

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES PHILIP BENZIGER

FOR THE
VETERANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND SOCIETY
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INTERVIEWED BY
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CYNTHIA TINKER: This begins an interview with Charles P. Benziger at the Center for the Study of War and Society at UT Knoxville. We're in the Center offices, and my name is Cynthia Tinker. I'm the program coordinator here at the Center. And also sitting in on the interview today is one of our interns.

DAVID ADKINS: David Adkins.

TINKER: And thank you Mr. Benziger for coming over here this morning.

CHARLES P. BENZIGER: You're quite welcome.

TINKER: We appreciate it. So, let's start with—uh, you want to tell us when and where you were born?

BENZIGER: Um, September 6, 1920. The first Labor Day. Knox General Hospital. Dr. Eben Alexander officiating. (Laughter)

TINKER: Officiating. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: And, uh, at that time my fam—my mother and dad lived on Coker Avenue, in North Knoxville, which had, just shortly before, been incorporated in the city of Knoxville. Before that it was just North Knoxville.

TINKER: Had your parents always lived in Knoxville?

BENZIGER: Yes, they were all born here. And, uh, let me see. My great-grandfather had come over here before the Civil War, and he had a farm down at Lyons View. I haven't been able to locate the location. Except ... anyhow, he went back to Switzerland to get his family, just before the Civil War broke out, and then he couldn't get back until after it was over. When he came back, he quit farming and he taught school at the German Lutheran church. That was probably one of the best primary schools at that time in Knoxville. Then my grandfather had a cigar store, tobacco store at the corner of, oh gosh, Gay Street and, um—it's where the East Tennessee Historical Society building is now.

TINKER: Oh, yeah!

BENZIGER: The old Fouche building.

TINKER: Yeah, I know exactly where that's at.

BENZIGER: And Doctor Fouche, the dentist, was upstairs, and my grandfather had that. And then he died suddenly, I can't remember when the date was, 1911 or something like that. It was before World War I. My father had gone to the old Bell House School. Do you know where that was?

TINKER: No.

BENZIGER: Well, let me see.

TINKER: The old Bell House?

BENZIGER: Bell House School, not bell marsh. Bell House, let me see. You know where the county court house is, the old one. What's that street, is that still Cumberland?

ADKINS: Uh huh.

BENZIGER: Okay, as you cross Gay Street and started down the hill, uh, going toward First Creek, Bell House School was over on the right. It was there for a long time.

TINKER: Wow, you've really got some Knoxville roots.

BENZIGER: And, uh, there were only two schools, grammar schools, in Knoxville. One of them was private at that time. I can't remember the name of it. And the other one was Bell House. After my grandfather died, my father went to work for the old Calvin McClung Company.

TINKER: And what year was your father born? Do you remember?

BENZIGER: [18]'78 or '88. No, Mother was born in '88. [He was born in]'78 I think.

TINKER: Wow.

BENZIGER: And they're all—let me see. All my ancestors are all in a row out at Old Gray [cemetery]. (Laughs)

TINKER: At Old Gray Cemetery?

BENZIGER: Mm hmm. Plus, a penurious preacher who had no place else to go when he died. (Laughs) My great grandfather had him buried in the plot.

TINKER: It was just somebody he knew? And he let him be buried there?

BENZIGER: He was a minister I think at the German Catholic—German Lutheran church, which used to be, when I was growing up, on the corner of Fifth and Broadway. Then there was a bank there later which was torn down and now there's, I don't know, some sort of organization has the property.

TINKER: So your father's side of the family was from Switzerland?

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: Do you know anything about that? How they came over?

BENZIGER: No, but he came in 1850, somewhere along in there. He was a teacher.

TINKER: Your grandfather?

BENZIGER: My great-grandfather.

TINKER: Oh, great, yeah.

BENZIGER: He was a teacher, and there was a famous teacher by the name of [Johann Heinrich] Pestalozzi. Did you ever hear of him?

TINKER: Uh uh.

BENZIGER: Okay. He had a different idea about education. His school had both practical and, what do you call it? Classical stuff. In other words, they learned a trade, learned to farm, something like that. He was very famous for his ideas back in those days. But my great-grandfather was one of his apostles, so to speak.

TINKER: Okay, wow.

BENZIGER: And, anyhow, he came over. Then he went back right before the Civil War started, broke out. You know, I often wonder if he got caught up between the ...

(Tape Paused)

TINKER: Okay, so, you were talking about how your great-grandfather went back to Switzerland right before the Civil War started.

BENZIGER: Yes, and actually my grandfather was born there. They came back through New Orleans. Came up—they got caught in a yellow fever epidemic at, they were down near Wilson Dam, Muscle Shoals [Alabama], and my great-grandmother died there. I've never been, I did a lot of work when I was with the TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority], and I looked all over the place.

TINKER: Trying to find her?

BENZIGER: Trying to find her, but never did. So the rest of the family came on up. Some of 'em ended up at Wartburg, [Tennessee], the German settlement, Swiss settlement. The family was tied in with the Weigles, and, what was that fella who wrote the big history of the Swiss in Knoxville? I never bought a copy of it 'cause it costs about a hundred dollars. (Laughs)

TINKER: Oh really? Your family's probably in there. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: It's in there. We used to go to the, my wife and the kids and I, used to go to the Swiss celebrations of Independence Day, which [was] four hundred years ago or something. (Laughs) Anyhow, they came back. They lived, I don't know whether you remember or not, but when Henley Street was first widened and all, there used to be another road you could take off right in front of the L&N [Louisville and Nashville railroad] station and run into where Cumberland [Street] split. They lived right along in there somewhere.

TINKER: Wow.

BENZIGER: And that's where my father grew up.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: I had a picture, and I can't find it. I think my sister who's in New York has it—of my father going to a birthday party for one of the Tysons when the Tysons had the big house where the Masonic temple is. And there's a whole bunch of them sittin' on the front patio or whatever, the front steps, and my father's in there. Uh, that was General Tyson ...

TINKER: Yeah, Lawrence.

BENZIGER: Yeah. But I don't know, I think the one that was there when my Dad went to the party was the Tyson that was in the, uh, that flew in the navy and was killed.

TINKER: Oh that's [Charles] McGhee Tyson.

BENZIGER: McGhee Tyson.

TINKER: The one the airports named after.

BENZIGER: Right. Which airport? I grew up on the old McGhee Tyson Airport off Southerland [Avenue].

TINKER: Yeah, did you?

BENZIGER: Well, I used to play on the old runway down there. There were no planes taking off. (Laughs)

TINKER: You mean there was one before the location where it's at now?

BENZIGER: Oh yeah. Well you know where West High School is?

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: Okay, West High School was the Tober Lane.

TINKER: Mm hmm.

BENZIGER: Okay, Tober Lane was there. It was a dirt road then. And Tober Lane was at the north end of the runway, and the south end of the runway was where they used, well there's a Parker Brothers there now.

TINKER: And that was the original McGhee Tyson airport?

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: I didn't know that! That's cool.

BENZIGER: Knoxville Air[port]. The hangar is still there. The Tennessee National Guard uses it ...

TINKER: Wow.

BENZIGER: ... for something. (Laughter) You didn't know that? Well, there we go.

TINKER: I think I've actually been out to that building.

BENZIGER: Huh?

TINKER: I think I may have been out to that building several years ago.

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: I'm going to have to cruise around that area and try to think, planes used to land here. (Laughter)

BENZIGER: Mr. Self was in charge of that airport, and I remember he had a big Stinson airplane. It was the one that Jim Thompson flew around in to take his aerial photos.

TINKER: And you grew up near there, then?

BENZIGER: Well, my mother and dad, we lived on Coker Avenue 'til 1930. Mother and Dad in 1927 or so, started lookin' at lots. [In] North Hills they bought one. They swapped it for one on White Avenue, which was White's Addition back then. Then they swapped it for one, well it was off Kingston Pike just opposite Scenic Drive.

TINKER: Mm hmm.

BENZIGER: I found a deed after my mother died, and one of the stipulations in the deed was that this property was never to be sold to a black.

TINKER: That was in the deed? I guess they did that back then.

BENZIGER: 1930.

TINKER: Oh, wow.

BENZIGER: So they—Mother and Dad built her dream house down there.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: My daughter and her husband live there now, and they're still in the house. It's not the same house. They've done a lot to it, but uh ...

TINKER: Where was your mother's family from?

BENZIGER: Okay. My grandfather was from Berlin. His father was chancellor of the German railway system. Now, don't ask me because I never got all of the details.

TINKER: And that would have been in the 1800s?

BENZIGER: But, Grandpa Fischer, that's F-I-S-C-H-E-R.

TINKER: Right.

BENZIGER: He got into some trouble

TINKER: He did? (Laughs)

BENZIGER: He went to Russia. He was a cook. He was leaving Germany, and the story that we get—now, how much there is to it I have no idea—but they were runnin' out of food. So Grandpa Fischer went out one day in the woods and shot a bunch of crows and cooked them up. And somebody found the feathers.

TINKER: Mm hmm.

BENZIGER: They chased him out of Russia. He went to Hamburg [Germany] and stowed away on a ship. He got caught, naturally, and put to work. But, my grandmother had left Switzerland to come to the States, and she was on the same boat. That's where he met her.

TINKER: Oh.

BENZIGER: So he came to New York, and he had an uncle in New York. Fischer Publishing Company, music publishing.

TINKER: Mm hmm

BENZIGER: You ever heard of them? They were in business for a long time. As a matter of fact, when we moved to Boston in '66, '[6]7, Fischer Publishing Company was still there.

TINKER: Wow.

BENZIGER: Nobody had ever heard of this uncle, (Laughs) but it was a long time ago. But anyhow, this uncle had already gotten word of Grandpa Fischer's misdeeds, so he turned him away from the door.

TINKER: His misdeeds? (Laughs)

BENZIGER: Whatever had happened in Germany, we don't know. So, he knew that Grandmother was coming to Knoxville, and she went to work for ... Island Home, what's the guy's name? He had the big estate at Island Home, it's now the ...

TINKER: I don't know.

BENZIGER: He also had a place down on the pike.

TINKER: We can look it up later.

BENZIGER: Anyhow, he had the big estate on Island Home, and one of Grandmother Fischer's uncles was his main gardener, laid out the estate and stuff. So she was there for a while. Then Grandpa Fischer followed her down here to Knoxville, and they were married. What year, I do not know.

TINKER: But they had met on the boat?

BENZIGER: They met on the boat.

TINKER: I guess they fell in love on the boat if he chased her down to Knoxville. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: Must have. I don't know where Grandpa Fischer got his training, ability, or whatever, but he was a master mechanic and machinist.

TINKER: Oh.

BENZIGER: And I forgot to bring pictures. He had a little machine shop up on Gay Street, and I know about the year because he had a picture of Woodrow Wilson, president, on the wall. I could see that. But Grandpa Fischer made all the prototypes of [inventor and meteorologist] Weston Fulton's inventions. And he would make Weston—there was an interview, one of the [*Knoxville Journal*] reporters who wrote stuff up, oh gosh, this interesting stuff. Anyhow, he had six columns in six papers, the old *Knoxville Journal* about Fulton and there's a lot in there about my grandfather, who made these models and prototypes.

TINKER: Really? You have copies of those?

BENZIGER: I've got most of them. (Laughs) They're around somewhere. Some of my relatives—I still have, let me see, I've got three cousins: Sam Bell, Sandy's father. Sam Bell is a first-cousin. Then Al Lewis Fischer out in Oak Ridge, and then I have another cousin, I think she's still alive. She's in Houston. Houston or Dallas, I can't remember which. Most of the family is gone. But anyhow ...

TINKER: So he did pretty well with his business then?

BENZIGER: Well, yes and no. What he did—now, this was back during the days when Knoxville was a marble center. When a new mill was built, he would install machinery and get it running. And, oh gosh, the old—John Craig was a grammar school and high school classmate of mine. We did a lot of hunting and fishing together. [He owned] Candoro Marble Company.

TINKER: What was the name of it? Candoro?

BENZIGER: Candoro Marble Company. It's on the old Maryville Pike. It's closed now. But, anyhow, Grandfather Fischer installed all that machinery. The old Gray Knox Marble Company, and two or three others.

TINKER: Wow.

BENZIGER: They lived well.

TINKER: I was going to say, I mean for that time it sounds like both sides, your mother's side and your father's side, were okay.

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: Your father's side, they were educated, and it seems like they did pretty well.

BENZIGER: Yeah, I'm proud of 'em.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: My mother lived to be 92.

TINKER: Oh, wow. What year was she born?

BENZIGER: Well, let me see. She died in '84. We had just moved back to Knoxville from Boston, and she died in the fall of '84. She was 92 at the time. My dad was 88 and he had died about ten years before, so ...

TINKER: You remember how they met? Did they ever tell you?

BENZIGER: (Shrugs)

TINKER: Don't know? (Laughs)

BENZIGER: No—oh, yeah, I'm sure, Saint John's Church. It's a Lutheran church out on Broadway. Oh, I have ...

TINKER: Oh yeah. It's past, it's near the Old Gray Cemetery, right? Is that the one?

BENZIGER: It's right across the street.

TINKER: Okay, yeah.

BENZIGER: Old Gray, yeah.

TINKER: Nice. It says they got married, on your form you put they were married in 1919?

BENZIGER: Yeah, right after ...

TINKER: So that would have been right after he got back from World War I?

BENZIGER: He was in the army of occupation for a while. And h came back ...

TINKER: So he didn't see the combat?

BENZIGER: Calvin McClung by that time had gone out of business. Calvin McClung was on Gay Street, and it was a wholesale, oh gosh, I don't know what they sold. It was not—they were related somehow to C.M. McClung. They were in dry goods and that sort of thing.

TINKER: Oh, okay. So this cigar store that your grandfather had ...

BENZIGER: Well, he already—he had died and it just went out of business.

TINKER: It just went under? Okay.

BENZIGER: Let me see. Calvin McClung had gone out of business when Dad came back from Germany. And Mr. Bowman was just starting his hat factory. Now, the hat factory was on, you know where the old JFG Coffee building is?

TINKER: Mm hmm.

BENZIGER: Well, before that it was a hat factory, up until 1930. And Mr. Bowman built a new factory on Homberg Drive. It's still there, but its offices now. Well, Mr. Bowman was a member of Saint John's Church. Mother and Mrs. Bowman were real good friends. So Dad went to work for Mr. Bowman, for fifty years at least.

TINKER: Wow. Did your father ever tell you any stories about the occupation [after World War I]?

BENZIGER: He stayed with a German family. He had enough German to get along with them, due to his family. And he stayed for quite a while and enjoyed it. But he talked about how bad-off the Germans were after the Treaty of Versailles, which is a real problem, or was.

TINKER: It caused a problem.

BENZIGER: [It] brought Adolf [Hitler] into business. (Laughs)

TINKER: Yeah. So he remembered that, how bad-off they were.

BENZIGER: Oh yeah. But he didn't talk much about the war. Not to me anyhow. I'll tell you what he did. He went to join the American Legion, and he got down there, and found out that 90 percent of them had never been overseas. So he joined the V.F.W. [Veterans of Foreign Wars]. (Laughter) He would have nothing to do with the American Legion. I don't know why.

TINKER: Maybe he felt like he just didn't have as much in common with them.

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: So then you were born. Now, were you the oldest child?

BENZIGER: Yes. My sister—I was born in 1920, and my sister was born in 1930, just after we'd moved into the new house.

TINKER: Oh, okay. I noticed that your mother worked as well. It says she worked at the American Limestone.

BENZIGER: American Limestone Company with the McCroskeys, Yeah.

TINKER: And was that when—was she working when you were a child?

BENZIGER: Yes. Coker Avenue—as soon as I could walk, Mother went back to work. They were saving for this new dream house.

TINKER: Okay. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: So, anyhow, she stayed, she retired somewhere in '50 or something like that. She'd been there a long time, and, oh gosh, she really enjoyed retirement. She lived long enough to really get something out ...

TINKER: So she was mainly working just so they could save up for the house.

BENZIGER: Mother, oh my gosh, I'd say she was tireless. I used to go with her to the East Tennessee Valley Fair, after—usually on the last day. She entered stuff, cakes, canned goods, all that sort of stuff, and I had a drawer full of blue ribbons. (Laughter) Sewing, embroidery, she got into ...

TINKER: She did all of that?

BENZIGER: She did all of that, and while working. She was at the church every time the door opened. She was in—she taught a Sunday school class for ladies at the church, must have been for thirty years.

TINKER: Wow.

BENZIGER: The Von Bora class. That was the name of Martin Luther's wife. Anyhow, they named it after Martin. But, she worked, and this was back when [the work week was] five and a half days.

TINKER: Oh, yeah, the ...

BENZIGER: Half a day on Saturday. Of course that finally ended—we had an automobile, but Dad would never drive.

TINKER: Really?

BENZIGER: I had another uncle who would never drive, and all the rest of 'em drove. One of 'em was, my uncle Bill Fischer drove a fire engine for the fire department, and he was known as "Wild Bill." (Laughter) He also had a still in the basement of the Commerce Avenue Fire Hall.

TINKER: He did? What year was this? (Laughs)

BENZIGER: Let me see. This was in the '20s.

TINKER: Did he ever get caught?

BENZIGER: No. (Laughter) He hurt his back in his fireman's duty and got retired and on a pension. That was Uncle Bill Fischer. Gosh, I was gone when all that family passed away. We were gone for almost thirty years.

TINKER: Well, how come your dad wouldn't drive the car? So does that mean your mom did all the driving?

BENZIGER: We were at church one Sunday, and we came back on Cumberland Avenue, and Mother stopped at the overpass where Kingston Pike starts. I remember, I was in the back seat, and so was my baby sister. Mother got out, and she says, "Clifford, you're going to drive this car home."

TINKER: She started him driving. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: He got in, we drove home; he parked it in the garage under the house, and he says, "Nell, you can have it." (Laughs) I remember that, boy.

TINKER: Really?

BENZIGER: He would never drive.

TINKER: But you never figured out why he didn't want to drive?

BENZIGER: No.

TINKER: Okay, now even later in life, he still wouldn't drive?

BENZIGER: He never drove.

TINKER: Isn't that something?

BENZIGER: Oh, he used to, he used to take it ...

TINKER: So did he just, like when he would go somewhere on his own, would he walk or would your wife drive him?

BENZIGER: Okay, where we lived, Homberg Drive, where the hat factory was ...

TINKER: Right.

BENZIGER: I guess it was a little over a mile. He would walk down the railroad tracks back and forth every day. He knew every train. I remember him pulling that big watch out, "Well, Memphis Special is ten minutes late today," or something.

TINKER: (Laughs) Because he knew exactly when they would be going by?

BENZIGER: Oh, he knew every, he knew every engineer on the train. They'd all whistle when they'd go back by the hat factory, and Daddy knew it was for him. Well, anyhow ...

TINKER: So what was school like for you? I'm assuming you walked to school?

BENZIGER: Yeah, four miles barefoot in the snow. (Laughter) Joyce and I were out there about four or five years ago ...

TINKER: Now, are you pulling my leg, or is that for real?

BENZIGER: It was Bellmarsh School on Washington Pike, and so I checked it on the odometer, and it was just about a little over a half a mile. (Laughter)

TINKER: Oh, but when you're a kid it probably seemed like four miles.

BENZIGER: Oh yeah. But I went to kindergarten walking. No one with me. I would—I went through the third—I remember kindergarten.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: There was a Ms. Rose Robbins. Boy, all the kids loved her. But then I got in the first grade, second grade, third grade, and Mrs., what was her name? Mrs. Baker was the principle. Oh, she was—the kids were scared to death of her. (Laughter) Anyhow, after we moved, I went to Sequoyah for fourth grade and fifth grade.

TINKER: When you moved out to the—near the Homberg place? Okay.

BENZIGER: Yeah. Well, actually, we were right across from Scenic Drive, where Scenic Drive turns off Kingston Pike. Down on the west side, it's a street that's a half a block off and one parallel to Kingston Pike. And ours and maybe two or three others were the only houses in this development back then. We, oh gosh, all those woods. I had a good friend, and man, we had a terrific time back in those days.

TINKER: I was going to say, it sounds great. It sounds great.

BENZIGER: Nobody worried about kids playing, going out. I was tellin' some fella, one of my friends at the Sertoma Club, about when I was about eleven or twelve years old I'd get on my bicycle and put my .410 shotgun across the handlebars, and go down Kingston Pike towards Bearden. I had places where I could go hunt. Pass a cop, they'd wave, and I'd wave. (Laughter) Oh gosh, things were different. Well, when we lived on Coker Avenue, I used to get my quarter or half a dollar allowance every week, [and on] Saturday mornings, I'd go down and catch the number three street car, come into town, and get off in front of the Strand Theatre, where I could watch Hoot Gibson or Tom Mix or some of the others.

TINKER: So you liked the movies, huh?

BENZIGER: It was a six cent fare, and I would have enough—ten cents for the movie, and ten or fifteen cents for candy or whatever. (Laughter) You know, nobody ever worried about the kids. There were hundreds of us, seven, eight, nine years old.

TINKER: Just runnin' all over the city?

BENZIGER: Yep. Them were the days, in some ways. (Laughs)

TINKER: What was your—was your mom a good—well, you said she entered all those contests.

BENZIGER: Oh, yeah

TINKER: But did she fix meals every night, and every morning?

BENZIGER: She was a fair cook, but she was really a good pastry and cake cook. That was her forte.

TINKER: What was your favorite thing to eat?

BENZIGER: You know, I can't remember what we, oh gosh. I can remember Saturday nights we had brains and eggs.

TINKER: Please don't tell me that. Brains?

BENZIGER: Oh, it was delicious.

TINKER: But which critter? Squirrels or what? (Laughter)

BENZIGER: Huh?

TINKER: The brains of what?

BENZIGER: Oh I don't know, you'd get them at the butcher shop, up at the market house.

TINKER: They sold the brains?

ADKINS: Yeah my father used to talk about that, yeah.

TINKER: So where would she buy, like where did she buy her meat? Where was the butcher shop? On Gay Street?

BENZIGER: No, there was a fella' at the old market house. You know where it was?

TINKER: Uh uh.

BENZIGER: Krutch Park. You know where the skating rink is? Well the market house used to be there. What was the guy's name? He was Jewish. But Mother would call him when she'd get to the office in the morning; she'd call him up and ask him what he had good. And he'd tell her, so he'd send it to her.

TINKER: Oh, nice.

BENZIGER: The other store was Lem Anderson's [Lem Anderson, Co.] which was at the corner of Union and Market, right across from Miller's. And Mother knew the clerks down there and she would call one special, and she'd say, "What have you got good today?" And she'd order and they would deliver. The groceries came twice a day. Milk once, delivery, groceries. laundry man would pick up the laundry. But I remember Lem Anderson. I got to know the driver real well. (Laughs)

TINKER: Well when you were growing up were you aware that your family was okay off? As compared to...

BENZIGER: Well, everybody ...

TINKER: I mean, were there people in your class that you knew were really poor?

BENZIGER: Not at Sequoyah School.

TINKER: So you all were about the same level?

BENZIGER: Yeah. Everybody was strapped really. Mother and Dad had sold their house on Coker Avenue, put their money in the bank, and they got it out right before the old East Tennessee Bank failed to make the payment on the new house. They were lucky. And so they refinanced it later through, I think the FAA [possibly FHA Federal Housing Administrations] or something, some federal thing after Roosevelt got in. But, anyhow. No we didn't, everybody was in the same boat, so nobody really thought about it.

TINKER: Did you play sports in school? Or join any clubs?

BENZIGER: Oh, just unorganized sports. Sequoyah School had an unofficial football team, and we used to play the Westmoreland kids. Bobby Webb, George Webb. Bobby is the one that started Webb School here. He couldn't play, he was a coach. He'd had infantile paralysis.

TINKER: Oh, polio.

BENZIGER: And one leg was shorter than the other, and he still limped up to the day he died. But anyhow, George, his younger brother, was a good friend of mine. It was kind of funny. We came back to Knoxville in '84, and my daughter was teaching at Webb School—matter of fact she still is, one of my daughters. Joyce was helping the librarian out for some reason or other; she had a degree in library science. So, she met Bob—George Webb one day. He was the chaplain at the school, and he invited me to the downtown Sertoma Club. So I went, and after a couple of times I joined up, mainly because here were all these people I'd played with in the fourth grade, and on up, all this time. Oh gosh, and they're all passed away now. I'm the only one left.

TINKER: Oh you are? Well.

BENZIGER: My last good buddy, Joe Brownlee, Brownlee Construction, he died four or five years ago. I'm the oldest member of the club now. (Laughs)

TINKER: You are? Well we're glad you're still here so we can do this interview, and you can tell us about them. So you went to Knoxville High School in '35?

BENZIGER: Well, before that, Sequoyah School was getting overcrowded. They sent the sixth grade to the old Van Gilder, which was right over here. It's an apartment now. (Laughter) But you know what, the little old neighborhood mom and pop store is still across the street, and we used to sneak over there and buy candy. Then seventh grade was Boyd Junior High, behind the old city hall.

TINKER: And it was called what?

BENZIGER: Boyd Junior High School, and there I ran into things like Latin and Algebra.
(Laughs)

TINKER: And how was that for you? Not good? (Laughter)

BENZIGER: My Latin turned out to be very useful later. But anyhow, the rest of it—I never was much of a mathematician. Anyhow, seventh, eighth grade at Boyd Junior, and then Knoxville High in '38—'35.

TINKER: Yeah, did you ever have a part time job or anything as a boy where you had to earn extra money?

BENZIGER: Yeah, I had part time jobs; one was working as a grease monkey at a filling station at the corner of where Kingston Pike and Lyons View split off. It's now a real estate office, I think. I don't know, Ollie Hale was the guy that ran it. But I helped change oil and stuff like that.

TINKER: How old were you when you were doing that?

BENZIGER: I don't know, thirteen or fourteen.

TINKER: You enjoyed it?

BENZIGER: Oh I loved it, especially paydays. (Laughter) But that was—oh, back then, kids used to deliver magazines, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Time*, whatever. You had routes and subscribers, and you took—gosh they were heavy, I used to get on my bicycle and go all over Sequoyah Hills, and around. People buying magazines, before they mailed them, and collect the money. Then once a week a fella' would show up to collect money from me for the magazines that I had sold and then give me a new batch to take.

TINKER: How much of the money did you get to keep for yourself?

BENZIGER: Not much.

TINKER: But it was enough to go to the movies on?

BENZIGER: Oh yeah, yeah. Booth Theater.

TINKER: And in high school, did you join any sports teams at Knoxville High?

BENZIGER: No, I was a scrawny kid then. (Laughter) I had some good friends [that played sports]. As a matter of fact ...

TINKER: How many people were at the high school then?

BENZIGER: I don't know but there were seven hundred in my graduating class.

TINKER: Seven hundred in your graduating class? Why am I surprised by that? That's a lot.

BENZIGER: Actually they had two graduating classes. The class of '38 had class A and class B. Class A would graduate in December. Class B would graduate in June. But there were seven

hundred in the class '38. And we're still, as a matter of fact, tomorrow we're having a meeting planning our seventy-fourth reunion. (Laughter)

TINKER: I love it. That's great.

BENZIGER: But I'm not going to be there. I'm going to be in the hospital. I've got a little problem.

TINKER: Yeah, I think you mentioned that. So you enjoyed high school, though?

BENZIGER: Yeah, ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps] and ...

TINKER: So you did join ROTC in high school?

BENZIGER: You had to, you didn't have any excuse. Every male student was there unless he was—had to work, had some other excuse, health.

TINKER: Did you enjoy it?

BENZIGER: Oh yes and no. I was a private in the rear ranks for two years. You had to do it for two years. And I finally embarrassed everybody. We had—each year, there was at the end of school, they had a contest. There were four companies: A, B, C, and D and to see who was the best drilled, which one was the best drilled. Plus they had a band which was also part of the ROTC. We were out at Caswell Park on the ballfield, and passing in review and everything, doing all that. Each company would get out and take turns doing drills and stuff. I was in A company, and we were first. We got through our drills okay, and we were pulled off to the side and told to stand at ease. It was a hot day. I was sleepy, and I was standing there with that big heavy gun, sweaty, it slipped out of my hands. (Laughter) Bang. You could hear it all over the field. Well, I picked it up, but I noticed the inspecting officer—they had some colonel from UT, I think. And he had noticed it and we got a black mark. Company D won that year, and I still have friends from Company D who congratulate me for helping them win. (Laughter)

TINKER: They still tease you to this day about that?

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: That's funny. That's a good one.

BENZIGER: But the only nice thing about two years at Knoxville High, when you started at UT if you had had ROTC before you only had to take it one year. Back then every male student at UT was in ROTC. And I only took it for one year. But then after the war when I came back to school, I decided to get in because you got paid thirty dollars a month back then for taking ROTC. It was an elective. And I had—so I joined up, and that's where I got my commission, but never had to—fortunately I never had to go back in.

TINKER: When did you learn to drive?

BENZIGER: Do what?

TINKER: I was wondering when you learned to drive and was it your mother that had to teach you, since your dad didn't like to drive.

BENZIGER: Mother took me out, I was fourteen. The state did not have a driver's license then. But you had to have a city of Knoxville driver's license. You had to be sixteen. Well, there was a place—it was on Broadway, its right where the interstate passes over now. You know where the Salvation Army is?

TINKER: Yes.

BENZIGER: Okay. There was a place where you took your cars to be inspected. It cost a dollar. They would look at the lights to see if they worked, the brakes, and the horn, and that's all the inspection was. Then you slipped the guy another dollar and he handed you a city of Knoxville driver's license. I was fifteen. Oh boy. (Laughter)

ADKINS: Sometimes you wish things were that easy now?

TINKER: So did your mom, I guess, did your mom use you to fill in as a driver for her?

BENZIGER: Oh, yeah. After that I drove everywhere. When I was sixteen, we drove from Knoxville to Connecticut. First time I had ever been that far away from home. Well I'd been to Chicago but on a train. But I drove Mother and a good friend of hers to Washington. This was back before roads almost.

TINKER: So what were these trips for?

BENZIGER: Mother's vacations. We had friends in Connecticut that—when Mr. Bowman first started his new hat factory, he got some people from Connecticut who had worked for Stetson to come down and help set up the factory. The Petersons, Ralph and, I can't remember the other guy's name. Anyhow, they went back to Connecticut—New Milford, and Danbury. Well anyhow, we drove to Washington, and this friend that was with us was the secretary, private secretary, for a senator from Missouri I think. He had a suite that he wasn't using in The Mayflower [Hotel] in Washington. So we spent the night at The Mayflower. (Laughs) We didn't stay, and the next day we drove to New York. Oh gosh, I got through the Holland Tunnel, and there was a cop, and I asked him for a certain street [and he responded,] "Get out of here." Boy, you know, "Keep going." Well traffic was behind me. I remember going up Jerome Street. Now Jerome Street had an elevated train over it. About every third street, not every street, but every third intersection was a traffic light. But if you were way down here and there were two more intersections you saw that turn red you were supposed to stop here. I didn't know that. I was zipping right on through. Finally got on the Old Post Road, and got to Danbury and New Milford. But I'll never forget my first trip.

TINKER: What kind of car?

BENZIGER: It was a 1933 Dodge, still had wooden wheels, wooden spoke wheels. I was an expert on changing tires and fixing flats. Anyhow, that was ...

TINKER: So your dad didn't go on these vacations with your mom? He just didn't like to take a vacation?

BENZIGER: No, not really.

TINKER: He didn't like to go in the car probably.

BENZIGER: He never traveled until after he retired. He came to see us in California and in New York.

TINKER: So what did you—I notice there's a little, you went to UT from '38 to '40, but then it says you didn't enlist until '42. Is that right?

BENZIGER: Um, well, yeah ...

TINKER: I was wondering about the two years in between.

BENZIGER: Right after Pearl Harbor, there were about twenty of us. We went up and took an exam, in January ...

TINKER: Were you still at UT in '41 though?

BENZIGER: No, I was working at Fort Loudon Dam as a drill corps inspector for TVA. [Tennessee Valley Authority]

TINKER: Oh. So how come you had left UT in '40?

BENZIGER: Money.

TINKER: Oh, you ran out of money?

BENZIGER: Before that I had worked at an aluminum company in a machine shop, which I loved. But anyhow, then they, all of a sudden, they told me I had to join a union and I said no. I had been trying to get a job with the TVA anyhow, and finally they gave me a job. I worked at Fort Loudon Dam during construction.

TINKER: As an inspector?

BENZIGER: Yeah. But when I joined there ...

TINKER: So you were working there when Pearl Harbor happened?

BENZIGER: Yes.

TINKER: Do you remember where you were? Or how you heard?

BENZIGER: I can tell you exactly. You know where the Worsham's mansion is down on Kingston Pike? Big stone house sits right across from Oakhurst Drive?

TINKER: Mm hmm.

BENZIGER: Okay, John Worsham was a friend of mine, and he was a year ahead of me in school. Stewart Marr, who eventually became a state geologist, and I were there in the Worsham's library listening to the radio. So I know exactly where I was. Anyhow, I didn't want to get drafted in the infantry or whatever, so I went up and volunteered for the Air Corps. Well you had to take a test, and you didn't learn anything for about a month, and it was, I think it was in February, somethin', that we were called up and actually signed in. Sworn in. So they said, "Go home and wait, and you'll be paid thirty dollars a month for rations and quarters." So when

you get that money, you cannot take another government check. So I had to quit my TVA job. Well, I never got paid. So Dad was talking to Dr.[Cloide Everett] Brehm [president of the University of Tennessee from 1946-1959] . This was before Dr. Brehm was president; he was head of the Ag [Agricultural] School at that time. So Dr. Brehm gave me a job in the mail room where you mailed out all these things to the county agents, and that sort of thing. I stayed there all summer until it was in September I think that I had to report to Nashville. That's when I got started in the cadet classification center. (Laughs) That was ...

TINKER: How did that testing go? Isn't that where they—or is it later where they test and then you've got ... where they said you'd be good as a gunner, or you know ...

BENZIGER: Oh, no.

TINKER: Is that later?

BENZIGER: No they, see they tested us at the classification center in Nashville. They separated—these were all aviation cadets. We were paid seventy-five dollars a month, which was twenty-five more than a private in the regular army. Anyhow, we were classified as pilot, navigator, or bombardier trainees. Well, fortunately I was in pilot. But then we went to, for six weeks, to Maxwell Field, in Montgomery [Alabama]. Which was a school, and you had to sit, as an underclassman, you sat at a table and ate what they called a square meal. You had to look straight ahead.

TINKER: Okay. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: Or you were a bombardier. You were at the end of the table with pitchers of milk or tea or whatever. You had to do the serving. Well it wasn't too bad. And then at the end of that six weeks, I went to Avon Park, Florida for primary training. After eight hours, most of us flew eight hours and then soloed. I'll never forget that solo flight. Boy, I wanted to keep going forever.

TINKER: You enjoyed it?

BENZIGER: We were supposed to take—my instructor took me out to this auxiliary field. Dirt runway or grass I can't remember. But anyhow, he got out and said, "It's all yours. Take her around, land, take off three times." So, the third time I didn't think was my good landing, (Laughs) a good landing and I went around the fourth time, and I thought, "Oh boy, I'm in for it now." (Laughter) And all he said was, "Those are pretty good landings, I thought I was going to have to shoot you down." So I got in my sixty hours, about thirty hours solo.

ADKINS: Is that where that picture you showed me earlier was taken?

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: Oh, at Avon Park? This one? We need to scan this.

ADKINS: Yeah, that's what I was going to mention.

TINKER: We'll scan this before you leave today. Before we get too far down the road in this conversation, I was going to ask you, before Pearl Harbor ... how closely did you follow the

news, or were you following politics? Because you know, some people could sort of see trouble was on the horizon. Do you remember being aware of the possibility?

BENZIGER: The late-'30's and the early '40's were the golden age as far as I was concerned. We were having fun doing what we wanted to. Never really worried about the Brits. (Laughs)

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: No kidding, I mean we were more or less oblivious to what was going—well we knew what was going on. But we didn't realize how serious it was.

TINKER: And were your parents ...

BENZIGER: No, not really.

TINKER: Did they read the newspaper every day?

BENZIGER: Oh, yeah.

TINKER: Did they?

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: But you don't recall them talking a lot about it?

BENZIGER: No, no I don't.

ADKINS: I have a question in the same area. When you mentioned you knew exactly where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor; I was wondering about your reaction when you heard about it.

BENZIGER: Well, we—I don't know whether we was kind of stunned. John, Stewart, and I, all three, we ended up in the service. But, everybody was kind of excited and wanted to get revenge I guess. I don't, you know, I really don't ...

TINKER: Did you think, "What's Pearl Harbor?"

BENZIGER: Yeah. I didn't know. I had no idea. Well I knew it was in Hawaii, in the islands, but I had no idea where it was, or really what it was. We didn't—that was a different world.

TINKER: Okay. Well we'll jump back ahead. When you finished your sixty hours pilot training in Florida, where did you go from there?

BENZIGER: Bush Field, Augusta, Georgia. You got in a plane that was twice as powerful, twice as heavy. It was a single-wing instead of a biplane, and a closed cockpit instead of open. And an instructor, in primary, in the steersman, the instructor sat in front, the student pilot in the back, in the rear seat. And the Vultee "Vibrators," we called them. It was the BT-13, Basic Trainer-13. The student pilot sat in front, and the instructor in the back. The instructor was from Knoxville, of all things, and I had dated his sister. (Laughter) I don't know why, but he took an instant dislike to me. Well ...

TINKER: Well, that's not right.

BENZIGER: I flew about four hours with him and all he could say, "Straighten up." He wouldn't tell me how to fly.

TINKER: He knew you were from Knoxville and knew his sister ...

ADKINS: It could be the dating the sister part that could have done it. (Laughter)

BENZIGER: I think it was. I think it was. They lived out in Island Home. He died about three years ago. He was chief safety man for United Airlines at that time. He'd been a pilot for them for years.

TINKER: So he was pretty rough on you?

BENZIGER: He was rough on me, and we had words when we landed after my last flight; that was about four hours. And the next thing I knew, I was on my way to Keesler Field at Biloxi [Mississippi], going to gunnery school.

TINKER: So you didn't choose that.

BENZIGER: No. I went ... This was in, let me see. This was in the spring. We got to Biloxi, oh, it was hot, and we were put out in a place called the swamp. And they had eight man squad tents with twelve people in them. And I was there for about a week just waiting to get shipped off to gunnery school or something, and they had a meningitis outbreak. So anybody that wasn't quarantined they got out right away, and I went from there to Harlingen, Texas to gunnery school. Oh boy.

TINKER: And what part of Texas was this in?

BENZIGER: Right on the Mexican border. Where the King—it was part of the King Ranch actually, which is that million acre ranch down there, and ...

TINKER: At least it was a dry heat this time.

BENZIGER: Yeah mostly. (Laughter) I'll tell you about air conditioning. We were living in two-story barracks, wooden barracks. They were nice barracks. They had a pipe running along the crest of the roof, with holes in it. They'd pump water up through those holes and it was kind of like rain all the time on the roof, and that was supposed to cool us off, and apparently it did a little bit.

TINKER: Did it?

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: So this was in the summer that you were down there in Texas? Summer of '42?

BENZIGER: Yeah.

ADKINS: The barracks sound like a big improvement over the tents.

BENZIGER: Great improvement. (Laughter) And next, after six weeks of gunnery school ...

TINKER: Well what was your training like for gunnery [school] during that time in Texas? I mean, what was your average day like?

BENZIGER: Well we were up at "Reveille," fed, [and] went to school to learn all about the weapons.

TINKER: Did you all do PT [physical training] every day?

BENZIGER: Oh yes. Well it was mostly school. I don't remember a lot of PT—there was some. No drilling or anything, you just went to school. And learned all about weapons—you'd have to be able to take 'em apart and put 'em together blindfolded and things like that. And the last week of school we went out on a range which was on Laguna Madre, which is that big island that runs from the mouth of the Rio Grande [River] all the way around to Houston. It was right on the border. And we would learn to fly at moving targets and things like that. Oh, shoot at moving targets. Then we had a day where we actually flew in an airplane and shot at another plane, which was—had a target towing behind.

ADKINS: I'd heard about that practice.

BENZIGER: Well they had—I never learned what my score is. But when you loaded your gun, you had bullets that had paint on them, and the paint was supposed to come off in the target. And I never learned whether I painted up a target or not. But we had a lot of fun killing rattlesnakes mostly. Gosh I never saw so many. Little sidewinders about that long all over the place.

TINKER: Would they come at you?

BENZIGER: No. One Sunday out at this Laguna Madre, there was a ditch that had a little dam over it. But at high tide water would come up and fill up the ditch. Full of fish. One Sunday we stole the net off of the officer's volleyball court, and some of the guys got in the water, walking the net, and the rest of us were beatin' the banks. And I remember I never saw so many little ole'—every cactus bush had a sidewinder under it. But we had fish you wouldn't believe. We took it back to the mess hall. They fixed a big fish fry. That's one thing I remember about Laguna Madre. But as I say, it was hot. We were in summer uniforms, khakis.

TINKER: What did you think overall about being assigned as a gunner as opposed to being a pilot? Did you ask ...?

BENZIGER: I didn't much care. I mean I was flyin'.

TINKER: Yeah. So you just figured that as long as you weren't in the infantry you were okay?

BENZIGER: Yeah. But after Harlingen, we were sent to Denver to the armament school where we had to learn about bomb fusing, defusing, other weapons. And that was also six weeks. Well we arrive in our summer uniforms, in a howling blizzard, in Denver. And it was about a ten mile trip out to Buckley Field in the back of an open truck. You talk about a bunch of frozen guys. (Laughter) We were put in tarpaper barracks. Now these were one story, narrow, a row of bunks on each side. They must have been about sixty feet long, and there was a potbellied stove at each end. Well since we didn't have—our winter stuff didn't show up for another two days we just

stayed in the barracks and tried to keep warm, and then we got our stuff and went to school. And after six weeks of that, there were three of us. Robert Fulton Boutilier and Frank E. Carlson, and both of those were regular army, but who had gotten into the Air Corps. We were good buddies, and we heard about a new school where if you went through, you would become either flight officer or second lieutenant when you graduated. It was a twelve week school. You had to have a 120 AGCT which was Army General Classification Test. Which was the same as for Officers' Candidate School. But anyhow, the three of us had it, and we applied and got in the school. The school was for fire control officer for B-29s, which was the big new plane at the time. Well, they told us we were gonna' graduate as either flight officers or second lieutenants. We stayed two weeks, we saw two classes graduate from private to PFC [Private First Class]. We were already sergeants at the time, having graduated from the two schools. So we went in to tell our squadron commander that we wanted to get out of that school and be sent to a combat outfit. Well he was a captain who had been in the Philippines, he was a pilot. Been shot up, and he had escaped to Australia with MacArthur.

TINKER: Mm hmm.

BENZIGER: And he says, "You mean you want to get out of this cushy school?" We said, "Yes." He reached back pulled open a drawer and put a big bottle of scotch on the table. Poured us each a drink, he says, "Congratulations." (Laughs) He gave us each a three day pass to go into Denver, asked if we needed any money, says, "I'll have your orders ready when you get back." So we came back after three days, here were our orders. He put us in his private car and drove us down to the train station. He says, "I'm doing this because the colonel in charge of that school is after you boys. He wants to put you on KP [kitchen patrol]." So anyhow, we got on the train and went to Salt Lake City, which was a big center for—all the school graduates came in, and there were assigned to combat outfits. Officers and men. I remember going, right before we got into Salt Lake City, we stopped, the train stopped in this little town in a very narrow valley, a little street on one side, and the railroad tracks and a stream on the other. And they were throwing newspapers at us; it was the day that Italy had surrendered, which didn't mean much (Laughs) because the Germans were still there.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: But anyhow, we got into Salt Lake City, they lined us up, and one of the first things I remember was there was a major. He came down the line, he was looking at people, and he'd see somebody that looked right to him and he'd pull them out of the line [and say], "Did you ever play football?" Well some of them had, and some of them had been to college, and some were high school. But he'd pull 'em out of line, and they stayed in the States and played football for their army teams. A fella that married my cousin, he played for [UT football coach Robert] Neyland. He was a blocking back, coached one of the teams, and that's all. He played for them for a while. He got injured and couldn't play anymore, but he coached the team all during the war. And after he got out he got a pension for his football injury. My dad was furious. He says, "He shouldn't have gotten a pension." Well anyhow. He's passed away now, doesn't make any difference. But anyhow, they pulled those guys out. We stayed there in Salt Lake City for about three days, we didn't get a chance to go into town. We were up on the side of the hill on the east side, and you could see the Mormon Tabernacle from where we were. But they put us on a train. Well they assigned us. My two friends got assigned to B-17 outfits, and I got assigned to a B-24 outfit which was just forming at Tucson, Davis-Monthan Field [Arizona]. I got on the

train, we spent about three days. I remember we stopped Sunday morning in Los Angeles, I'd never been there before. We had the day off, and had to get back on the train that night sometime, but I toured part of Los Angeles. One of the things I remember vividly: there was a bar that went from one street all the way to the next—the whole block, and there were three or four bartenders, this was all beer. You'd order a beer and the guy would pour it out, put it in a glass, whatever, and then he'd just heave it and it would stop right in front of you. (Laughs) They were ...

TINKER: Like in the movies. Just kind of shove it down towards you?

BENZIGER: Yeah. (Laughs) They were great. So we kept ordering more beers to see if they'd miss. (Laughter) Anyhow we got back on the train, we ended up in Tucson. There we were formed into crews; I guess I was the luckiest person in the world. The crew that I was with—of course I only met 'em when I got there. The pilot was a great big guy, fortunately. It took brawn to handle one of those B-24's. Quentin D. Poe, gosh he was a nice fella, and Burt Stodden was our copilot, he got killed. Now that picture was taken, our bombardier was already missing. Between Florida and Trinidad the plane went down, nobody knew whatever happened to him.

TINKER: Oh really?

BENZIGER: And he was flying with another crew for some reason or other.

TINKER: Probably filling in for somebody.

BENZIGER: So he was out of it before we ever got to South America. And our engineer had problems with combat flying, and they took him out and sent him someplace else, I never knew. But, actually there were six of us left. The engineer, one of the waist gunners, the radio operator, the nose gunner and myself, and the pilot, and our bombardier were the only ones finished. But out of—there were seven ...

TINKER: So you all, when you get to Arizona you get assigned the crew, then you all go through the rest of the training together as a crew?

BENZIGER: We went through training, did some—first time I'd been in a plane since I left the cadets, and we, they had training planes ... I don't think we made but three or four flights, these were old beat-up aircraft.

TINKER: So you didn't actually train in the B-24's?

BENZIGER: Yeah, they were B-24's.

TINKER: But they were older models?

BENZIGER: They'd just put the whole crew in there just for the ride. It was mostly for the pilot, the co-pilot and the engineer.

ADKINS: You mentioned in your journal here that they were just old planes that had been sitting in the hot sun?

BENZIGER: Oh and people had been sick in them and everything. I never—Nobody on my crew ever got airsick. I'd talk to other crews and they'd say, "Oh yeah, so and so gets airsick all the time." But, I don't know what was wrong with us. We didn't get airsick a bit.

TINKER: What was it like flying? I mean you're mentioning sick; I'm just thinking about, when you're in the air, was there a lot of exhaust that ...

BENZIGER: No.

TINKER: Was there a lot of exhaust I guess coming into the plane? Because sometimes that can make you sick.

BENZIGER: No, I don't remember any of that at all.

TINKER: Okay. Well that's good.

BENZIGER: An engine would smoke once in a while, but we never had anything serious. We got an engine shot out once, but we flew home on three. But no, I never noticed it. I'll tell you about the open waist windows, when we were in combat they had to be open for the waist gunners. Well, of course I was sitting in the tail turret. The tail turret had a curved door that you could pull a cord that you could slide it to or open it. I didn't trust it; I kept it open all the time. We were in the Alps one day, and the pilot called back and said, "I want you to know the ambient temperature here is sixty below zero." So I called back from the tail turret, and I said "What's the wind chill factor?" Because those two windows open come right through that ... (Laughs) they didn't give me a wind chill.

TINKER: I guess not.

BENZIGER: But it was cold, and that particular day my heated suit shorted out. It was electrical. We had some—GE or somebody, made electrically heated flying suits. You could attach heated gloves and heated booties. They were like a bunny suit. They were electric blankets they made into suits. That's all they were. But runnin' on twelve volt instead of 110, or whatever, 120. They were liable to burn out easy. Anyhow mine shorted out, and that particular day I got my feet and hands frostbitten. But I had parachutes all over me. I had a chest chute, I mean I had a backpack, seat pack, and then right behind me on the floor I had a chest pack.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: I'll tell you why. The first mission I went on, I had a good view of all this. One of the planes had gotten hit by flack or something, and Goering's [Hermann Goering, head of the Luftwaffe] yellow nose fighters, FW-190s, were all over the place. Well they didn't attack us because we were in a tight formation, but this one plane had been hit by flack or something and they lost an engine, and they dropped out, and I could see them flying all over and hitting it. Well I saw a guy jump out of the waist window, and he hadn't gone very far and he pulled his chute and it was on fire. We were out, back out over the ocean. We had bombed just beyond the Anzio beachhead, and we were back over the ocean at that time. He fell 20,000 feet or so, and maybe—I'm sure that he was dead before he hit the water, because lack of oxygen among other things. But I had nightmares about that for a long time, and after I came back to the states, I had a furlough, and I had to report to Atlantic City. Oh, we lived in—they had us billeted in resort

hotels, good food and everything. And we had to go through psychological evaluation, dental, medical, all that. And when we got to the psychological, the guy says, the doctor says, “Do you have any dreams?” I said, “Oh yeah I have this nightmare about this thing, this guy falling with a burning parachute.” Well he thought for a moment, and he says, “I’ve got to send you to the hospital.” I thought where is this hospital? He says “Nashville.” I perked up then. I was gettin’ close to home. Well, I went back and told my two buddies about it, and I said, “You got to dream up a dream.” Well they did. And they got sent, we all three got sent the same time to, what had been the classification center; I was right back where I started.

TINKER: Right.

BENZIGER: The major was a good friend of the father of one of my best friends in Nashville. He gave me passes and everything. Every weekend I was coming back to Knoxville. My welcome here was getting kind of worn I think. Well anyhow, then we went back to Atlantic City, and they had that terrible hurricane, and it just wrecked the boardwalk. The boardwalk was just up and down like a rollercoaster, and the hotel where we were, a big lifeboat was washed right through the front door and ended up in the lobby, and there was sand and stuff. They had to move us out in a hurry. But anyhow, the hotel next door had started tilting, that was the President Hotel, and that’s where the officers were billeted.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: And they got ‘em all out. It happened to be on my birthday, September the sixth, and they’d baked a cake for me and we were down in the basement, nothing but candle light. Cake and beer. Well after a few beers I went up to my room and there were four GI cots in it, and I got to my cot and there was somebody in it. Well it was dark and I yanked him awake, and I said, “You’re in my cot, doc. I got to have it.” And he says, “Well, where I am going to sleep?” Well we had some extra mattresses. Put some mattresses on the floor and he got on one of them. We were still in the dark. He got on one of them, and somebody donated a blanket, and we all went to sleep. I woke up the next morning, I looked over at this mattress, all I could see was this big major’s insignia. (Laughter)

TINKER: They sent them over to your place.

BENZIGER: He was—he says, the next morning he was real nice about it. He says, “I don’t blame you for gettin’ me out.” (Laughter)

TINKER: Well let’s get back to when you all were in Arizona, and you’ve met your crew and everything, how many weeks were you there in Arizona?

BENZIGER: Not too many. I think it must have been about four or five weeks.

TINKER: Okay.

BENZIGER: Before the group, the 459th Bomb Group was forming, and at that time there were four squadrons.

TINKER: At that time did you—they went ahead and assigned you to a squadron too? You were in the 758th.

BENZIGER: Yes, and to a crew.

TINKER: Okay. What did you all do in a typical day there? Were you in class or were you on the flight line?

BENZIGER: We went to class, refresher classes. We did this and that. You know I don't remember much about it. The only thing I remember about Tucson, this is kind of funny. I went in, I had a pass to go into town and I went in, and The Hotel El Conquistador. Been there many years, and it was in a park, a big park, and it had little private residences around it. And I went into the bar to get a beer before eating, and I was standing at the bar. This big master sergeant, oh he was a monster, tapped me on the shoulder, and he says, "Would you move over Sarge?" He says, "This fella wants to go to the bar." Well I looked at him and I said, "Okay." He was a lot bigger than I was. Well it turned out that he was the batman for Pershing, John J. Pershing.

TINKER: The what man? Batman?

BENZIGER: Yeah well, he was assigned take care of General Pershing.

TINKER: Oh, okay.

ADKINS: A personal aid.

BENZIGER: General Pershing lived—Well batman's a Limey [slang for the British] term. Every officer had a batman. Anyhow, he was assigned to take care of Pershing, who was retired of course. And I got to speak to him and tell him my dad thought he was the greatest American or something like that. I said "He was in such and such a unit." [Pershing said] "Oh yes I remember them." And that was the big thing in Tucson.

TINKER: Wow.

BENZIGER: I wrote Dad and told him about it. He told all his friends I was a buddy of Black Jack Pershing. (Laughter) He [Pershing] had about a glass as big as that (motions) of straight bourbon.

TINKER: Oh wow.

BENZIGER: Then walked back to his private residence back on the grounds.

TINKER: Did you feel star-struck in a way?

BENZIGER: Well, yeah.

TINKER: (Laughs) Was he what you expected?

BENZIGER: No. Well yes, he looked about what I remember; he died shortly after that. It wasn't too long.

TINKER: Yeah, wow. That's really something

BENZIGER: He was one of the last of the old frontier Indian fighters.

TINKER: You said you wrote to your dad. Were you writing quite a bit back and forth with your parents, or just keeping them pretty updated?

BENZIGER: Yeah, and I had a girlfriend.

TINKER: Oh, did you? Wrote a lot?

BENZIGER: I was writin' her.

TINKER: Where did you all go from Arizona, from Tucson?

BENZIGER: We went by train, troop train to Massachusetts—Westover Field near Springfield. From summer heat to—this was, I think we were there in November—it was cold. What we did, we were learning formation flying. We hadn't flown in formation. Each squadron would go up and we were doing that. We had one navigation flight to Bermuda and back, which was a nice break. And we flew over, flew down to New York one time. Flew around the Statue of Liberty, and up the Hudson, and we got up near Poughkeepsie, or Newburg rather, and we got chased away from Roosevelt, the estate at Hyde Park by a couple of planes. (Laughing)

TINKER: Oh really?

BENZIGER: Nobody was supposed to fly over there.

TINKER: Interesting.

BENZIGER: We were—we couldn't have been there more than six weeks. It was all cold snowy weather, and we were learning to fly in bad conditions. We had a—I was charge of quarters one night. I just had to stay in the orderly room and take phone calls and messages or whatever, and a captain came in and he had a pass and he says, "Go get me a jeep." Well I had to go down to the headquarters to get his jeep. Well I drove down; he wanted a pass to get out. He was going to see his mother and dad who had come up to see him right before we left. This was—we were just on our way to go overseas. So I went rushin' down to this MP [Military Police] place to get this pass. Back in those days they had, actually it was a big trailer, their office there. There was a grassy yard around it, but to keep guys from walking, they had a little thing that stuck up about this high (places hand about two feet off of the floor), a post, and they ran a cable around. A little fence, keep off the grass. Well I didn't think about it, and I jumped out of the jeep and started across the [grass], to go get this pass for this officer. I tripped on one of those things, and I came down just straight arm with all my weight. Well it didn't hurt at the time. I drove him into town. I came back and middle of the night boy, it started hurting something awful. Next morning it was black and blue, my arm, all the way up. And I went to the dispensary to get some aspirin, and the guy there called in a medic who looked at it, and he says, "Go get your things and report to the hospital." Well we were leaving the next day going to Mitchel Field. I wasn't about to leave the crew. So I got my things, but instead of going to the hospital, I hid in the hanger. (Laughing)

TINKER: You did?

BENZIGER: Until we took off the next morning. And we went to Mitchel Field to get new equipment, new plane, this and that. Mitchel was plum out on the tip of Long Island almost, and

there wasn't much for us to do at all. So they gave us passes from roll call in the morning, 'till roll call the next morning. We all piled on a train going into New York. The whole crew had a great time together. Two of the wives, our nose gunner's wife and (Laughs) she had a PhD in mathematics.

TINKER: Oh wow. (Laughing)

BENZIGER: She'd follow him around everywhere and she'd get a teaching job just like that. And our co-pilot's wife, they had just gotten married. Well, we all partied 'till we went back the last day, and we came back and had our orders. And we flew from Westover to West Palm Beach, Florida. Just stayed one day, and that's where we got our final orders; we didn't know where we were going.

TINKER: The plane you flew from Mitchel Field down to Palm Beach, was that your actual plane that you then ...

BENZIGER: That we used in combat.

TINKER: Okay. And when did you all name it?

BENZIGER: You know I don't know. We had a big conference, the whole crew. Pilot on down to the lowest rank. Everybody threw names in the pot. Most of them were a little bit ...

TINKER: Racy?

BENZIGER: Racy. (Laughing) So Colonel Munn, our group commander, had put out orders: none of that stuff. So it ended up Jap-a-Nazi Jinx. I don't know whether or not, what happened but it was lucky. That plane flew I know at least a hundred missions.

TINKER: Wow.

BENZIGER: One of the last reunion I went to—they had a big photographic gallery, and here was our plane standing up on its nose at the end of the runway. I had found out one of the guys who had flown in her after we left, and he says, "Oh they cannibalized her after that."

TINKER: That's sad isn't it? (Laughs)

BENZIGER: Yeah. Apparently, I didn't know him well, but we had a top notch crew chief who kept everything runnin'. Our pilot was, oh he was one of the best, and of course he didn't ...

TINKER: I was going to ask you about the maintenance crew, because that's what I did in the Air Force.

BENZIGER: Oh did you?

TINKER: So I'm always interested in what the crews, you know, thought of the ground crew, and how they took care of the plane. It sounds as though you had a great ground crew.

BENZIGER: We had a great crew. There was an armorer gunner and ...

TINKER: That thing flew a hundred missions, that's amazing to me.

BENZIGER: Yeah. There was a ...

TINKER: That's how many hours on average? That would be at least ...

BENZIGER: About five, at least five hours. Five hundred hours.

TINKER: Per mission, see that is amazing.

BENZIGER: I know they changed two or three engines on it, at one or more times. But anyhow, it was a lucky plane.

ADKINS: I was in armaments in the Air Force.

BENZIGER: Were you?

ADKINS: Yeah so, same general area of interest.

BENZIGER: There was an armorer guy assigned to the maintenance crew, and after the first mission ... When we got into the air, everybody had to fire their guns to see if they were working, and of course then you had to clean them. Well I was going to clean the guns and this guy on the armaments, he was a PFC I remember, he came back and says, "Sergeant, don't you dare touch those guns, they're mine." (Laughter)

ADKINS: Sounds about right.

BENZIGER: And he kept them in top notch shape. Except that a new crew would come in, fly in with a brand new airplane maybe, and we would find out about these, and we'd meet 'em. Two or three guys in my crew would meet 'em down, and they'd take 'em in a jeep and take off. Well, two or three of us were left behind. The first thing we would do is swap our old gun barrels for their new gun barrels. (Laughter) Oh well.

TINKER: That's funny.

ADKINS: You mentioned that your plane was considered lucky, were there any other superstitions amongst your crew? Lucky ...

BENZIGER: Not really. Not really. I had a white silk scarf that my girlfriend had given me before I went overseas and I wore that. And I've still got it, when I get on an airplane I've still got it with me.

ADKINS: Really?

BENZIGER: No kidding. If that's not superstitious I don't know what is. (Laughter) But then I got a Dear John letter from her.

TINKER: I was gonna say, your wife don't mind you carrying around that scarf?

BENZIGER: No. It was kind of funny because, when we got to Brazil, Fortaleza—well, we flew from Morrison Field to Trinidad.

TINKER: Now, we're at Morrison Fields in Florida?

BENZIGER: West Palm Beach.

TINKER: Okay, so you flew to Trinidad.

BENZIGER: We flew to Trinidad from there.

TINKER: Do you remember what month that was. It couldn't have been ...

BENZIGER: January.

TINKER: Yeah I was going to say it had to be early.

BENZIGER: Yeah it was January, or the first of February, I don't remember exactly. But anyhow, we flew to Trinidad. We spent the night and bought a case of rum, which we were going to save until we finished our missions. Boy, anyhow we took off the next day and flew to Belem, at the mouth of the Amazon. Stinking place that I've ever been in, and I came back in the '70's and landed there and it hadn't changed a bit. (Laughter) Oh gosh.

TINKER: Now was this your, the whole squadron, or the whole group flying over.

BENZIGER: No, we went individual planes.

TINKER: Oh you did?

BENZIGER: And I don't know why but maybe it was to ... the Gulf of Mexico was full of German submarines, and they had a big gun, and if you weren't flying at altitude they had a good chance to hit you, and we think that's what happened to the crew where my bombardier was on. We never knew for sure, no trace was ever found of the plane or the crew. They went down somewhere between West Palm Beach and Trinidad. And well, we flew to Trinidad, spent one night there, bought a case of rum, cheap. They told us it was the best available. (Laughs) We put it in the plane and we flew to Fortaleza—to Belem, at the mouth of the Amazon, spent one night. My friend George Webb was down there as a meteorologist, and I asked him if it ever quit raining and he said, "Nope." (Laughter) And then we flew from there to Fortaleza. Well Fortaleza was on the, where Brazil juts out and the closest to, [in] air miles, to Dakar in West Africa. Well, we stayed there about a week, and there was a little PX [Post Exchange] that was selling boots, and they were Wellington style boots, everybody on the crew bought a pair. They were easier on our feet than G.I. boots, shoes or whatever. Anyhow, I bought I think six pairs of nylon—no, silk hose, at the PX and a couple of boxes of Brazilian cigars. And I was gonna send back—after I got 'em I thought, what am I going to do with these things? (Laughter) Well I took 'em all the way to Italy, and we flew to Dakar, then to Marrakech, and then to Tunis. Nothing exciting happened, but I still had this stuff with me. Right after we got to our new field, which was near the town of Foggia, which was a good sized town. We had a pass to go into town, so we went into the—there was a USO [United Service Organization].

TINKER: Mm hmm.

BENZIGER: You could get a meal and coffee and doughnuts and stuff. Well we went into this USO thing, and there was a—they had tables outside, and three or four of us were sitting outside and we were talking. And there was another table, bunch of guys sitting next to us, and one of them heard me, overheard me say something about Knoxville. So he came over to the table. He

was a tech sergeant, and he said, “What do you know about Knoxville?” and I said, “Well it’s my hometown.” He says, “My girlfriend is in school there.” And he says, “We’re flying back but we’re not going through Brazil and I can’t get any of these silk stockings or anything.” I says, “I’ll give you two pairs if you’ll take the rest of ‘em back and give a couple to my mother and a couple to my girlfriend.” So, he says, “Okay.” Well here’s a guy I never heard of or anything. Got a letter from my girlfriend a couple of weeks later that says, “What a surprise.” He showed up at the door, handed her a couple pair of silk stockings. Things that you couldn’t get then, and what else. Oh and he got the cigars to my dad, well, and the other stockings to my mother. I never heard from him again, but he was lucky—he had just finished his missions and was going home.

TINKER: Already.

BENZIGER: We hadn’t even started.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: I think I’d had one mission at the time.

TINKER: That’s a good story.

BENZIGER: But, I wore those boots. I bought them in ’44. I wore those boots until sixty-something.

TINKER: Built well.

BENZIGER: Built well.

TINKER: Absolutely.

BENZIGER: The soles were put on with wooden pegs. Now they hadn’t done that here in the States in a hundred years. Old time cobblers used wooden pegs. And finally I took ‘em to a shoe shop and the guy wouldn’t even look at them to fix ‘em.

TINKER: So when you all got to Italy, where you flew in, was that your base, base?

BENZIGER: Yes.

TINKER: Okay.

BENZIGER: It had been a Luftwaffe fighter base. It had only been liberated a couple of weeks before we got there. We were still close enough to the front that you could hear the guns, the big guns at night, artillery. And the first thing we had to do—our tents, the tents for the crews had already been pitched. There were four officers to a tent and six enlisted men. We had cots. We had mattress covers which we filled with straw. No sleeping bags or anything like that. We just had blankets, and it was cold. But, our squadron was lucky. The whole area was flat except there was a slight rise where they had an olive grove, olive and almonds. This was a big winery that had been taken over for the headquarters. The Germans had, before we were there. Anyhow, we had good drainage where our tents were. The rest of them were in a mud flat. I mean, every time it’d rain they were knee deep, ankle deep in mud. We had the best of it, our squadron did. But ...

TINKER: Was your crew one of the first ones to get there?

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: Okay. So then you all had to wait for the rest of the squadron to come in.

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: And how many planes were in the squadron?

BENZIGER: We had seventeen crews. I don't think we had seventeen planes.

TINKER: Okay. But you had seventeen crews.

BENZIGER: We supposed to be flying either eight or ten. Each squadron was supposed to put either eight or ten planes for each mission.

TINKER: Okay.

BENZIGER: So there'd be thirty five or forty in the group on the mission.

TINKER: So how long did you all have to wait for the rest of the squadron to arrive?

BENZIGER: It wasn't very long. They came right in. Some of them were ahead of us. But the ground crews had gotten there by boat.

TINKER: And they were already there?

BENZIGER: They were already there. It took us about two weeks to get from Florida to Italy.

TINKER: And you didn't have any trouble with the plane at all during that time?

BENZIGER: Oh yeah we did. We had, um—the first time we left. They had us leaving at night from Fortaleza for Dakar. For some reason, I don't know why at night. Well, they wanted to make sure it was daylight when we landed I guess. So anyhow, we started out one night, and we hadn't gotten very far. We ran into a terrific storm, and one of the engines quit. We weren't about to cross the ocean on three engines so we turned back. It took two days to replace it and then we left again. Actually we ran into a little thunderstorm on the way, and we had bought a pet monkey for the crew in Fortaleza.

TINKER: Poor monkey. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: Yeah. The monkey was—we kept him tied up, leashed, in the rear end of the plane. There were four of us back there, a nice place to sleep. This monkey got lose somehow and the waist windows were open and he went out.

TINKER: Okay. That really bothers me. (Laughs) Sorry, I'm a big animal lover.

BENZIGER: One of the crews took a donkey over.

TINKER: Oh my. I don't know if I want to hear this.

BENZIGER: Had a donkey as a pet.

TINKER: I hope it didn't fall out of the plane. Like your poor monkey.

BENZIGER: No it didn't. But it was confiscated the minute we got to Italy (Laughter) Oh gosh.

TINKER: Poor monkey. Okay. I'll get over it. Let's move on. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: Okay.

TINKER: So when did you all get your first mission assignment? You waited a few days on the other planes to get there and ...

BENZIGER: We had several training flights, to get into formation. There were so many groups all around there, and all of them flying at once, you had to be careful. So we had two or three training missions in group formation, just getting into formation. I don't know, it was February, I don't remember when my first mission was. The group went on a mission, and our crew was not included in that one. But we went on a second one that the group flew. We went to the same place that they had gone, we went to a place called Viterbo Airfield. And that's where the main airfield of Rome is right now. What do they call it? I've landed there several times and never got out of the plane. Never got out of the airport. Leonardo da Vinci Airport. But it was Viterbo Airdrome at the time, and Goering's Yellow Noses, the FW-190. Focke Wulf 190, and the Messerschmitt were stationed there, and we were bombing them. And they were shooting at us.

TINKER: I'll bet they were. Did they try to get the fighters up after you all?

BENZIGER: Do what?

TINKER: Did they try to send the fighters up after you all?

BENZIGER: Oh yeah, they did.

TINKER: They got some up?

BENZIGER: The plane I was telling him about, that got out of formation and fell behind, was chewed up by the Yellow Noses. First time I had ever seen them. We had heard of them and been told about them. But the first time I had ever seen them.

TINKER: So that was your first real air combat.

BENZIGER: War is hell I found out. I'll tell you what. After a few missions, and waiting for planes to come back that didn't, that sort of thing, you just got resigned. I mean, who's gonna make it? Very few made it through fifty. Like out of our squadron, out of seventeen original crews, there were only parts of two that finished fifty. Mine and one other.

TINKER: Wow.

BENZIGER: I've been lucky ever since. You see this? (Refer to article in scans)

TINKER: Midair over the Grand Canyon.

BENZIGER: I had a ticket on that United Airline plane.

TINKER: You did?

BENZIGER: I found that in a magazine just the other day that somebody gave me.

TINKER: Well what happened that you didn't go on the flight?

BENZIGER: We had a consultant coming down from San Francisco to meet us in Los Angeles. We were going to St. Louis. He had a bad hangover and he couldn't make it so we postponed it for one day.

TINKER: Well thank the Lord for his hangover.

BENZIGER: But the next day ...

TINKER: What year was that? '56.

BENZIGER: I was in a Constellation. [Lockheed L-749 Constellation airliner] The next day we took off a beautiful day. I was sitting in the back, the Constellation bar was in the tail, and there was a guy who was a Hollywood something sitting back there. We got up to the Grand Canyon, and the pilot made two big circles. And this guy says, "You know what?" He says, "I've been on this flight fifty times. First time they ever circled to show us the Grand Canyon." What they were looking for were those two planes. They hadn't found them yet. We didn't know it until we got to St. Louis and picked up the newspaper and it was the headline. Boy, I've still got the original ticket, that I didn't make [the flight].

TINKER: That's a story. That's unbelievable. We'll scan that too. Did you have a question about his ...

ADKINS: I've got quite a few actually. But we'll ...

BENZIGER: I'm here all day. Got nothing to do.

ADKINS: We were talking about your first missions and the later ones. I've read, in some cases, that tail gunners had sort of an isolated position way at the back of the plane. With radio silence, did you ...

BENZIGER: I never thought of that. We had intercom of course. But the pilot would tell us, "Get off the intercom." You know, if he wanted something. He didn't like us to be so chatty. Some crews apparently were very chatty, and would sing songs, and tell jokes.

TINKER: But you all weren't very chatty.

BENZIGER: No. I would say our crew was, except for our navigator, bombardier, Wilbur Day, who was only twenty years old. All the rest of us were older than most of the other crews. One guy was—our nose gunner was actually regular Army. He had been in the regular Army in the infantry or something. And he had been in Alaska during the ...

TINKER: How often did you all go on missions?

BENZIGER: Well, the schedule was you flew two days and you were off one. Okay. But it never worked that way, on account of weather, uhm ...

TINKER: Mission requirements.

BENZIGER: Yeah. Anything.

TINKER: So there were times where you would fly multiple days in a row?

BENZIGER: Yeah, and then there were times where it would be a week or two.

TINKER: Where you wouldn't fly.

BENZIGER: Actually thirty-five missions. How long was I there ... February, March, April, May, June—six months. It would average out about six a month. So it wasn't every day.

TINKER: Do you remember the first time you shot a plane down?

BENZIGER: I think. You can't tell. You've got a formation of eight or ten planes. And a guy's coming in towards your back, if those planes are all stacked up close together like they are supposed to be, with everybody firing, you don't know. I think I shot one, or actually I think two. But one was an accident. (Laughs)

TINKER: How was it an accident?

BENZIGER: Well what had happened was—this was around, we were at either Munich or Vienna, I don't remember which. But somebody up in the nose said, "There's a plane coming at us head on." Well I was in the tail turret and I had my guns pointing right out the back, and as soon as I saw the—I see this pilot. He had a red scarf, he was that close. I just stomped on the, we had foot triggers. I stomped on the foot triggers, and I saw smoke coming out. But he was gone so fast. The rate of closure must have been six hundred miles an hour.

TINKER: Wow.

BENZIGER: I don't even know whether the bullets would catch up with him or not. (Laughter)

TINKER: In situations like that where you see the plane coming at you, did you feel panic, or you just didn't have time to think about it?

BENZIGER: No. Boy, this is my chance, and I'll tell you why. We would sit there flying through flak [anti-aircraft fire] and there wasn't a thing you could do about it, but here you got a chance to fight back. That was—you got ...

TINKER: You're excited?

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: You can't fight the flak. You just have to hope for the best. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: Oh boy, I'm tellin' you, when you could hear it, and you could hear flak pieces of it hitting the skin of the airplane.

TINKER: What was your closest call?

BENZIGER: We were over Ploesti [Romania]. Now the Germans had ...

TINKER: Excuse me; did you fly there several times?

BENZIGER: Yeah. Ploesti and Bucharest and other oil refineries.

TINKER: You were there several times? Okay, go ahead, I'm sorry.

BENZIGER: But Ploesti, I remember, and this was—the Germans had this all over, but they'd have four guns in a battery, 88mms. And they had all sorts of fire control stuff. Now what it was I do not know, but it was accurate to 25, 30 thousand feet. Anyhow we got over Ploesti and I was sitting in the tail turret, and I saw that big blast go off behind, below us. And here came the next one a little higher. Here came the next one a little higher and closer. The fourth one went off right under the plane, and we got pieces of flak stuff, and one hit the bottom. There was a steel seat that I was sitting on, it came through that and lodged in my seat parachute. (Laughter) As close as I ever got. As a matter of fact ...

TINKER: Well that's pretty close

BENZIGER: ... other than the co-pilot who was killed in combat, we only had one Purple Heart on our plane.

TINKER: Really? And who was the Purple Heart?

BENZIGER: The top gunner, engineer. And he, what—a piece of flak broke the Plexiglas, and he got a Plexiglas cut. (Laughs) That's what he got a Purple Heart.

TINKER: Well yeah. That can do you ...

BENZIGER: Well he was bleeding.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: Well the doctors would meet you at de-briefing, "Who needs a Purple Heart?" (Laughter)

TINKER: Your co-pilot got killed. You said he went on another flight that was how he got killed, right?

BENZIGER: We had a new crew come in. A new crew flew their first two missions; their pilot would sit in the co-pilot seat and an experienced pilot in the others. Well our co-pilot, against the objections of our pilot, on account of his size, he just wasn't big enough to haul that wagon around. It took brute strength and stamina. Anyhow he was first pilot for short supplies, so he was promoted. So he flew this crew one mission and they got back okay. The second mission, they were coming back from Austria I think, and they got shot up real bad. Two Luftwaffe ME-109's were one on each wing. They lowered their gear which was assign of surrender, the landing gear. So the Luftwaffe planes guided them to a landing field where they landed, no real problems. But the story that I got later was that our co-pilot, his back had been broken when they landed. They banged into something or something. Everybody got out of the plane and by that

time there were German soldiers surrounding them. And they wanted to go back and get him out, but the plane caught on fire. And there wasn't any way to get him out.

TINKER: Mm Hmm.

BENZIGER: So anyhow. But my connection to all this, other than the copilot. The crew that came in, their first pilot was the older brother of one of my best friends. His father was a Prof at U.T. This guy was a graduate civil engineer—mechanical engineer, and he'd gone off. Oh, he'd gotten in the Air Corps. But instead of spending two weeks getting to their assigned operational squadron they spent almost six weeks, a month or six weeks, doing the same tour that we had, but they'd stop and enjoy life for a while. Almost got court-martialed. Anyhow, the plane went down in Yugoslavia, and the Major, not the flying Major, what do you call them? Next to the squadron commander. Middle of the night I got a—somebody came up to my tent and says, "The Major wants to see you." And I thought what in the world have I done now? So anyhow, I went down and the Major says, "Did you know Lieutenant so and so?" And I said, "Well his brother's one of my best friends, and I knew him, but not too well." He says, "What kind of guy was he?" and I said, "Well, he belonged to the First Baptist Church, and every time the door was open he was there. He was president of the BYPU [Baptist Young Peoples' Union] and stuff like that."

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: And the Major says, "Well I been going through his stuff." And I said, "Okay, I'm sure the family," Oh he was married by that time. I said, "I'm sure the family, his wife would like to have it." He says, "I want you to look at this." He had a pile, it was that thick, (motions a distance of about eight inches), 8x10 glossy porno photographs.

TINKER: That's not good. Oh no.

BENZIGER: In Tunis [Egypt], if you would get off the bus, the G.I. bus going into town, here were these guys, "Filthy pictures, filthy pictures!" Selling them all over the place, and he'd collected them. Why, I do not know, I couldn't believe it of this guy. And I says, "Major you better get rid of that stuff." I said, "I know his parents," I said, "It would kill them."

TINKER: Oh yeah you can't send that back to them.

BENZIGER: So anyhow, he says, "Okay." He had a stove, and he just threw them in the stove. He says, "I don't want to keep them." Anyhow, after the war this guy got out of prison camp. He came home, they lived over on Scenic Drive, and I read in the paper where he had gotten home. So Dad and I, we got in the car and we drove over there. You could look down at the house in the living room, he was sitting there with his mother and dad and his sister, all of whom I knew. So I go down and knock on the door, and Professor came to the door, I says, "Is Jimmy here?" "No, he's not here." I never got to see him. I wanted to write our co-pilot's wife to tell her, you know. I don't ever know what happened. He just wouldn't—he must have known that we found out about those ...

TINKER: Oh, he knew when he was taken prisoner that his things would be gone through and ...

BENZIGER: Oh yeah before they sent them back.

TINKER: He was probably afraid that those things had been sent back. Well, poor fella. So you never seen him again after that?

BENZIGER: Never saw him again after that. He lived in North Carolina. He was just visiting his mother and dad.

TINKER: Okay.

BENZIGER: Never saw him, and his brother was at Oak Ridge all during the war. I don't know whether he's still there or not. But he's in my high school graduating class, and when we have a reunion, we have a phone thing where people call people they know and ask them, tell them about it. I've called this guy three or four times and never shown up.

TINKER: That's too bad.

BENZIGER: I think he's deceased now anyhow.

TINKER: What about the function of your weapon, your gun. Did you ever have any instances where it broke down on you or caused you any trouble?

BENZIGER: The weapons didn't break down but the tail turret in a B-24, there were two big boxes on the sides and then they had a track, where the ammunition came up feeding the guns. Sometimes that would get screwed up.

TINKER: Okay. Would you have to fix it?

BENZIGER: I wouldn't fool with it. I'd call back to one of the waist gunners who wasn't do anything and he would come straighten it out.

TINKER: So you didn't have to try and get it ...

BENZIGER: He didn't have to go as far that door.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: But, no I only had to ...

TINKER: I guess you couldn't be in that turret if you were claustrophobic?

BENZIGER: I didn't fire my guns in anger more than half a dozen times. Now I know people who would burn out barrels and everything. But it was like a, well, it was either boring or terrifying.

TINKER: One extreme or the other. What did you think about people that would burn out their barrels? You just thought that maybe they were high strung or ...

BENZIGER: Well, you were supposed to fire short bursts, and these guys would push on them buttons and let 'em go. It didn't take long to ruin a barrel. 50 caliber machine guns. We would fly our plane for two days, and then in between somebody else would fly, some other crew. The first thing I'd do was get ahold of our armament guy and ask him about my gun barrels after somebody else had been ...

TINKER: Because you were afraid they might have ruined the barrel.

BENZIGER: Oh yeah. But like I said, the Red Tails, you know them?

TINKER: Oh yeah.

BENZIGER: Okay. They flew cover for us.

TINKER: Did they?

BENZIGER: Actually they claim that they never lost a plane to enemy fighters, which is not so. But, we never lost one of our planes when they were flying for us.

TINKER: Right. I think that's the claim to fame, that they never lost a bomber.

BEZIGER: Yeah but that ain't quite so. But they did a good job, they did an excellent job.

ADKINS: Did you know they were black fighter pilots?

BENZIGER: I didn't know at the time. I didn't know at the time. I'll tell you what happened; they were building this museum at Tuskegee. Well I knew they had flown cover for us by that time, so I sent them a hundred bucks. Big mistake! I started getting letters from the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] asking for money.

TINKER: Oh yeah once you give money everybody's going to ...

BENZIGER: Black churches in New York and Chicago. They put this mailing list out everywhere, I hate that.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: So they keep sending me letters, and each one of them had a stamped self-addressed envelopes in it. I collected six of those stamped envelopes; I put a dollar in one, stuffed 'em all in another of their self-addressed, sent 'em back and I haven't heard from them lately.

ADKINS: Once you get on a mailing list it's hard to get off of them. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: That museum in New Orleans is the same way.

TINKER: Yeah the World War II, well it used to be the D-day Museum. Do you have a most memorable mission, or have you already told us about it?

BENZIGER: Most memorable mission was to Vienna, and boy was it well protected.

TINKER: What was the target?

BENZIGER: Aircraft plant. Aircraft production facilities, I didn't know what it was. Anyhow, I remember it was sixty below, the waist windows were open and that 200 mile breeze was coming in across my back.

TINKER: Was this in '43?

BENZIGER: '44.

TINKER: Yeah okay. Yeah, '44.

BENZIGER: I think I shot a plane down but I'm not certain. I never claimed one, for the reason that we had some hotshots in the squadron. I don't care whether there was another enemy plane in the sky, they always claimed something.

TINKER: But you didn't want to unless you were one hundred percent sure.

BENZIGER: You couldn't tell. I tell you one funny thing though.

TINKER: Well wait; tell us your story about Vienna first. (Laughter)

BENZIGER: Oh, it was just cold. There were fighters all over the place. We had no escort that far, at that time. It was before the P-38's and the P-51's got wing tanks, and they couldn't follow us all the way into the target.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: And they'd follow us half way and then as soon as they left the Luftwaffe would jump us. But I tell you what our group was pretty well disciplined. We had a colonel who was an old timer; they called him the Old Grey Wolf, but Colonel Munn insisted on tight formation flying. The fighters would leave the planes that were flying in tight formation alone because you had massed firepower. Whereas where they were all over the sky it was easy to pick off one at a time. So we had, we didn't lose many to fighters, but we lost quite a few to flak, that's where most of it came from. Vienna, Ploesti, Bucharest, Budapest. Hey, that's something funny: an engineer I worked with in Boston was from Budapest. He was several years younger than me. And he remembers B-24's flying over and dropping bombs. (Laughter) He lived in Pest.

TINKER: Did you ever tell him that was probably me? (Laughter)

BENZIGER: I can't remember—Buda's on one side of the river; Pest is on the other.

ADKINS: What did you think about the—did you give any thought to the German pilots at all? That were trying to shoot you down, or what did you think of the German people in general at that time?

BENZIGER: We didn't even think about that. I mean, the krauts [slang term for Germans] were our enemies, shoot first, kill or be killed, you know, that was it. But I don't know that anybody had any real hatred. Maybe some people had reasons for it but we didn't. It was just us or them, you know.

TINKER: What about in Italy, did you get to mingle at all with the civilian population in Italy?

BENZIGER: They didn't mingle with us. (Laughter) The Germans had been there before, and when they retreated they took everything that wasn't nailed down. Of course they liked to see the Americans come in. But we didn't mingle with the civilian population at all except there was a—oh gosh, this was awful. When I first got there we had a mess hall, it was a tent. You went in with your mess kit and got your food and came out and ate whether it was raining or snowing or

what outside. Then they had places to dump whatever you didn't eat. The Italians were there, ragged kids with tin cans, [taking] what you didn't eat. Oh boy that was awful.

TINKER: That's tough.

BENZIGER: Nobody, nobody, none of us had seen anything like that before. So we gave them candy and stuff, and gave them whatever we didn't eat. We had an Italian guy who would come in and pick up our laundry. I don't know who did it, but it always come back beautifully cleaned, pressed, that sort of thing, and very cheaply. You know I don't remember—Oh, (Laughs) one Italian family, our crew had finished twenty-five missions so we were getting three days on the Isle of Capri.

TINKER: Nice! (Laughs)

BENZIGER: You finished half your missions and you got the three days. Anyhow we went in truck to Naples, and we had to stay there overnight to wait on the boat to take us over to Capri. Well we were wandering around Naples and this little kid came running up and said, "Spaghetti Joe!"

TINKER: He said what?

BENZIGER: Spaghetti.

TINKER: Oh, spaghetti.

BENZIGER: So we finally found out that he had a place where I guess his parents were serving spaghetti and wine, that's all. So we went in. We had a good spaghetti dinner, and they had some kind of bread that was excellent. Well after a little bit of wine I wanted to find the men's room or whatever. There was a little courtyard out the back, the cook mentioned me out that way, waved me. I went through the kitchen and a high wall, and it was stacked with Franco-American spaghetti dinners. (Laughter) They had gotten 'em off—on the black market somehow; it wasn't a real Italian diner at all. They was boxes all over. (Laughter)

TINKER: That is funny. That's funny. Well at least they probably made the bread.

BENZIGER: Yeah. It was good and the wine was good. Dago red we called it, Chianti. Next day we went to Capri. Officers were in one hotel, enlisted men were in others, no saluting, no uniforms, nothing. The first thing we did was buy rope sandals, and a flowery hat and most of us had T-shirts and shorts, and that was Capri. The first night our crew—the hotel didn't have accommodations for new crews so they put up in this villa on Anacapri. Capri is a figure eight island. Capri is a small part of it; Anacapri is the biggest one. Nero's castle is up there or whatever. So was this big, I called it a chateau or something. There were five of us in one bed, it was twelve feet square. The room ceiling, wall, mirrors, this was Count Ciano's villa. Count Ciano was Mussolini's son in law.

TINKER: Oh man. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: We stayed there one night, and before we left a bunch of MPs [Military Police] showed up to make sure we hadn't stolen anything. There was still a lot of stuff around, statuary and stuff. But the center of the island between Capri and Anacapri there was a gully through

there, and each afternoon about three O'clock a Messerschmitt 109 would fly through there and the guy wiggling his wings waving, and we'd all be shouting at him. (Laughter) It had been a Luftwaffe rest camp before we took it over.

TINKER: So a German would fly through and just wave at you? He was probably thinking, I wish I was down there.

BENZIGER: Yeah. Oh anyhow.

TINKER: Did you send postcards home when you went to places like that?

BENZIGER: No. I never saw a postcard; we'd use V-mail [Victory Mail] that was about it. V-mail was it.

TINKER: So you came back and finished your other twenty-five missions?

BENZIGER: Yeah, but while there, Gracie Fields, this famous British music hall gal. She had a home on Capri, had a fantastic library, and the Red Cross had taken it over, you could go in and get coffee and doughnuts and read any book you want. Oh it was great, I spent a lot of time there. We visited the Blue Grotto and the Green Grotto. You couldn't swim, because this was about two weeks after Vesuvius had erupted and there was pumice floating all around and it was sharp as razors. You could get cut easy, and they wouldn't let us swim.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: But anyhow, what happened, the three days turned into seven. Because thanks to the Luftwaffe—well the breakout at Anzio beachhead had started and the Germans had come down and mined the harbor at Naples. Dropped mines to prevent supplies getting up. Well, the ferry boat couldn't make it through so we had to stay another four days.

ADKINS: I bet you were real sorry about that too. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: Oh boy yeah.

TINKER: You all lucked out.

BENZIGER: We lucked out.

TINKER: You are a lucky crew. (Laughter)

BENZIGER: Yeah we were.

TINKER: And I mean still, you made it through fifty missions, that's

BENZIGER: The pilot ran out of money and he borrowed money from me.

TINKER: Did he? (Laughter)

BENZIGER: Oh boy.

ADKINS: Did you end up flying with any other crews while you were ...

BENZIGER: One time. I'll tell you what happened. They guy was just out of West Point, already a Major, he was only twenty-two or three years old. And we were the lead plane in the group, he was flying lead plane, and he picked me as a tail gunner. I didn't want to go with him, but I had to. Anyhow, this was my forty-ninth or fiftieth, I think it was the fiftieth ... forty-ninth. We went to Turin in Italy. A Fiat manufacturing plant was there, automobiles, but they were making tanks when we bombed them. Came off the target, wasn't much flak and no fighters, and this guy made a wrong turn and he caused two planes to collide, trying to get out of his way. And I was hollering at him because they were actually behind us. I was hollering at this guy, he told me to shut up, so I did. Well we got back, we got on the ground, and I got out of the plane, and I was standing around, I don't remember—oh I was waiting for this armament guy. Pilot gets out and he comes over to me and he says, "Sergeant, you've been demoted." And I said, "What for?" He says, "Hollering at me over the interphone when I was busy." And I said, "But, sir, I was only telling you about this." He says, "Its Private now." Do you know, we went up to briefing, and everything came out, and every other pilot in our squadron was screaming about this useless major?

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: When it came out, I got a set of orders where I was busted down to private and at the bottom half of that I was restored to staff sergeant.

ADKINS: You were demoted for about five minutes? (Laughs)

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: So they followed through with what he did and then someone else reinstated you. Why did they even bother with that?

ADKINS: Sounds like the military. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: I don't know.

TINKER: I don't even see how he had the authority to do that to you.

BENZIGER: Oh, he could. He was an officer.

TINKER: And how come he was—see, I don't understand him coming straight from West Point and flying.

BENZIGER: Oh he had been through flying school of course.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: And he was a replacement crew, and he was our squadron commander.

TINKER: Well did he get in trouble for what he did?

BENZIGER: I don't know. See right after that, I left.

TINKER: Well you said it all came out.

BENZIGER: I came back home, because that was my forty-ninth or fiftieth mission.

TINKER: Okay.

BENZIGER: I was one ahead of my crew; they had one to fly after I did.

TINKER: Oh, so they flew their last one without you.

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: Do you remember when you came home?

BENZIGER: I went to Naples and got on a boat. The boat, the *General M.C. Meigs*, was on its maiden voyage, and by the way that boat is still transporting troops.

TINKER: Really?

BENZIGER: Yes. I found a guy who had been on it in the last ten years or so.

TINKER: Wow. This was in July of '44?

BENZIGER: Yes. We went to the repple-depple, Replacement Depot in Naples, which was a side of the old race track, and we waited around there until this boat came in. The boat was unloading a battalion of Brazilian infantry on one end; we were getting on the other. It didn't take long we were there less than—soon as they got off and we were on, off we came. No escort because this was a very fast boat, could outrun submarines and stuff. We did stop at Oran [Algeria] for fueling and then through the, by Gibraltar where a big whale swam right by and spouted as it came by. A lot of guys on the rail watching it got spouted. (Laughter) But we were about six days—now I had a strange voyage. I was assigned to one of the lower decks where they had these hammocks about that far apart (motions about 18 inches). But, I was up on top and this captain grabbed me, and he says, "Sergeant, I'm going to make you an MP." And I said "What?" He says "well you have to guard somebody while we're on the way home." He said, "Where you stayin'?" I said "Down below decks." He said, "Well, I'll have to get you outta there." There were four WACs [Women's Army Corps] in the jug there, in the brig or whatever they call it. They had been operating a house of ill-repute in Foggia. (Laughter)

TINKER: Oh no.

BENZIGER: And J.A. Wallace who was an MP Officer, he was a major, and in charge of the MP's in Foggia. You ever hear of Wallace and Wallace Real Estate? Okay J.A. was my age and a good friend. He was the guy that caught them, and I talked to him later after he came home. But anyhow I had to guard these girls from the brig, to eat, and a half hour exercise every day.

TINKER: So they were like under arrest.

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: How many? There were four you said?

BENZIEN: What had happened was, while you were overseas you could not send home more than your monthly pay. Well these gals had a lot of money that they weren't making and they

sent it home and they had caught them. And they sent them back to the States, which they were probably glad of. (Laughter) But anyhow, I had to watch them. While all this was going on, I found a lifeboat that somebody had opened part of it up. I climbed in that lifeboat, and I crossed the ocean in a lifeboat, only getting out for meals, and for when I had to bring these girls back and forth. (Laughter) That lifeboat was a lifesaver for me.

TINKER: That's funny. Speaking of girls had you already gotten your Dear John letter by this time?

BENZIGER: Oh yeah, speaking of that. I got that with the thanks for the silk hose. (Laughter)

TINKER: Oh well that was nice. "Thanks for the silk hose I'm breaking up with you."
(Laughter)

BENZIGER: Oh, and let me tell you. She married a guy who I went through geology with.

TINKER: When you come back to UT?

BENZIGER: Right. Her mother was the woman in charge of the Tyson House, and she lived there with her mother. Anyhow, I didn't know the guy she married until after we got back home and then I found out he was in my geology classes. We were good friends. We hunted and fished together a lot.

ADKINS: I have a question for you. It just dawned on me. You said in Trinidad you bought that case of rum for the end of your missions, and if you finished before your group how did that work out?

BENZIGER: Oh! Well I waited till the rest of the crew the next day. We got, oh I think we got two coca-colas a month. Two coca-colas and two beers, no way to cool 'em, except take them up in an airplane and fly them around for a while. (Laughter) Well, we had been saving up our cokes, cause gonna have a rum and coke. That was the worst stuff I ever tasted in my life. (Laughter) But you know what? At one end of the field we had an anti-aircraft crew, and they were always British or Australian soldiers who were on leave from the front. This was a rest camp for them. They'd stay down there about a month. And I got real chummy with this ANZAC, Australian New Zealand Army Corps guy, and I would go down and swap cigarettes. They had navy cuts that would come in a tin about like that, must have been about fifty or sixty. But you could smoke one of those navy cuts for twenty minutes, I don't know why. They lasted about twice as long as any of our American cigarettes. And we got chummy and he gave me his hat. One of those Australian hats with the floppy brim, you know.

TINKER: Oh yeah.

BENZIGER: And I gave him something. Anyhow, I took my almost full bottle of rum down to their tent. They loved it. (Laughter)

TINKER: They did? You thought it was the worst thing you ever tasted. (Laughs) Maybe they were just more desperate.

BENZIGER: So I swapped them. They had gin, and so I swapped them rum for gin. I don't know what they did with it. Oh, I think we forced the rest of the case on to some new crew that

came in. Because a new crew would come in and we would meet them and direct them off to the headquarters so they could be checked in and then we'd get into the plane. We'd steal, swap guns, our old ones for their new ones. Anything, C-rations, if they had emergency we'd cart that off and have a jeep full of stuff. We were scroungers.

TINKER: That is one thing you learn in the military.

ADKINS: Oh yeah.

TINKER: You get good at scrounging.

BENZIGER: We one kid from West Virginia. Boy I'm telling you, you want something, he'd find it. I don't know how he got it. But I remember we were building a stove for our tent. It was still cold, and you took a fifty-five gallon oil drum and cut off about that much of it. You had a hole for a pipe, stove pipe, and we'd cut a hole for a draft in front and you'd pile these big river rocks in. And then you had a tank outside of some sort. We'd have a little tube of aviation gasoline coming down. Well, we were looking for stove pipes. He says, "I know where we can get some." Well we got hold of a truck, and here was a German ammo dump. 88mm shells and they're about this long (motions about three feet) about that big around at the base (motions about five inches) and like that at the top (motions about three inches), the bullet end. We were sitting around, what in the world are we going to do with these things? Two Limeys showed up in a jeep. One of them came over, he looked at us and he came over and picked one up. Here was a big tree, Wham! And the projectile fell out and he dumped all the powder. They were live shells. (Laughs)

TINKER: Oh my word.

BENZIGER: They got of them that they wanted so we did the same thing. I got to thinking, boy what if one of those had gone up?

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: The 88mm was the best piece of artillery in World War II. The Germans would actually fire at a single soldier a mile away, they were that accurate. One of these barrels from the chamber, it squeezed down as you got to the muzzle. Velocity was fantastic. Like I say they could use it as anti-aircraft up to 30,000 feet. Five, six miles.

TINKER: You want to take a little break? Then we can pick up.

BENZIGER: I'd like a cup of coffee. Do we have any coffee around here?

TINKER: We can get you a cup.

END OF TAPE ONE

TINKER: Okay this continues an interview with Charles Benziger on March the 8th. This is part two. We stopped and took a little break. This is Cynthia Tinker. Now when we stopped, you were just on your way home on the ship. And where did you disembark?

BENZIGER: Newport News, Virginia.

TINKER: Newport News.

BENZIGER: We disembarked there on a beautiful sunny morning. The first thing they did was march us to a mess hall; oh, it was the biggest mess hall I ever saw. Milk, cereal, eggs, bacon, coffee, biscuits, whatever, oh it was beautiful.

TINKER: That sounds beautiful. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: The funny part about it was, we passed by this prison compound where the desert storm troopers were incarcerated. Here we were a scruffy looking—we'd been on a ship, no washing, nothing, no new clothes. Here were all these German desert troopers with beautiful, washed starched shirts and shorts out playing soccer, and especially the infantry guys were really hooting at 'em picking up rocks and throwing. The MP's stopped that. No, I don't remember a thing, except that big breakfast. I don't know how they processed us or anything, but the next thing I know, I was on a train for Fort Bragg. Got there the next day, they—I got some pay I think. Got my gear together, they gave me a bus ticket. The bus came somehow through Cherokee [North Carolina], now why it came down Cherokee I do not know. But then over the mountains.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: I didn't have a seat. I was sitting on the floor with my feet down in that little well where the door was.

TINKER: So you all went through Cherokee and then down through Gatlinburg and out?

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: Well that's the long way.

BENZIGER: Yeah. I don't know why, but that's the route I got home. And then at that time the bus station was right across from the old county courthouse.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: On Cumberland way on up there, and I called my mother and she drove up to get me. Mother and Dad.

TINKER: Did they already know you were on your way home?

BENZIGER: No.

TINKER: You just surprised them?

BENZIGER: I surprised them.

TINKER: I'll bet your mom was happy.

BENZIGER: And people had saved ration stamps, gas stamps and other stuff, food stamps. I lived like a king for a while. Had all the gas I needed.

TINKER: They saved them up for you?

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: Well how nice.

BENZIGER: People had been so nice.

TINKER: Well that's wonderful. What's the first thing you did when you got home? Or one of the first things?

BENZIGER: I don't remember.

TINKER: Did your mom cook a big meal?

BENZIGER: Oh yeah, well that was a given. (Laughs)

TINKER: Yeah. Did people start coming over?

BENZIGER: All the relatives gathered around wanting to hear my war tales, which I was not in the mood ...

TINKER: To tell?

BENZIGER: At that time. But that was—I went to see old girlfriends and ...

TINKER: What about your little sister? We haven't talked much about her. Were you close to her, or did the age difference sort of ...

BENZIGER: We were not close at all. We're still not. She's in New York. She took up theater while she was still in high school. The lady that ran the thespians club or whatever was, thought she had promise. She enrolled in Fine Arts here and got a degree.

TINKER: At UT?

BENZIGER: At UT. Let me see, that was 1952, because she started the fall of the spring that I graduated, and she went to New York, and she hasn't been back since. You couldn't get her out with dynamite. She's afraid to leave. Her apartment is in rent control. The owners of the apartment have been trying to throw her out for years, but they can't.

TINKER: You mean as long as she stays there, the rent, it stays the same?

ADKINS: Its New York rent control laws. But the second you leave, they can charge higher for the next person.

BENZIGER: Oh yeah, they can charge whatever they can get for the next one.

TINKER: So her rent must be pretty low.

ADKINS: Well in New York if you get an apartment like in the 50's they pass it down from person to person to keep the 50's price. (Laughs)

TINKER: Oh. I did not know this.

BENZIGER: It is low compared to other—Well even in the apartment where she's staying, it's very low.

TINKER: Has she been back to visit? Or ...

BENZIGER: She's been back once or twice. She came back, my mother had to go to—she was in, gosh, over behind Sequoyah Village, in an apartment after she sold the house to the kids, my granddaughter and her husband, but she had to go to Shannondale [Nursing home]. And my sister came back—I had just gotten back from Ecuador, and Mother was going to Shannondale, she didn't mind it. She'd been down there visiting friends, and she had friends. And my sister came back to help her sell out all of the stuff out of the apartment that she couldn't take. But I think she came down one or twice for Christmas, but that's all

TINKER: Well did she make it as an actress in New York? Is that how she made a living? So she never made it?

BENZIGER: She had two or three walk-on parts but nothing significant, and no way to keep going. So she took a job with Parents Magazine Press, and she edited the stuff that they published. And then her boss got fired, and it happened to clean out her whole department. So she got hooked up, somehow, with Famous Writer's School. I know you've seen the ads in magazines, "We can teach you to be a writer." Well, she stayed in New York. This school's in Connecticut, but she stayed in New York, and they sent her stuff. She had twenty or thirty pupils. They would send their work in to her, and she'd correct it, edit it, and do what, and she got paid for all that. And then, something happened, I don't know. But right now she's on social security and whatever I send her. So anyhow, she's there and she's eighty-one years old.

TINKER: Wow.

BENZIGER: Just to tell you the truth, we never got along. My wife doesn't get along with her. We think she's nuts. (Laughter)

TINKER: Well I wouldn't want to live in New York myself.

BENZIGER: Oh gosh. I used to get the shuttle down from Boston in the morning and do my work, and get the first shuttle I could out. Oh I hated it.

TINKER: Well, how long—did you just kind of take it easy for a while when you got back home, or did you start looking to go back to school right away?

BENZIGER: Oh I got home right, the third, fourth of September, and right after Labor Day, UT opened up.

TINKER: So you just went right back.

ADKINS: You mentioned that while we were in the break.

BENZIGER: Yeah, I went right straight back.

ADKINS: You said you were surprised that they took you?

BENZIGER: Yes, like I said my record hasn't been anything to brag about.

TINKER: Well when you went right back in did you know what you wanted to major in?

BENZIGER: Oh yeah.

TINKER: You did?

BENZIGER: Geology. I'd had geology class before I quit to go to work. So I knew the professors.

TINKER: So why geology?

BENZIGER: I was sitting down in Ramsey's Cafeteria. At that time it was right next to Ellis and Ernest drug store where the Student Center is. And my good friend, Stuart Marr, the one that I'd been sitting with down at the Worsham's house finding out about Pearl Harbor. Stuart's father had wanted him to be a chemist and he was taking chemistry, chemical engineering or something. And he didn't like it at all, and he got into geology. Stuart and I were sitting having lunch, and I was, at that time I was in business administration and didn't care for it at all. Stuart says, "Boy you ought to get into geology." So I took a course and I was hooked, best thing that ever happened to me. Field work, I hated to be in the office. So they had plenty of field work for me. They sent me all over the world. Only place, and I was always mad about it, they didn't send me to Australia. I always wanted to go to Australia. (Laughs)

TINKER: You wanted to go to Australia. Let's see, so you graduated UT in ...

BENZIGER: '48

TINKER: So it took you about two and a half years to finish up?

BENZIGER: Yeah, the reason for that was, I had to take three years of German and I hadn't taken any language before. But while I was taking that German, I'd finished all required geology courses for a Bachelor's degree, so I took the masters, and they had one PhD course that I was taking before the TVA offered me money, and I left. (Laughter)

TINKER: What was it like being on campus as an undergraduate? I mean, I'm sure there were a lot of other veterans but ...

BENZIGER: Oh yeah. I used to drive in every day. Park right there in front of Ayers Hall or the old P and G Building, which is now the, I don't know, geology's out. Geography and geology are out of it now, they've got their own building. But I'd park right there in front there were no cars, nobody had a car, it was right after the war. But I did, I had access to one. I would drive up, park all day long. Nobody would bother me.

ADKINS: You told me there were about 30,000 students and faculty on the ...

BENZIGER: Three thousand.

TINKER: Three?

BENZIGER: Thirty-six or seven hundred in '38.

ADKINS: Okay, for faculty and ...

TINKER: Yeah.

BEZIGER: Hoskins was president. Dean Hessler, let me see who else was here. Of course [Dr. Cloide Everett] Brehm was at the Ag school and he later became president, and that's when the big expansion started. His daughter was a good friend of mine, high school classmate. Gosh, I don't know, I don't know if she's still alive or not; I know her husband died.

TINKER: How do you think UT treated the returning veterans? I mean, did you feel accommodated? Did they have an official welcome veterans?

BENZIGER: Well now, I was single, and I never noticed anything. But there were a lot of married ones, and they lived over on the hill. In those old prisoner of war barracks and trailers, they were scattered all over the hill over there, especially between Ayers and Cumberland Avenue. They were other places. Boy, you know I'd go to the bookstore and get the books I needed on the G.I. Bill, and we had one professor, he didn't think we were supposed to get anything. He hadn't been in the service, but he was just one of a bunch of them over there. He was a nice guy and all, good teacher, but, he didn't—no special privileges.

TINKER: You mean he didn't think you should have the benefits like the G.I. Bill and things like that? Did he let that be known?

BENZIGER: You could tell. (Laughter) You could tell. I remember I went over to the bookstore, which was up on top of the hill back then and that old building. Is it still there?

ADKINS: Which one?

BENZIGER: Between Ayers Hall and the old chemistry building. It's an old building, what did they call it?

TINKER: Yeah it's kind of like as you're going around the circle it's to the left? Yeah that's still there.

ADKINS: I don't know what it called off the top of my head but yeah, it's there.

BENZIGER: That used to be the bookstore. Campus bookstore, also the headquarters for *The Orange and White*, which is now *The Volunteer*. *The Orange and White* used to be a weekly newspaper, and I used to—oh gosh. Back in those days, under the administration building over here, they had a big room with boxes, every student had a box. Sam Bell was the business manager and editor, business manager of *The Orange and White*, and he recruited me to stuff papers. We'd take that paper fresh from the printer and put one in each one of the boxes. Sometimes students wouldn't come by for weeks to pick 'em up. And you were supposed to check them once a day to get notices from the dean or whatever, change of schedule.

ADKINS: No email. (Laughter)

TINKER: Yeah this is way before email wasn't it? How did the other students treat veterans like yourself? I mean did they want to hear stories, war stories, or did they just treat you like everybody else?

BENZIGER: No, no, not really. The other students were 99% girls when I came back. Boy, anything wearing pants was fair game.

TINKER: Oh yeah, because you were back before the war was ended really.

BENZIGER: Just about, right at the end.

TINKER: There were still so many still gone.

BENZIGER: Yeah a lot of them still overseas didn't have the points to get out. Well, yeah. (Laughs)

TINKER: Did you meet your wife on campus? Was that how you met?

BENZIGER: She was here, but we met her—I met her—my fraternity had been inactive during the war, and we were having a party at the old Highland Grill that's just opened up as Highlands Restaurant.

TINKER: Yes. Yeah, I know there.

BENZIGER: Okay. So we were having a party down there, this was in January of '46, a bunch of the guys had gotten back by that time, about getting the fraternity going again. Well, I had a good girlfriend, who was a Tri Delt [Delta Delta Delta Sorority] I got a date with her, and then I found out my cousin was just getting out, and I thought he was going to come to UT. And I thought he would make a good member of the fraternity, so I told my date to get him a date, which she did. So anyhow we went to the party and it was a brawl of course, and I neglected my regular date and went for his date. (Laughter)

TINKER: Oh no.

BENZIGER: Well she didn't care. She was engaged to some judge. She was from Memphis. Anyhow, she didn't care. She was having fun, so she didn't even pay any attention to what I was doing. So anyhow several days later I was driving up, I was coming to the library as a matter of fact, and there were a bunch of girls standing on the corner of Sixteenth and Cumberland hitchhiking. So I pulled over and asked them where they were going. They were going up to the Tennessee Theater to a movie, so I said, "pile in." Well, my wife got in the front seat with me and I asked here for a date, for there all that's history.

TINKER: So you met her at the party, and then you saw her just by chance needing a ride on the side of the road.

BENZIGER: My cousin William always said I stole her from him. (Laughter)

TINKER: That's a good story.

BENZIGER: Oh, we go—the last two years—You know Highlands has opened up again, and the last two years the whole family has met down there on our anniversary.

TINKER: Aw, that's really nice.

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: Yeah, that's a really nice restaurant.

BENZIGER: Last count there was children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. Just one great grandchild so far.

TINKER: What's her maiden name?

BENZIGER: Joyce Srygley, S-R-Y-G-L-E-Y.

TINKER: Okay. What's the origin of that name? That's unusual.

BENZIGER: Pott Shrigley. Near Manchester, England is a little town called Pott Shrigley. The Shrigley woolen mills are there, and Shrigley Hall is there. Shrigley Hall is now something for an order of monks for training boys to be missionaries. Anyhow, we've visited.

TINKER: You have?

BENZIGER: So that's—Shrigley is the old English name for shrike, which is a bird, and it was a pool. Pott Shrigley, pot for the ...

TINKER: Okay I was looking at it on your questionnaire, and seeing how it's spelled, I would not even begin to pronounce it the way you're pronouncing it.

BENZIGER: Well Joyce is the only one that went to UT all the rest of them were Vanderbilt. (Laughs)

TINKER: The rest of her family went to Vanderbilt? So she grew up in Nashville?

BENZIGER: Yeah. Her two brothers went to Vanderbilt.

TINKER: What made her decide to come to UT instead of ...

BENZIGER: Vanderbilt was expensive.

TINKER: Okay.

BENZIGER: And her father came—her father had been superintendent of city schools in Raleigh, North Carolina, that's where Joyce was born, and then he became superintendent of schools in Nashville. Well that was a mistake, he—a lot of politics about the school superintendent. And I don't know, some time when Joyce was in high school I guess, they appointed somebody else. Well when Oak Ridge—he took several teaching jobs, but when Oak Ridge started, he was offered the job to teach people math here in Oak Ridge. So they moved to Oak Ridge, and that's where she was living when I first met her. And when I would go out to Oak Ridge back for a date, I had to have a pass to get it in. This was when the fence was still up.

TINKER: To get in the city?

ADKINS: Was there any clue as to what Oak Ridge was up to before you went? Now I know Oak Ridge sort of geared up just as the war started, but with your roots in the area, I was wondering if there was any ...

BENZIGER: Well I'll tell you one thing. Some Army people came down, and of course the first people they contacted were TVA people. And this was '39, '40, somewhere along in there. And my old boss at TVA, Berlin C. Moneymaker, had grown up at Wheat, which is in the Oak Ridge community. And he was chief geologist for TVA at the time, or the assistant I don't remember. But he, and the army people, and old Major Eckle was the chief geologist. They went out and looked at the Oak Ridge area, and they decided, looked at maps and decided this was secluded enough and that sort of thing. So I know Money [Moneymaker] helped them select it. Money had gotten a degree, Master's degree, he'd written a thesis on caves of East Tennessee, and he got a scholarship to Yale for his PhD. But he only stayed a year. He came home, and Major Eckle was looking for someone with experience on caves, because of course, all these dams have got cavernous water channels underneath. So he wanted somebody who was an expert.

TINKER: Mm hmm.

BENZIGER: So Major Eckle asked somebody at UT—oh yeah Professor Amic, who was a geography professor. He says, "Oh well, we've just got this guy that just finished his Master's thesis on caves a couple years ago." "Well let's go get him." So they drove out to Oak Ridge. Money was out in a field behind a mule, barefooted and plowing. (Laughter) Of course he knew, he didn't know Major Eckle, but he knew Professor Amic, and Amic called him over and introduced him. Major Eckle says, "You want a job?" He said, "Sure." Got in the car with him and never went back to Wheat. No kidding.

TINKER: Never went back to Wheat?

BENZIGER: Never would talk about his family, they wouldn't have anything to do with him. Here he had left this mule standing in the field. (Laughter)

TINKER: You mean literally he ...

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: He, like, just puts the reins down and gets in the car and leaves?

BENZIGER: That's the story that I got from Prof Amic several times. And when I worked for Money ...

TINKER: Well, I would be mad at him too.

BENZIGER: Money was one of the nicest guys. When I was looking for a job after I left Bechtel, Money put in a real good word for me with Charles T. Main in Boston. Man, that was the happiest day of my life just about.

TINKER: When you graduated, so you went straight into graduate school right?

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: And finished that up.

BENZIGER: I didn't finish it up.

TINKER: You didn't? Oh I see '47, '48.

BENZIGER: I turned in one of my TVA reports, a foundation report, as I remember it was on Kingston Steam Plant. I'd done all the geology. I turned it in as my Master's thesis. They accepted it but nobody had been my supervisor. Money was giving me a hard time, he says, "I could have easily qualified as your supervisor." But before anything could be done, this was an afterthought. I had finished all the classroom stuff. This was when the TVA was reducing force, this was when I went to work for Bechtel. That was awful, California.

TINKER: So what caused you to leave TVA?

BENZIGER: Reduction in force. There were four of us geologists plus Money, who was chief of the department, and two of us left. Bob Allen came back later and became—took over as chief geologist, after Money and Jack Kelburk had retired.

TINKER: So exactly what would you do for TVA or then with Bechtel, or was that two totally separate jobs?

BENZIGER: No, they were the same.

TINKER: Or as a geologist did you sort of do the same thing?

BENZIGER: Yes. Bechtel hired me because ...

TINKER: Because I have no idea what a geologist would go out and do. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: We were doing foundation explorations. Was the rock enough to support this plant? That sort of thing.

TINKER: Okay.

BENZIGER: It was all geology and we would have drill rigs, which were diamond drills. We'd drill through earth everything, rock. With that information we'd give them a report whether this was favorable site or not. Like at a dam site we'd do, where the river would run along like this we'd drill a line across it, maybe several lines, and find out if there were any caverns or anything.

TINKER: Okay.

BENZIGER: And report on that, I did the same thing. As a matter of fact, Bechtel hired me because I was supposed to be an expert on limestone, which was the most cavernous rock. Because they were getting ready to do a job in Missouri in limestone and they had nobody out on the West Coast that had ever seen limestone. My boss had worked with the Bureau of Reclamation, and all he'd ever seen was sandstone and igneous rocks and shale and stuff like that. (Laughter)

TINKER: Were there ever cases where you know, you're testing this rock and this area out, were there ever disagreements about, like you're saying, "No, we shouldn't build here." And then somebody else is saying, "Yeah we should." How do geologists resolve that issue? Or who resolves that?

BENZIGER: Well it would all depend on who it was. There are times when I'd say you shouldn't do this, and they'd say okay, and I'd have given them a reason. One reason nearly got me fired. When I was working for Charles T. Main, we had a contract with the Nebraska Public Service. They had a project up on the Missouri River; it was going to be a pump storage plant. Well pump storage is, they have a lower reservoir and an upper reservoir. At night when power is cheap, nobody's using it, there's surplus on the lines. They could afford to pump from the lower to the upper. The next day when they need extra power they can flip that water out and generate. Okay, we spent six months, and we had consultants, we had everybody. And I didn't like the site. It was a site that Lewis and Clark had camped on one time, to begin with. It was historical. But then there were landslides where we wanted to go through with the powerhouse and that sort of thing. I was all against it. We had one engineer who was fighting for it because he wanted to be the project manager. Well Nebraska Power sent about ten people into the Boston office. We were going to have conference, which we did. I didn't have much to say at the conference. But when it was all over all the Nebraska people were still in the room and they said, "Chuck, we'd like to talk to you." Everybody else went out, and the guys says, "I've only got one question, do you think this is suitable?" and I said, "No way." He says, "That's it, that's all we wanted to know." Well this guy at Main who was going to be the project manager, if he'd have had a gun, he'd have shot me. He wanted that project so bad.

TINKER: Cause he's wanting to get to work.

BEZIGER: But, what happened was, they got several geologists who worked with the Corps of Engineers out on the Missouri River to look at the site; they all agreed with me, which was the nice part about it.

TINKER: You could spend as much as six months at a site to determine ...

BENZIGER: Oh yeah.

TINKER: That's a lot of work. So you only spent one year with Bechtel?

BENZIGER: A year and a day. (Laughter) One year and one day. I had a one year contract. So they'd pay for moving me. But that didn't count for moving me back. (Laughter)

TINKER: So how did you come to work for, Charles—now is Charles T. Main, that's its own separate company?

BENZIGER: Oh it's a long story. Let me get started.

TINKER: How did you get to work for them? (Laughs)

BENZIGER: The job that I was working on, on Establishment Creek in Missouri for St. Louis Power was canceled, and that was another project that I figured was going to cost a lot more than they thought it was on account of the caves and the limestone, which was why they'd hired me.

Well I turned in a very unfavorable report, and the next thing I knew, the chief geologist came over and he says, “Chuck, let’s go for a drink.” It was in the afternoon before quitting time, so we went down to the bar and he says, “I hate to tell you this but you’re rified,” reduced in force or whatever. So I said, “Chief, you couldn’t have made me happier.” So anyhow I went home and told Joyce. By that time we had three kids, and she was pregnant with number four.

TINKER: Oh no.

BENZIGER: So we got in the car and packed up our stuff and got the moving company to take care of it until we were ready to go. Oh and when we got back to Knoxville, I didn’t have a job. We were staying with my mother and dad, and ...

TINKER: And Bechtel had you living where?

BENZIGER: Buena Park, California. Which was—Disneyland was just down the street.

TINKER: Which your kids probably loved.

BENZIGER: You ever hear of the Knotts Berry Farm?

TINKER: Yes.

BENZIGER: Okay we were two blocks from Knotts Berry Farm. The kids used to go to Sunday school over there on the train.

TINKER: I bet they loved that. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: So was your wife happy to be coming back to Tennessee?

BENZIGER: You bet.

TINKER: Was she?

BENZIGER: She had a brother out there, but she and her brother didn’t get along too well. He was in Azusa I think. We were in Buena Park, which was separated far enough. Anyhow ...

TINKER: So you came back and were staying with your parents.

BENZIGER: We came back, stayed with Mother and Dad, and I did some consulting. Hop Bailey, the real estate out here in Knoxville.

TINKER: Hop Bailey? His wife just created our most recent endowment here at the Center.

(TAPE PAUSED)

TINKER: Okay so we got off topic a little bit. We’re talking about Gatlinburg now.

BENZIGER: Well anyhow this was 1926, ’7. My mother and I would get on the bus, I don’t remember whether we would go all the way down to Pigeon Forge or not. But that was the end of the bus line, and we would catch the mail driver. Mother had always made arrangements with

him. He had a Model-T Ford. It seemed like we crossed the river six or seven times before we got to Gatlinburg, I mean 40 [I-40]. There were no bridges then. And, uh, by the time we get to Ogle's store, why, that was—We had to walk the rest of the way from the store up to where the cabin was. But I would—I was five or six years old. I'd sit up in front with the driver, Mother'd sit in the back seat with all the packages and all, mail. And we'd get into the water at a ford and my job was to jump out and grab that one gallon oil pail that was hanging over the radiator cap, [and] fill up the radiator. (Laughs) 'Til the next ford.

TINKER: Yeah. That's good memories. (Laughter)

BENZIGER: Oh, I loved it because I got to play in the creek all day, and I fished with a bent pin. Never caught anything, but Dad and my uncle caught a lot of trout. They didn't have any rules or regulations back then.

TINKER: That's nice.

BENZIGER: Ogles, Maples, oh gosh ...

TINKER: You know Ms. Maples just died.

BENZIGER: Yes, I saw that.

TINKER: Yeah, she just died.

BENZIGER: Reagans, and I was trying to remember the people's name that lived right across the creek from us. They were natives of the place. But, oh those were good ol' days. I used to go up there quite a bit in the summertime.

TINKER: Yeah, now my great-granny grew up in the Baskins Creek area.

BENZIGER: Oh yeah?

TINKER: You know, but then they had to come down when they created the park. And then on my mom's side, my ... granddad, his family's from the Sugarlands area.

BENZIGER: Oh, okay, I know Sugarlands. Yeah.

TINKER: And my grandmother grew up out in Greenbrier, you know out towards Pittman Center. So yeah, I got—my roots are as deep up there as yours are in Knoxville. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: Yeah right. Yeah ... Oh gosh.

TINKER: Well, we better get back on topic, or we could talk about that all day, couldn't we? (Laughter) Uh, I think we were talking about ... when you, you brought up Hop Bailey. You'd just got laid off from Bechtel, right?

BENZIGER: Yes, I was ...

TINKER: And then you were doing, I guess, some independent work for a while.

BENZIGER: A little independent consultant work. And then ...

TINKER: Now what did you do for Hop?

BENZIGER: Oh, uh, he was looking for, somebody had—one of the big quarrying companies had asked him about property where they could open up a quarry. This was when the Bull Run Steam Plant was gettin' ready to be built, and—it wasn't Stone Webster, I can't remember who it was—their agent was Hop about as far as real estate was concerned. So, he asked me to look at some places where there were potential quarry sites. So I did. But there's just a little bit of that and um ... First time in my life I went on unemployment, whatever. Well, they had no jobs. They'd never heard of a geologist. (Laughter) So there was no reason. So anyhow, I had all these friends in the TVA who had gone to work in Boston for a firm called Uhl, Hall and Rich. Uhl, Hall and Rich was a ...

TINKER: Ewell, like E-W-E-L-L?

BENZIGER: No, U-H-L.

TINKER: Oh, U-H-L, Uhl.

BENZIGER: Mr. Uhl was a civil engineer. He'd been a consultant for the TVA. Wilford McGregor Hall had worked for him and was ... project manager for, not Wilson Dam but one of the dams on the main river. And, George Rallo Rich was the chief hydro-engineer. Well anyhow, I knew Mr. Rich, I didn't know the ... I'd seen Mr. Uhl when he was here on consultant trips for the TVA, but didn't know him well. But George Rich I knew. I guess he was chief mechanical engineer. And anyhow, they formed this—the TVA started cutting back, especially on hydro.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: And they formed this firm in Boston. Now things were looking up at the end of the Depression. They had work. And, um, Uhl, Hall and Rich was formed for one reason: to do work for the New York Power Authority. Because the New York Power Authority could not hire an engineer that was not licensed in New York state. So all these people were licensed in New York state and they—there was other things to it, insurance, whatever. But Uhl, Hall and Rich was a subsidiary of Charles T. Main [Incorporated, a New England engineering firm]. Now Charles T. Main had been in business for a hundred years. And there were a lot of the old cadre there. People I knew [and] had known here in Knoxville ...

TINKER: Oh, okay.

BENZIGER: ... before they left the TVA. So, uh, I didn't go to Boston where the headquarters [were], but I went—reported to, uh, Niagara Falls. And I stayed there for six years. Loved it. It was a big construction job. Matter of fact it was the biggest going on in the world at the time, Niagara Power Project. And I was project ...

TINKER: So you and your whole family moved up there then.

BENZIGER: Oh yeah. We lived in Lewiston—Youngstown—which was right on the shores of Lake Ontario. The power authority had built 110 nice houses. They were ranches, all of 'em. One door, one-car garage, whatever. But we lived in one of those for six years. And it was right in the middle of what had been cherry, plum, peach orchards. The trees were still around. We had fresh

fruit all the [time]. The kids loved it. Oh, I had a great time. The project manager had just come back from Turkey, and he'd had a hard time with the geologist that had worked for him over in Turkey. I must have been a relief, we—cause I didn't argue with him much. And we got along fine. I worked with him in Pakistan and after he left Main and, oh gosh Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay.

TINKER: So when you say six years, that project itself was six years. Is that what you mean? That Niagara project you were on?

BENZIGER: Yeah, oh yeah. It went on for ...

TINKER: So you stayed with ...

BENZIGER: 'Til the construct ...

TINKER: And then would the Charles T. Main Company then send you somewhere else? Is that how it worked?

BENZIGER: Oh, yes.

TINKER: Sorta like the military in a way.

BENZIGER: In a way. There was a potential project for Storm King Mountain on the Hudson River right above West Point. And so we moved to Newburgh [New York]. And we were there for three years. I did—had exploration going on all this time. We had a lot of rock work to do. And I spent a lot of time in Washington testifying before the, what was it back then? Something, and it had to do with dams and hydroelectric projects. Well, anyhow, I spent a lot of time on that. While I was there things kinda loosened up a bit, and they got a job in Pakistan with the World Bank. And everybody—oh I was still an employee of Uhl, Hall and Rich without pension benefits or anything like that. The part of the contract was everybody that was sent over had to be a Charles T. Main employee. So Van Court M. Hare, who I had known here in Knoxville before, he was one of the principals and a member of the board, whatever [at] Charles T. Main. He came into Newburgh one time to see what was going on, and I was showing him around. He says, "I'm transferring you." And I thought, "Where are we going now?" And he says, "Oh, just transferring you from Uhl, Hall and Rich to Charles T. Main." They made up all—from the time, for the six years, they put in my pension, stuff like that.

TINKER: Oh, they backdated it. That's nice.

BENZIGER: Yeah, and sent me to Pakistan. Now if you want to write—I had to go to Boston. Joyce and the kids were still in, um, Colden Park, which was a suburb in Newburgh. I went to Boston and met my traveling friend who was the chief hydrologist for Charles T. Main. And we got along like two brothers, two close brothers. Lou's still alive. Anyhow, we got on the train—on the plane, went down to catch TWA flight from New York to Madrid to Rome [Trans World Airlines]. And then we caught another flight going on into Karachi, Pakistan. But, we were in—Back then, if you had to take more than two hours on a plan you got first class. So this was [a] long trip. We were all in first class. Well, we were in the first class waiting room and all of a sudden some guy—cops came in and says, "You'll have to move out for a few minutes." So everybody moved out of the room wonderin' what was going on. I happened to be standing by

the window overlooking the plane, and here were a bunch of cops I can see from New York City police force, you can see these colonels' wings on their collar, stuff like that. And they were escorting this lady and several young people and there were some men onto the plane. And about that time we got word, "Well, you can come back in and start boarding yourself." Well, I got in my seat in the plane and across the aisle was this elderly lady, looked like my mother. [It was] Queen Frederica [of] Greece. And the two young ladies were her daughters. And the rest were FBI or CIA or whatever guard. So anyhow, during the flight they had a contest to see who could predict landfall in Portugal. And I won and got a bottle of Champagne.

TINKER: (Laughs)

BENZIGER: Six o'clock in the mornin'. And offered the queen a drink. She refused but the daughters didn't. (Laughter) We landed in Madrid, and they wouldn't let us off the plane. But waiting for the queen was [Generalissimo Francisco] Franco [dictator of Spain from 1938-1973] and prince somebody that one of the daughters was gonna marry. So they all got off in Madrid and we had the plane to ourselves. Except this drunk gets on.

TINKER: (Laughs) Oh, no.

BENZIGER: He's sitting right behind me. I didn't pay any attention to him except the fact that he brought his own bottle on board. And we were starting, we were coming down over Rome and all of a sudden this guy's pounding me on the shoulder. He wasn't strapped in or anything. He says, "My house, my house, we're landing over." It was Orson Welles.

TINKER: Are you kidding?

BENZIGER: No.

TINKER: You're on the plane with Orson Welles?

BENZIGER: I didn't know who it was.

TINKER: You didn't. (Laughs) I guess you didn't have time to watch a lot of movies.

BENZIGER: We landed in the airport waiting [to] get back on the plane to go back on to Beirut as I remember. And here came the Beatles through. I didn't know 'em. They had black leather pants, coats, and all these screaming kids behind them.

TINKER: When did you realize it was the Beatles?

BENZIGER: I was told. I asked somebody. I said, "What's going on?"

TINKER: "What's the ruckus about?" (Laughter)

BENZIGER: That was my introduction ...

TINKER: Well, when did you realize it was Orson Welles?

BENZIGER: Oh, I was told by one of the, uh, stewardesses.

TINKER: This is funny. And you just thought, “Who’s this drunkard hittin’ me on the shoulder?”

BENZIGER: Yeah. Oh, he was drunk as a coot.

TINKER: Now, this must have been when he was probably gettin’ pretty good size by then.

BENZIGER: He was pretty hefty as I remember. Uh, I was off the plane before he got off so I—and I didn’t see him any more after that.

TINKER: (Laughs) Now that’s a good story.

BENZIGER: Yeah, that was my introduction to the jet set.

TINKER: Yeah, not many people get on a plane and have the Queen of Greece, Orson Welles, and the Beatles. (Laughs)

BENZIGER: Oh, by the way, ... I was telling you I wrote Phil Williams [East Tennessee radio newscaster].

TINKER: Oh yeah, the letter.

BENZIGER: About my ...

TINKER: About Gatlinburg.

BENZIGER: About Gatlinburg. And he had another little contest about have you ever met famous people. So I wrote and told him about meeting General [John] Pershing [commanded American Expeditionary Forces in World War I] and also this trip. [I] never heard a word from him. And what made me so mad, when he awarded the prizes, he awarded the prize to somebody that had written about Cades Cove, not about Gatlinburg at all.

TINKER: That’s not Gatlinburg.

BENZIGER: No, it isn’t.

TINKER: That’s not even anywhere near Gatlinburg.

BENZIGER: (Laughs) I know it.

TINKER: That’s a long trip.

BENZIGER: Yeah, it’s a long way along the river there to Elkmont and over the hill.

TINKER: Oh yeah. I was looking here at your resume and you’ve traveled all over. Now a lot of these I imagine were short trips, short jobs. Like say what would be your shortest type job?

BENZIGER: Oh, a couple of weeks. I’d go down like to Ecuador. And the way would already be prepared [with] transportation and all the rest. And they’d take me out to look at the site and see what I thought of it. and I’d write a report and come back.

TINKER: Okay, you would get there and you would see the results of the drilling that had already been done and things like that?

BENZIGER: Yeah, I never spent more than a couple of months at any one place.

TINKER: But all these—okay. ‘Cause you’ve went all over I see. All over the United States, South Korea. I see one here, Iran. You went to Iran?

BENZIGER: I got out a week before the hostage takeover.

TINKER: Oh really?

BENZIGER: The Canadians got me out.

TINKER: (Laughs) What?

BENZIGER: Our State Department was absolutely useless. I was at a project which was the Reza Shah Kabir hydroelectric project. This was when the Shah was still in power when this was built.

TINKER: Yeah, they were trying to build the infrastructure there.

BENZIGER. As a matter of fact, I stayed in his—there was a residence, actually it was a small palace at the project for his use. He’d used it once. One day. Then it just stayed empty. The hotel, or what they called the club, was full when I got there, so they put me up in his palace for one night.

TINKER: Did you complete the job before you left? Or you were in the middle of it?

BENZIGER: No way. I was in the middle [of the project]. But I’ll tell you what happened. I had been trying for two weeks to get the Iranians to bring in the drilling equipment. I’d go down every day to their office. “Well it’s on their way.” “Oh, the train wrecked.” “Uh, bandits got it.” Just one excuse after another. And I could see—I had a young man who was a captain in the Iranian army. He was workin’ as a civilian ... His father worked for the Shah. His mother was also, and his wife were still in uh, not Baghdad, Tehran. And we’d go out in the morning, at daylight, and do our work, whatever we could. About ten o’clock it got so hot we had to go back in. First thing he’d do, he’d rush back in and go to what they called the cable room. And he’d call his father. He never did tell me why. Boy, he was real anxious. Everybody there, all the Iranians, got kinda nasty. Well, one of the Canadians—Ontario Hydro [a Canadian hydroelectric power commission] had a bunch of people working over there as consultants. Ontario Hydro built the projects on the Canadian side of the river. Niagara Falls. Well anyhow, one of ‘em that I’d made friends with came up and said, “You’d better get packed.” And I said, “How come?” He said, “Something’s going on. We don’t know for sure but our embassy people have told us to get out.”

TINKER: So when you went to Iran you didn’t really have an idea of the level of unrest that was going on.

BENZIGER: No.

TINKER: And how far from Tehran were you?

BENZIGER: Oh gosh. Six, seven hundred miles. We were south, way south. And Tehran's almost on the north end. There's one big range of mountains between them and Russia. But anyhow, the Canadians got me down to, I wanna say Dubai, [but] it wasn't Dubai, Kuwait. I got a plane from there.

TINKER: When did you realize how things had went?

BENZIGER: Well I didn't know it. I was already back in the States before this takeover took over. But I was glad I didn't have to—oh, they had sent me down—when I left the project I went down to this town that's right where the Euphrates and the, what's that other river, come together. In the Golden Triangle. Anyhow, there was a general that lived right down the street from this guest house where I was staying, right on the shore of this river. Our guest house had a balcony. I go out on the balcony to take a peek, see what's going on. Boy, the house-boy came out and grabbed me and pulled me back in. "No. No." He wouldn't tell me why. He didn't have enough English. Well I finally found out, and I stayed off the balcony. The general had been ambushed and shot. I could see soldiers all over the place.

TINKER: Yeah.

BENZIGER: I go to the airport. I was supposed to catch a plane [at] eight o'clock in the morning. And I get to the airport, I don't know, it must have been about two o'clock in the morning. It was the only transportation I could get to go there. This was some sort of official transportation. And I got there, and I was the only one in the airport. I had my ticket and everything was okay, except there was an army officer I guess, or a police in uniform. He kept going around and checking all the trashcans, for bombs I guess. [He] looked at my passport must have been five or six times. (Laughs) Make sure. Passport and ticket.

TINKER: Well, it sounds like you had a good, long, varied career.

BENZIGER: Yes. Oh, I enjoyed all of it until the last couple years. Hydroelectric projects became passé, I guess you'd call it. There was too much environmental opposition. They were costly, and they weren't as efficient as thermal or nuclear plants, although they didn't cost as much. Even overseas, they quit thinking about them.

TINKER: They started going more nuclear.

BENZIGER: So anyhow, the Charles T. Main Hydro Division work was running out. There was several divisions. There was the Papermill Division and the Transmission Division that built transmission lines. I worked with them quite a bit on transmission tower foundations and places. And occasionally with the paper people.

TINKER: So by the time you're ready to retire, the work's kinda running out anyway.

BENZIGER: Last two years, I would hate to go into the office. There wasn't anything for me to do. And of course we had to turn in a weekly time chart, [to] show what we'd been working on, that sort of thing. And I was always around scrounging hours from other project managers. The boss, the chief of the hydro group, called me in his office one morning. It was the day the

timecards were due. And he said, “Chuck, I hate to tell you this, but today is your last day.” I grinned. I said, “Thank you, Bob.” I had been so frustrated [with having] nothing to do. I still had a staff of about eight guys and they were working on projects in Nigeria and other places. I went home that evening, got off the train. For some reason, Joyce had come over the train to meet me. Usually, it was about a half mile from the train station to the house.

TINKER: This is in Boston?

BENZIGER: Yeah, and I usually walked. This was in Walpole, Mass., which is twenty miles south of downtown Boston. I walked up to the car, I guess I was smiling, and Joyce says, “Don’t tell me. You’ve been fired.” I said, “Yeah, let’s go out and celebrate,” (Laughing) which we did.

TINKER: So how many years total did you live in Massachusetts?

BENZIGER: Twenty.

TINKER: Did you enjoy it?

BENZIGER: Joyce cried for a year when we left.

TINKER: Did she?

BENZIGER: Friends we had ... Everything going on up there.

TINKER: Oh well twenty years in a place ... Y’all moved around a lot. Where do your kids think that they’re from? If somebody says, “Where are you from?”

BENZIGER: Well all of ‘em were born in Tennessee except Suzie. Now, she’s the nurse down in Atlanta. And Suzie was born in Orange County, California.

TINKER: Let me pause this.

(Tape Paused)

TINKER: Think they’re from? You said they were all born in Tennessee except for Suzie.

BENZIGER: Except one. She was born in California but she was just a baby when we came back. She was in the, I think, in the second class of the nurse’s school here at UT.

TINKER: Oh wow.

BENZIGER: Either first or second.

TINKER: Did they all go to UT?

BENZIGER: All of them went to UT. Janet, the oldest daughter, she was a French major and she finally got a Master’s. She’s been teaching at Webb [private primary and secondary school in Knoxville]. Gosh, let’s see ... We came back in ’84 and she’d been there several years before that. She taught at UT-Martin for a while. French. And then she teaches uh, middle school at Webb. She’s still there, just on half time right now. She’s about ready to retire. Nancy, the second daughter, she’s the real achiever. She has MS [multiple sclerosis] and has had it for

twelve, fifteen years. While she had it, she got her Master's degree and her PhD here, her doctorate [at UT]. She's running something at Walters State [Community College in East Tennessee] where they find jobs for people, retrain them.

TINKER: At Walters State at the main campus?

BENZIGER: Morristown. Fifty miles a day each way she drives.

TINKER: She drives that?

BENZIGER: It drives us crazy. We keep telling Nancy, "Get a job in Knoxville at least." She doesn't have to work. Her husband's a CPA and he's ... And then as I told you, Suzie is the nurse. She was the captain at—she went right in the Air Force when she graduated from here. I got to visit her one time in California. Then she went to the Philippines. Well, I got to the Philippines for a project two weeks after she'd come home. (Laughs) And she was at that field that uh, was Clark Field [U.S. Air Force base]. It was inundated by the uh, not the tsunami, the mud flow. She had two young ladies, well both of 'em were married, but ... There were four of the nurses in this house and they had these two people doing housework, laundry and stuff. And both of them had died in this mudslide.

TINKER: That's terrible.

BENZIGER: That she found out later on. She came home before that was over and she was at, uh, below Miami. The one that got wiped out by the hurricane, the big field.

TINKER: Tyndall [Air Force Base]? Was it not Tyndall?

BENZIGER: Not Tyndall, uh, just south of Miami.

TINKER: I can't think of it either.

BENZIGER: I know. I know why.

TINKER: Well, what about uh ...

BENZIGER: I'll think of it in the middle of my ...

TINKER: Now is he Charles junior? Your son?

BENZIGER: Yes.

TINKER: And he went to UT?

BENZIGER: He came to UT for one year. He was practically raised up north.

TINKER: Is he the youngest?

BENZIGER: He was born here, in Knoxville, and he wasn't six months old before we took him to Niagara Falls. So he was a Yankee, really.

TINKER: (Laughs).

BENZIGER: He missed all his friends. He went back and went, after a year here, he went to U Mass [University of Massachusetts] for two years. And then he got a job with a geophysical surveying company. They were paying so much money, he didn't want to go back to school. He finally ended up at Bridgewater State [University in Massachusetts] with a degree in geography, of all things. Well, he couldn't find a job. He was cooking [at] various restaurants and he finally got a job as a taxi driver in Norwood, Mass. And as it turned out, about every Friday this passenger would call in and make sure that Chucky junior would be his driver for the evening. His job was to take him around to various bars and wait for him. The guy was a vice president of an engineering firm in Boston. He had lost his driver's license.

TINKER: Oh, (Laughs) I see.

BENZIGER: That's why Chuck was drivin' him around. He asked Chuck one time while he was doing this taxi driving, [Chuck] told him [that he] couldn't find a job as a geographer. The guy says, "You know anything about surveying?" He said, "Yeah, [I] took a surveying course." He says, "Come and go to work for me." He had an engineering firm in Boston. Well, it wasn't too long until this engineering firm acquired um, computer—CAD, computer aided drafting. [They] had nobody to run it. And they sent Chucky to California for two weeks to the factory to learn how to do this. He came back. He worked for them maybe a year or so and somethin' happened. He left and went to work for another firm. But he wasn't doing the CAD work. He looked around and he worked for, oh gosh, it's another old Boston engineering firm. But they do, um, infrastructure work: sewers, pipelines, streets, stuff like that. And Chuck runs their CAD department. He's got several guys working for him.

TINKER: Well, that's pretty good. From a taxi driver.

BENZIGER: So, he's happy. Besides he married a Yankee from Maine. She wouldn't come down. (Laughs) She'd come down for a visit but that's it.

TINKER: So, you really did raise a Yankee? (Laughs)

BENZIGER: Yeah.

TINKER: Well, you couldn't help it.

BENZIGER: Oh, he's a great Boston Red Sox fan, while I was also always a New York Yankees fan.

TINKER: Oh, yeah? Well that's fun isn't it? Let me ask you a couple more things and I'll let you go. One thing we forgot to talk about was, um, when you went back into the ROTC after the war and got your commission.

BENZIGER: Yeah. Well, I went back because we got paid for it. Plus, it was an elective. Uh, Senior ROTC ...

TINKER: So, if you stay—agreed to stay in the reserves ...

BENZIGER: Five years.

TINKER: Okay, five years.

BENZIGER: Now, let me tell you a story about that. And you'll like this. You remember Frank C. Clement, Governor of Tennessee?

TINKER: Yeah, yeah.

BENZIGER: This was before he was governor. But he was national commander of the American Legion at the time. I was minding my own business—Joyce and I lived on the corner of Papermill and Northshore Drive at the time, before they tore everything down to build houses ... offices. Postman came, I was mowing the grass. And he handed me a special delivery, [an] official letter. I opened it and it said, "You will report this day at noon"—now, this was ten o'clock—"at noon, to Fort Bragg for deployment to Korea." I hadn't been to even a reserve—I went to one reserve meeting the whole time I was in Knoxville. They issued me a pistol belt and a uh, field desk. Neither one of which I ever saw. I had to sign for 'em.

TINKER: (Laughs)

BENZIGER: But, course I got all excited. I called up the local reserve and this there sergeant there says, "Just calm down, Buddy." He says, "Look on page two at such and such a name. It's Frank C. Clement, First Lieutenant Frank C. Clement." That whole order, fifty names, was killed. Nobody went.

TINKER: Why?

BENZIGER: At least involuntarily. Some of them wanted to go, you know. But there was nobody on that list that was ordered in. Shortly after that, my reserve commission expired. But I would have gone to Korea. And I tell you what, my later work in Korea—boy, I'm glad I didn't. Course I was there in the wintertime. Oh man, it was miserable. And I was there in the summertime, too. Korea's nothing but mountains.

TINKER: I wanted to ask you. I usually like to ask veterans if they feel like their military service or their training or something they experienced in that realm really stayed with 'em and helped them or hindered you in your civilian life and work later? I mean, do you know what I mean?

BENZIGER: I know what you mean. I'll tell you something. I wasn't much of a student before the war. When I got back I knew I had to do something. So I stuck with it. I even made the Dean's List once or twice.

TINKER: So you feel like the training and the having to sit down and learn something in the military helped you be a better ...

BENZIGER: Yes, right. Now the Air Corps back in those days, at least the combat crews, discipline was—I mean, uh, everybody took care of other people. But there was no, uh, none of this ...

TINKER: But the classroom discipline helped you?

BENZIGER: Oh yeah. I think so.

TINKER: Yeah, I don't see how it could not. Well is there anything you wanna mention or that you think we haven't covered or anything you'd like to say for the record?

BENZIGER: I'll tell you something right now. I've talked to you more than I've ever talked about my military experience.

TINKER: Oh, really? Well good. That's what I like to hear. Oh, I found online on that website we were telling you about earlier, do you remember the tail number of your plane?

BENZIGER: No.

TINKER: 'Cause I was looking through this list and I didn't see your plane's name on here but it has ...

BENZIGER: Oh, it didn't have a name.

TINKER: It has a whole list of tail numbers.

BENZIGER: That list ... this came from, uh, *Coffee Tower*, which is a book.

TINKER: Oh, okay. Yeah I saw the book for sale on Amazon. *Coffee Tower*. What does that mean, *Coffee Tower*?

BENZIGER: You did? How much were they askin' for it?

TINKER: I don't remember. I can look it up again.

BENZIGER: Several years ago, Joyce and I were on one of these, uh, river queens and we stopped in uh, what's the mouth of the Tennessee River? Not Portsmouth. Anyhow, that's the place where the book was published, which I didn't know. I already had one. Well I was walking down the street while we had a few hours ashore, and I saw this book place. I looked in the window and here was a [copy of] *Coffee Tower*. So I, two or three people asked me for copies, so I went in and I says, "I'll take that." "No, you won't. That's our only copy." (Laughs)

TINKER: So people are trying to find copies of this.

BENZIGER: So they were all out of print.

TINKER: Well, if you don't have anything else to add, I guess I'll just thank you again for coming. We appreciate it.

BENZIGER: Well, you're quite welcome. I have enjoyed it.

TINKER: We'll get David to work on the transcript that you'll be able to read.

BENZIGER: Okay, that's great.

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