a plane down at him.” He said it was hell, you couldn’t go out in the open with that air superiority. He said it was just awful. Most of them were very happy to surrender because they knew it was over and they wanted to get out intact if they could.
GR: True. And the Russians didn’t offer them that choice?

RS: The Russians hauled them off to Russia. So generally it was congenial. I didn’t run into very many that were...I ran into a few that were pretty GI yet. We had a lieutenant one project out in the country that always saluted me. I’m a corporal. He said to me, “I got the corporal stripes when I was working with prisoners because I was a non-common in your company.”

GR: It all helps your veteran’s benefits. Your retirement.

RS: Oh yeah. Got three hundred and twenty dollars instead of three hundred. (laughs)

GR: So how long before you and Rita decided that you were ready to get married?

RS: We decided rather quickly, I think. We kind of shocked our parents.

GR: Rita was younger, but was there urgency on your part as an older man trying to get going?

RS: I wanted to settle down, all my buddies were settled down. And the life of a single guy wasn’t all that exciting. Especially when you’re a schoolteacher. I just met her and it seemed like a good idea.

GR: Did you get married out in Denver?

RS: No, we came back here to her...she was brought up on a farm in Illinois. We got married in a little church in the little hamlet she lived near. The church is down now, they took it down.

GR: What year was that, Bob?

RS: ‘52.

GR: So you waited a little bit?
RS: Yeah, I was twenty-seven, thirty when our first child was born. Our kids are in their forties now.

GR: So, she's working, you're working, you get married. Did anything change?

RS: She worked for three years to get her permanent certificate. It happened that the first child started to appear after about three years. And we decided what we were going to do. The job market in Denver was terrible. Once again there was an overabundance of labor everywhere. Our parents are back there, we were making the well over a thousand-mile trip back every vacation. We didn’t have much vacation anyhow. So we decided to come back here. We did something, if our kids did today, I’d shoot them. That’s not a good subject when we talk about the Army or something—just a figure of speech. We got in the car and put our stuff in storage, came back looked for a place to live, wandered around. We wanted to live in Wisconsin. Rita wanted to live in Michigan, I wanted to live in Minnesota. I'd lived in Michigan, I didn’t think it was all that great. I wanted to live in Minnesota and she didn’t want to live there. So we compromised on Wisconsin, which was a good compromise, it’s a beautiful state. And we just wandered around until we found a job.

GR: What was that?

RS: Well, I didn’t want that either. We were getting pretty hungry by then; we were a little concerned. We went into Appleton, Wisconsin. I don’t know if you know the town or not.

GR: In the Dorr Peninsula?

RS: No, it’s just southwest of Green Bay. A pretty town, a nice little college there, Lawrence University is there. We went in, and I checked in with the employment bureau there. He
said, “Have a cup of coffee.” He disappeared and came back. “The Institute of Paper Chemistry would like to talk to you.” That’s in my memoir on my working days. I said, “I don’t want to work there.” I knew about it; it was an institute supported by the paper industry that had a graduate school for paper engineers. It also did research for the paper industry. I had heard a speech by a guy from there that had come over to Hope College and talked to us. I said it didn’t interest me at all. But it was the only game in town, so “I’ll run over and talk to him.” Well, I went over and talked to him, and as you understand often happens, that’s where I ended up going to work. But their promise was, “We’ll train you, we’ll make a paper chemist out of you, we’ll teach you the trade,” which I had run into when I was looking for jobs. Everybody said, “Well, you’ve got a wonderful education but no trade.” “We’ll teach you the trade, and then after four, five years if you want to go to work for one of our member companies, one of the companies that supports us—all big paper companies did—we’ll help you get the job. That sounded like a pretty good deal to me. It was certainly the best I had been offered, so I took the job. Appleton is a beautiful town to live in. And so, that’s how we got into the paper industry. And true to their promise, four years later I said I wanted to go to work in a paper company, and they helped me get a job. And we moved up to Minnesota.

GR: So you did end up there?

RS: I worked in a paper mill for seven years. One of the reasons I took the job was to work for a small company so I wouldn’t be transferred around. After about six years, a big company came along and bought our little company. All of a sudden I was in a big corporation…that was about five years after I was up there because I stayed on for a couple years. But it took a while for the big company…the big company gave us the
same old stuff they always do, "We're not going to change this, you won't even notice a difference," and all this kind of stuff. Well, like always happens, finally the big guys begin to learn your terminology and they think they know an awful lot about your business. Pretty soon they start sending their people in to run things, and it became obvious that the promotional ladder was going to be filled by Idaho, not by Minnesota. They're beginning to cut down people, and I just went and found another job in Toledo, Ohio, working for a big corporation.

GR: Had Rita decided not to go to work after the child?
RS: Yes, once we had the first kid, she said "I'll stay home and take care of the kids."

GR: So did this go on until your last was born and raised?
RS: That's right, she's never gone back to work. She actually has learned since she'd much rather be a librarian than a teacher.

GR: Did she have those types of yearnings anytime during the child rearing years?
RS: (laughs) There are days she wanted to get away from the children, I'm sure.

GR: How did you two handle that as a couple, and as parents?
RS: Did I change diapers? Yes, I changed a lot of diapers.

GR: So you were an involved parent?
RS: I was involved, but then again, I traveled a lot too. It was tough on Rita; she had a tough ten, fifteen years.

GR: How did she do that? Mentally, how did she get through some really nice times, but some times too when she was probably a little bit stressed?
RS: The first thing I had to do when we got a new house was...the very first thing was I was going down to the lumber yard and bought the lumber to build a sand box. Kids love
sandboxes, and we've had a sandbox in every house and it was built by the same plan—build them all the same. So she did that. Then, of course, there were a lot of other ladies around everywhere we when that had the same problems. They hung out together. In those days, we played bridge; we don’t do that anymore. You know, you do what you can at two, three hundred dollars a month.

GR: Did you find yourselves spending time with other couples with children?

RS: Yeah.

GR: Did you find yourself living in neighborhoods that...?

RS: Yeah that’s right. See, we lived in Appleton, Wisconsin—that’s a middle-sized community, four, five hundred thousand—and the people in our neighborhood were not people that we associated with at all. They were, most of them...well, the guy across the street fixed telephones, kiddy-corner was a postman...these were not people that had our interests. So we didn’t socialize too much with our neighbors. But we had all the people at work, we had all the people at the church, we had people that we knew at the university—so that was the gang. There were some of the them down the street, not too far from us. We had bridge clubs where we all got together.

GR: So that was kind of your time out together with Rita?

RS: Yeah. In Appleton I did not travel much. When I got to Minnesota I traveled a little more.

GR: When you weren’t traveling very much, did you have a particular hobby or something?

RS: Yeah, keeping the house up. (laughs)

GR: Did you play golf?
RS: I’ve played golf all my life, but never as much as I have since I moved here. I just didn’t have the time.

GR: You didn’t have a day segmented just for playing golf with your buddies?

RS: No. I played golf off and on all the time. In Minnesota, there was a small, local golf course—private course, not a municipal one—but everybody belonged. One hundred dollars a year to be a member. Everybody in town belonged. Out of my back window, I could see one of the fairways. When I’d see how busy it was, I’d hop in the car and run up and play nine holes. So I could do that, and there was a regular men’s night every Thursday night, and so we did it there. In Toledo, big city, golf is hard. You kill a whole day playing a round of golf. So I didn’t play much there.

GR: When you and Rita decided to spend time with the kids, what kind of things would you do together? Family activities?

RS: We traveled around. Wisconsin’s a wonderful place, go over to Baribou, all these resort areas, up to Dorr County. I had an aunt over in Detroit who likes me, and we went over and visited her. We got in the car; we took the ferry across a couple of times come over—her mother was living here. I don’t know everything we did in those days. When you’re bringing up four kids, you block it out in a lot of cases. But we did some things. We didn’t travel as much as a lot of people did.

GR: How many children did you have?

RS: We had four.

GR: They all survived.

RS: Yes.
GR: Four kids, that's a lot of work. Did you ever receive any unsolicited advice from parents or other...?

RS: Oh, yes. My dad died when I was very young, and my mother was a single parent all her life. Rita's folks were on the farm. No, they didn't really give a lot of advice, but every time we had a child, Rita's mother would show up at the door and help out.

GR: Did you ever ask for any advice?

RS: I don't know. I suppose we did.

GR: You had an absent father figure. How did you fill that in?

RS: Well, you're going back to the history of Holland now. A lot of people who came here with names that weren't Dutch, complained, felt they weren't well treated. But I think there was kind of a gentleman's agreement that they treated people on the faculty well. I think the people at the college, for the most part, were treated well no matter what their name was, because we were treated real well. When dad died, there was never a father/son banquet or anything that I wasn't picked up by somebody and taken. The town just kind of took care of us.

GR: What happened to your father, Bob?

RS: He died of cancer six years after he arrived here. They didn't have any big musical instruments in town when we arrived in '29, well, I should say before we arrived. When we arrived, the big organ in the chapel—the big Skinner—was there. That was the first big concert organ in the area, and dad was organist. This got a lot of excitement going. There was a stir.

GR: So you had some people, not only at Hope but in the community, that kind of took you under their wing?
RS: Yeah, the town... Well, first of all, Dr. Dimnent, Dr. Nykerk, and Dr. Wichers—two of the presidents of Hope College and Nykerk was a godfather—were involved in hiring dad, and they were some of his strongest proponents. So he had a lot of support up top.

GR: What was his first name?

RS: My dad?

GR: Yeah.

RS: His first name was Wilfred, but his middle name was Curtis; they called him Curtis. Apparently he was quite charismatic, because people in town really... and he got a lot of musical things going. It was just going. There had been a lot of good music before, but this was just kind of a re-surge of it all. So he built up quite a following.

GR: How old were you when he passed away?

RS: Eleven.

GR: So you had enough time to know him.

RS: I knew him, yeah. I don’t know how good an organist he was, but everybody tells me he was very good.

GR: The limited knowledge you remember of him, did you take any of that into your own child-raising era?

RS: Oh yeah, I’m sure I brought it... of course mother was a big influence on our lives. A lot of her principles we followed.

GR: Did you have siblings?

RS: Yeah, three. One brother and twin sisters.

GR: Did they ever try to help out? You were kind of an older parent. They probably had children already?
RS: They lived miles away. We’ve always been quite separated geographically. No, but there were support groups of our own age.

GR: So you would go outside the family to maybe talk to the guys around the neighborhood?

RS: Or our friends.

GR: Did you find it hard to believe that here you were with a solid family and four kids and try to relate to how your mother had done all of that?

RS: It’s taken me a long time to realize what my mother did. She did a lot. Women didn’t get paid a lot in those days. She was doing a man’s job but she wasn’t getting paid anywhere near that.

GR: What was the position she held to support four kids?

RS: Well, when dad died, they started looking for a new organist for Hope College. Mother was excellent organist and pianist, a good musician, so she went over to help out. Well, they hired a guy, he stayed a few years and left. She helped out. Hired another guy, stayed a few years and left, and she helped out. She was there about thirty years. So she was the college organist in effect, never in name, but always in effect.

GR: What was her first name?

RS: Esther. Then her arthritis got the better of her, and at the age of sixty she quit music, went back to school and got a degree in German and taught that for ten years.

GR: At Hope?

RS: Yes. And she was very instrumental in helping Paul Fried get the Vienna Program going, because at that time he needed a woman chaperone if he was going to get any girls to go to Europe. He knew he had to have somebody, and mother had the respect of the community and she knew the German so she seemed ideal. So mother spent six, seven
summers over there helping put that program into go. She finally got to travel the world; after a whole life of working, she got to do some world traveling too.

GR: Is she still with us?
RS: No, she died in ’74. No, she’d be a hundred and ten now.
GR: After your own children left, how did you and Rita view that opportunity to do more things, and did you have to reconnect?
RS: We had an education fund. Four kids to go through college, we didn’t know how we were going to do it. At work I had been setting money aside for education. The kids went off to school and somehow they got through college, and we still had money in the education fund. They got scholarships, they all worked, they hustled some dishes and this kind of stuff. So they got through. We got the fourth one, he was not out of college, but he was in town going to the University of Toledo—where we were, just down the street—and kind of working on the side, and pretty much we were putting him through college on operating expenses not our education fund. So in ’81 we got an opportunity to go over, they had the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Vienna Program. Mother, of course, was gone by then, and did we want to go as a representative of the family? Sure, we did. Oh, Rita got the fever. She had never traveled, and she got the fever. Well we’ve been over a dozen times since then.

GR: So you’ve really taken world travel to heart?
RS: We’ve done a lot of that, yeah, we have. And then our oldest son has taught in China for fifteen, twenty years now. Worked his way up through the ranks, got a bachelors in it, then a masters, and now a Ph.D. in Chinese and is teaching over there, running a teaching program for teaching English in Chinese universities.
GR: Have you ever wondered how a chemistry major, turned engineer... how his kids ended up doing what they do? Do you ever know?

RS: I had one ended up a scientist. That's our daughter. She went into paper chemistry. She got a degree in paper chemistry.

GR: Do you think you had anything to do with that?

RS: Oh yeah. I was running a laboratory in Toledo. She had a high school project, and she had to know something about papermaking. So she came to work and I showed her how to make paper. We had a hand machine there; we could make sheets of paper. She got intrigued with the whole thing. She went off to Miami University and got a degree in Pulp Paper Technology and worked for Hammermill paper for several years. Did the same thing as her mother when she left to have a child, didn't go back.

GR: Never has gone back? Did you ever ask her about that?

RS: Yeah, she's just not really interested. She said, "I did it," and she had some good responsible positions. She did what I did, she went around and solved problems in the paper mill.

GR: So you have son that is a teacher in China, a daughter who was a paper engineer, who now is a stay at home mom...

RS: The second son went to Hope College, got a degree in geology, got a Ph.D. in geology at Penn State.

[End of tape two, side one]

GR: What does the last son do now, Bob?

RS: He's had a lot of trouble deciding what he wants to do. He's picked up a masters in biomechanics, if you know what that is.
GR: No, I don’t.

RS: Well, it’s the physical function of joints and bones, the design of running shoes and all this kind of stuff. It’s a cross between biology and physics and…

GR: Is that what he is doing now?

RS: He didn’t like it, so he’s going back and getting a doctorate in education now. He’s teaching mathematics in Denver.

GR: So he’s back out in Denver.

RS: Yeah. He went and came back and said, “I got a job near Denver.” “Where you teaching?” “Hinkley High School.” I said, “My gosh, Aurora? That’s were I taught.” And Hinkley hired me, Hinkley was the superintendent. (laughs) So, he’s teaching out there. I got three boys teaching, and I’m happy about that.

GR: So in a way, you and Rita have affected all four children in some way with occupations. I know you said you traveled quite a bit now, but you were coming home after a lot of time out in the workforce, and Rita had been at home. What was that like? Were there any schedule issues?

RS: She just got accustomed to it. She didn’t schedule us. She did her thing.

GR: What would that have been?

RS: She would belong to associations, church. You know, the women’s societies and all that.

GR: So she had some outside involvement, the community?

RS: She did what she could, and of course, the kids eventually got old enough to have a babysitter and so she began to do more things. She has taken a few trips. She went off to her college reunion. I put her in a car with all her buddies, and they went off to the reunion. I took care of the kids for three or four days.
GR: As a retired couple, you’ve reconnected and do things mostly as a couple?

RS: Rita’s doing what... she’s retired when we moved here. See they prepare the big meal of the day here for us, and they do the maid service, and so she says, “Now I’m retired. But she’s doing things—she’s still working at the church, she’s one of the librarians here at the village. She’ll probably show you that when you talk to her, because she’s real proud of that library. It’s a real fine library.

GR: What have you done?

RS: I knew you were going to ask that. (laughs) I do a lot of writing. I’ve been writing for that—that’s our little newspaper there. I’m listed as the editor, but really, pretty much everybody does their thing, so it’s not all that big of a deal.

GR: Did you ever get involved in veterans groups?

RS: No.

GR: Why is that?

RS: I never joined anything. I’m not a Rotarian or a Kiwanis or anything. No objection to it, it’s just that... well, my objection is I don’t want other people speaking for me. I don’t want people getting up and saying, “Bob Snow says the Supreme Court should outlawed,” you know, this kind of stuff. And these veteran groups are very good at making big pronouncements. I didn’t see much sense in playing soldier after I was out. I couldn’t wait to get out, so I was not a very good soldier.

GR: Have you received publications or anything military oriented?

RS: Oh, no.

GR: You just do some private reading.
RS: I do a lot of private reading. I’ve got a bunch of guys; I have one at church that flew airplanes for paratroopers and gliders. He flew the airplane that pulled them or took them places.

GR: What is his name?

RS: Bill Lamb, former mayor of Holland, Michigan. He flew a glider in at the Rhine crossing, so he must have flown right over my head. He and Lee Howard I talked to you about earlier, we’d get these books and read them and pass them around. We’ve got a little lending library we go around, everything one reads, the others read. Lee’s very interesting, he’s got a buddy that we play with from Grand Rapids, who was in Baton, captured, did the death march, went into a prisoner of war camp for the whole war, was wounded by a strafing American plane trying to liberate them. Lost both legs. He plays golf with us.

GR: He has a prosthesis?

RS: Yeah. He rides a cart, but he doesn’t hit very far because he doesn’t dare swing.

GR: What’s his name?

RS: I don’t know his name, Ken something. He lives in Grand Rapids. After fifty years of ignoring the fact that I was in because everyone was in and it wasn’t a big deal, we’re beginning to take a little notice of it.

GR: Is that caused by projects like this, is it movies like Saving Private Ryan, is it books like Stephen Ambrose or Brokaw?

RS: I think Ambrose helped a lot; I’m not real fan of Brokaw. But I had never walked in a veteran’s parade until I came to Holland.

GR: Why is that?
RS: I've got five or six ribbons sitting there, and I've been walking here lately. Because I didn't realize that...well, Ambrose, you know, if you take the percentage of all the people that have ever lived in the United States, took the percentage that served in the military, it's something like four or five percent. Because I went at a time when everybody was going, I had the impression that everybody did this. And it really isn't, it's a precious few. We're a society onto ourselves, and I've begun to realize that this was something unique, something unique that I participated in.

GR: Is Holland a little bit more gracious about its veterans than some?

RS: Well, yeah. I've never seen the attention paid to it that's been paid here. We never celebrated Veterans Day anywhere we lived.

GR: What parades do you do?

RS: Memorial Day. Really should be Veterans Day because Memorial Day is not for us, it's for the guys that didn't make it. We should shift our emphasis to Veterans Day and have a parade then.

GR: Like the memorial that went up in Centennial Park, do you think that was really needed?

RS: I think it's needed, particularly in today's society, needed to have these kids remember that somebody gave up something for them. Once again, I'm talking about the heroes, the ones that didn't come back. I think that in this day and age we're awfully materialistic, and there's getting to be less and less concern about ethics and morals. But there's also a resurgence interested in their group. Last Memorial Day was a revelation. The parade route was packed.

GR: With veterans?
RS: No this was people of the town. So there’s more interest in it now, and there’s a lot going on. I went to Private Ryan—I didn’t want to go, and I didn’t enjoy it—but I’m glad I went.

GR: Why didn’t you enjoy it?

RS: Well, because it was a terrible sight. Those guys that went into D-Day really took a beating. But I think you’ve got to realize what they went through. I just finished a book, Flag of Our Fathers, Iwo Jima capture. If you want to know why Harry Truman should drop the atomic bomb, read that book. That’ll give you a pretty good excuse.

GR: You were still physically in Europe when that all happened. What was it like to hear that we had dropped a nuclear weapon on...?

RS: I was in the hospital in Paris at the time. They came out and said America has a new secret weapon. We had a high school chemistry teacher here at Holland High School that had said if they ever find a way to break that nucleus of that atom, we’re going to get more energy out of that than you can imagine. And he stressed that several times. So my first thought when I heard that was, oh they’ve cracked the atom. I thought they would have thought I was real bright if I’d said that because that’s what it proved out to be. But then I got to thinking, they might have said, how did he know that? And I might have been investigated, you know the darn Army.

GR: So the public really is aware of the fact that there was something there that could end this war?

RS: Yeah, they cracked the atom before the war.

GR: Japan was not willing to listen to the some of the warnings coming over the news?
RS: Well, I don't think they threatened them with that. I think that was kept so secret that they didn't know it.

GR: So were you shocked when they were able to drop something that devastating?

RS: Well, I was shocked that they pulled it off, yeah.

GR: What about the second one?

RS: I have a little trouble with the second one. The excuse I hear is that they had to prove that we didn't just have one. But we just had two. (laughs) But that proved that we can do it again. I would have hoped the second time they could have said look out on the Pacific Ocean at ten o'clock at such and such a day. We could have bombed them with impunity and they could have seen it, but that isn't the way they did it.

GR: Do you think the military veterans from your experience might not talk a lot about the war just because of the fact that it ended on that note versus a full surrender?

RS: No, I don't think so. See I was directly affected, I was a combat engineer, a demolition specialist, supposedly combat trained, as I pointed out—not heavily combat trained, but, I had been in combat, and my record said combat training. Those guys had reserved seats on the first boats going in. They even went before the infantry to clear the beaches. So I was a pretty sure bet to get in on that invasion. And that probably saved my life. So that’s got to color my judgment a little bit. I respect Harry Truman, he made the decision and he didn’t back off. He said, “I did it, if it’s wrong it’s my fault.” So as I said, right or wrong, he made the decision he thought was right and he stuck with it.

GR: Do you think Roosevelt would have done that?
RS: No, I don’t think he had the courage. He was very sensitive to the political aspects of
everything. I don’t know if he would have or not, but I don’t think he was the decent guy
that Truman was. That’s just my opinion.

GR: You probably have grandchildren at this point. Has that given you some opportunities to
impart some knowledge on their impressionable minds?

RS: No, not until they ask.

GR: So they have asked?

RS: That’s the big problem that they don’t ask. There other grandpa was stationed very near
me in the Netherlands when I was there. He was a quartermaster. We really haven’t
talked about it a lot at all.

GR: Do they ask you other things? Things going on in their lives?

RS: They really aren’t interested. They’re interested in basketball and hockey.

GR: But they don’t ask you some of the hard questions about life, like what should I do?

RS: No, not an awful lot. We don’t see them all that much. They live in Erie, Pennsylvania.

GR: Do you get any calls from your kids about how to raise kids?

RS: No, I think they’re doing... only one, just the daughter is the only one that has children.
But they’re doing a brilliant job. She’s got a wonderful husband and they’re both
extremely involved in the church. He’s a lawyer, but a very moral one. He will not
touch divorce cases. There are things he just won’t do. Greatest respect in the world.
The reason I gave you that magazine is that that is a direct outgrowth of my work. For
almost forty years I wrote scientific reports, which is dull reading. My whole trick was to
write something at least good enough for the big wheels up front to read it once in a
while. So I made a real effort all my career to write. Then I got here, and I can write any
darn thing I want. I don’t have to back it up or anything. I’m thoroughly enjoying it.
That’s how my career has worked into my retirement. Otherwise I have nothing to do
with my career. I have no interest in it.

GR: So you really kind of found another life.

RS: And history. I’m a bearcat for history, I got into that. I got into all kinds of history. I
have an article in there that is historically based, and I can muse on that. So that’s played
a part in my retirement.

GR: Well, is there anything that you want to end our conversation with on, for people to
remember, not only your veterans experiences, but...?

RS: Well, we talked about Brokaw for a minute there. I disagree with him on the greatest
generation, because I think George Washington and Jefferson and some of those guys had
a pretty good generation. All three good generations, they got this whole thing going, so
I would say the greatest is pushing it. We were a unique generation, and I’ll go along
with that. Great Depression. I started grade school in Washington School here,
September, 1929. One month later the stock market crashed. I was in the Depression
from the time I went into school until I graduated from high school in ‘42 at which time
the war ended the Depression. But the war started. So we went from the Depression into
the war. Came back here, Hope College went from three hundred students to fifteen
hundred. Three hundred to over a thousand in one year. I was here as a freshmen when
they were little, I came back as a sophomore when they big and growing. We had no
facilities; we had no place for people to live. And then we beat our way through school
with night classes and Saturday classes and everything else. And then went on into a
lousy job market. So our generation is unique, and I don’t think any the worse for it.
GR: How did you deal with Korea when it came along so quickly after the war?

RS: Very thin. I had an offer of commission. First thing, when I came out of the Army I was determined that if we had another war, I was going to have a commission. I wasn't going to do that enlisted man thing again. I was offered, at the University of Colorado when I was out there, a commission if I would take one ROTC course, which was tempting because I really wanted to make sure I had that commission. And I said no; I'd have been in Korea in a few months if I had done that.

GR: Was that something that you really struggled with?

RS: Not an awful lot because that happened about the time I got married, at which time I lost any interest in adventure. I don't mean that. I mean that kind of adventure.

GR: How did that war...how was it talked about? How was it viewed by past veterans? Your wife?

RS: Well, it was a very tough war for the soldiers, because there wasn't a great deal of interest in it. Vietnam was even worse. So from that point of view, I've got to hand it to those guys. I know a lot of people got hauled back in for that war. When you got out of the service, if you were an enlisted man, sergeant on up, or an officer, they wanted you to be in the reserves. A lot of those got dragged back in.

GR: How did you deal with it as a civilian? Paranoia, did that do anything to your lifestyle?

RS: No, you mean the...?

GR: Bomb shelters or...?

RS: Oh you mean the...?

GR: The Cold War.
RS: Oh, the Cold War. No, I was convinced when I came out of Europe that I was going to go back to fight the Russians. That was the mood over there.

GR: Was that an odd thing to think since they were just your allies? Helped you beat the German forces.

RS: I don't think we were under any illusions that they were our friends, they were our allies, but they didn't trust us very much. I was walking along one day and a truckload of German prisoners came a surrendered to me. The lieutenant came out and he said, "I've got a carload of able-bodied men here. You give us rifles and we'll go help you fight the Russians." That was his comment. I said, "Gee, I don't have time right now," and sent him on back.

GR: Was there talk about us getting involved in a push for Russia even before World War Two had ended?

RS: Yeah, there was a consensus around that that was going to happen, and it's a miracle that it didn't. But we had thought that would happened, but the Korea thing, of course, came out of the blue.

GR: Your children, during the sixties especially and Vietnam, did you have any dissent in the house with war?

RS: Yeah, I had a hippie son. Swore he was going to go to Canada.

GR: The oldest one?

RS: Yeah. But he had very poor vision. Needs a lot of correction. But he never came close. I think I had one that had to sign up for the draft—that was the youngest.

GR: Was that hard for you as parents?
RS: Yeah, it was terrible to have the kid go sign up for the draft. No, we weren’t really affected. As I said, Don was in the hippie generation.

GR: How did Don act out on his thoughts on the war?

RS: Don has made it a point to be very apolitical. And he’s teaching in China, that is a good thing. He is totally divorced from the politics. He married a Chinese girl who was sent to the countryside by the Red Guards. She and her mother were exiled, sent back to her mother’s original province, do labor. And her mother was a teacher. They were not physically abused, she said, but were given jobs in the factory and they were not good jobs. Her father was abused, and he just recently died. So she was badly treated by the revolution. But to this day, that was the Liberation. That’s her attitude, it was the Liberation.

GR: So he’s a U.S. national living in a communist country now?

RS: Right, and she’s now a naturalized American citizen, so that if we had to get them out we could do it rather quickly. And so she could live in Hong Kong with him, because they didn’t allow Chinese to live in Hong Kong. So she came here and got naturalized. But she says, “I’m an American citizen, but I’m Chinese.” She’s very proud of her heritage. Bright young lady. She got a college degree on television and has just recently gone into the seminary in Hong Kong, Lutheran Seminary. Got a master’s degree in divinity and a master’s degree in library science. With sketchy undertraining. she got into a master’s program and completed it. And as Don said, she complains about her course work, she got a B in one course (all the rest As). She says the reason she got a B was her teacher asked her to grade herself so graded herself, the only B she got in her graduate school. Bright young lady.
GR: What was it like for the siblings, when not only when Don was reacting, but the other son was called up?

RS: He wasn't called up.

GR: Or just got draft notice.

RS: None. Matter of fact, we didn’t know. We were worried about his refusing to register, getting in trouble. Did they? Finally we asked them, “Oh yes, I registered.” But none of them were called. They were just a little behind. That was in the seventies wasn’t it? They were just in high school at the time.

GR: Because they were probably watching it on television, and they understood it.

RS: Don was the only one that was old enough to be eligible, I think.

GR: Was he making any undertones around the house? Was it obvious that this was a son that was against the war?

RS: Yeah, he was pretty specific about it. But I don’t think he knew a lot about it.

GR: Was that hard for you as a veteran, because you knew that probably the war was wrong, but you knew…?

RS: It was hard for me as a father, worrying about trouble my kid would get in.

GR: Did you think he might end up in Leavenworth?

RS: Well, I just worry about what he might do. But it worked out. That was tough. We brought up our kids all in the era. And, of course, the civil rights was going on too. We were in a big city; our church was right down in the inner city.

GR: This was Toledo?

RS: Yeah.
GR: What was that like as a white young man who had been raised in a town where diversity was still...

RS: Lily white.

GR: Yeah, what was that like?

RS: We worked in Denver, and I worked in this chemical plant. My whole work crew were Mexicans. They called themselves Hispanics, but these kids were from Mexico. So legitimately that's not prejudice. They went out at night and got in gang fights, and they carried marijuana and all this stuff, but they put in a good day's work. When they came to work in the morning, they worked for eight hours. Their work ethic was excellent. So I have a great deal of respect for them; I didn't care for their social life. I was the only gringo in the bunch, and I worked for them all the time. There was no problem at all. The training at home was no prejudice, that was mother's story. But that was the first time I really saw it. In the Army, we had one black guy in our company. I don't know how he got there; he was there for awhile but they shipped him out before we came overseas. Then we went to Minnesota and that was lily white. Appleton was not, well it was. No blacks stayed in town after sunset in Appleton, Wisconsin. Pretty good-sized town in those days. And then ________________, Finlanders and Polish. Half-and-half. It was ethnic diversity, but not color.

GR: Was Toledo healthy for your...?

RS: Toledo was very healthy. We lived in a house in an area built up around a synagogue. The synagogue was two blocks away; the area around it was a housing development built up after World War Two—pretty heavily Jewish. We bought from the Jewish family that had built the house. By the time we bought it, we were diluting it. The lady next door
was Lebanese, Christian, and there were quite a few Muslims in the area. It was the university professor area, very diverse, we had a lot of East Indians, we had Orientals, we had blacks. The only blacks we had in the neighborhood were socially and economically well above us. And university vice presidents and so on. So it was good for the kids, I think, very good. And they went to high school. Don was in a rock band, one Muslim, one Jew, and Don, a Presbyterian. They played at the mosque, and they played at the synagogue, and they played at the Presbyterian church. (laughs) Then when they had the march when the Jewish athletes were killed—they had a march, a protest, from the synagogue—Don was right in there carrying a sign saying “your friendly neighborhood WASP.” (laughs) I think it was very good. And then the church being down where it was, we went down into the ghetto, bought a house and rehabilitated it, right in the middle of...and this was 1972, '70 and '72, right in the middle of all the racial tension. So we were down in there working, and we were not bothered. Once the neighborhood knew who we were, what we were doing, and why we were doing it, they were our pals. There was no damage done to the house. We went down there nights and worked, and this is an area where everybody said stay out of it in the daytime. So we became very accustomed. Rita worked for the very activist black organization in town—the Horambi, they were a black rights group. She worked there as secretary for one of the leaders and drove down there herself. You know, it’s a jungle. There are certain places you don’t go at certain times. But once you learn the rules, we didn’t have any great fear of it. Our church wasn’t broken into, but our church was very active out in the community, doing things. The churches that walled up and put in security got some problems with destruction. It was a wonderful experience; it was a great place to bring up kids. And
they avoided the drug culture. It was there at their high school, but high school was about half-and-half. There were a lot of drugs. There were quite a few black kids running in their gang, too, that didn’t have anything to do with drugs. And there were a lot of white kids over there doing drugs. So it wasn’t a racial thing. It was kind of funny, you’d go over to the high school in the morning, and they’re waiting to go into class. Around one door is a huge group, a bunch of kids waiting to go in, and around another door another huge bunch—these were the teetotalers and these were the druggers. They got along; they respected each other’s turf. And so it was good training for the kids.

GR: So you’re happy overall with what happened?

RS: I’m very happy with the way it worked out, yeah. So there, you know more about me than you wanted to know. (laughs)

GR: Thank you, Bob.