May, Robert L. Interview 11-13-91

[Speaker 2]
This is Stan Tinsley speaking. Today I am interviewing Colonel Robert May of 117 Collier Road in Powell, Tennessee, in regard to his experiences during World War II. Thank you.

You'll get a copy of this. Colonel May, when did you go in the service?

[Speaker 1]
Well, I was commissioned in 1934 as a 2nd Lieutenant of Infantry, Aero-Pixie at the University of Tennessee.

[Speaker 2]
Okay, and what lines of service were you in?

[Speaker 1]
Infantry.

[Speaker 2]
How old were you?

[Speaker 1]
I was 21, I believe.

[Speaker 2]
Any other members of your immediate family in the service? Brothers or sisters?

[Speaker 1]
No, just a brother-in-law, a foreign agent.

[Speaker 2]
Okay, is he your brother-in-law?

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, I married my sister.

[Speaker 2]
I see. I think, if you will, just start and tell me about your experiences in the infantry all up to the time you went overseas. Stop there and we'll put you in your training and all that.

[Speaker 1]
I was commissioned in the infantry, and strangely enough, I never served in an infantry assignment. When I was called to active duty in January of 1942, I was assigned to the 1st Armored Division. Thirty of us, all Lieutenants Reserve.

Three of us were assigned to Division Headquarters, and I was assigned to the Adjutant General's Office. I'd never heard of the Adjutant General's Office in my life, didn't know what it was, and that's where I started on that track. I stayed with that all during the trip to Ireland, where the Division stayed there, until we moved to Liverpool, and then went on the invasion of North Africa from Liverpool.

[Speaker 2]
Excuse me, what do you do when you're in the Adjutant General's Office?

[Speaker 1]
That's basically the administrative and personnel functions of the unit.

[Speaker 2]
You were talking about North Africa?

[Speaker 1]
We went into North Africa in the invasion in late 1942. I remember very distinctly that one battalion of our division went in on a British destroyer. It was a French warship in the harbor at Oran, and they opened up point-blank on this destroyer and killed most everybody, if not everybody, in that battalion, about 600 men.

There was a Lieutenant Colonel George Marshall, strangely enough the same name as the Chief Staff of the Army, that was commanding that battalion. He had just joined us at Fort Dix before we went overseas. We went from Oran across Algiers into Tunisia, and we were at Kasserine Pass when this fellow Romoff came barreling across the desert and almost whipped us right there.

We lost lots of men, lots of tanks, and so forth. Incidentally, back during those days, we had towed 37s. That's these little pop guns.

The tanks had the guns in the sponsonment tanks, not in the turret. They had steel treads instead of the rubber treads which you have now. I don't believe the turret would swing more than 90 degrees.

That would have been 180, but it had to swing it. Then we ended up in Tunisia, Tunis, the town of Tunis, which we captured several thousand Germans and ran them off, brought them into the sea. Then we pulled back across the desert to the town of Rabat in Morocco, getting ready to go into Italy, invasion of Sicily in Italy.

That was when I then returned to the United States for a couple of months. Later returned in March of 1944 to Europe, or to England, and joined General Eisenhower's headquarters.

[Speaker 2]
You got your own brass lead or something when you came back?

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, a temporary assignment at Fort Knox. I got there just at the time the buzz bombs started, the B-1s and the B-2s. Very interesting story about that.

I was living with a British family right close to Bushy Park. That's where our headquarters was. Bushy Park was a suburb of London.

One day, this friend I was living with, he was an air raid warden of some sort, and he came back telling the tale that it had an air raid and they'd shot down the plane, but they couldn't

find the pilot. There wasn't any pilot to it. We had intelligence, and I knew, of course, couldn't tell him.

This was a B-2 that didn't have any pilot. It was very interesting. We stayed there and moved to southern France, I mean southern England, to get prepared for the invasion across the Channel.

The headquarters stayed, the main part of the headquarters stayed back until they were well in England. I mean, well in France. We moved across the Channel and then moved to Paris.

Our offices were in the stables of the Versailles Palace. That sounds like kind of crummy, but those stables were really fancy out there, and it was an office that you could find anyplace. I guess what we'd use as offices had been for the people to live there and handle the horses.

I had quite a few experiences there. One of the highlights was that my immediate superior was General Ray Barker, an artillery general, who had gone to England in 1941 and had started planning Operation Overlord in 1941 and 1942. Sir Frederick Morgan was the senior British planner, and the two of them were the staff of U.S. and British, planned Operation Overlord. And then after the African campaign was over, General Eisenhower brought most of his staff from Africa back to London, and that's what formed the Shave Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces. General Eisenhower was the Supreme Commander, Lord Tedder was the Deputy Commander, and General Beedle-Smith was his Chief of Staff. He was quite noteworthy, quite a taskmaster.

I lived next door to him one time in Frankfurt. He later was head of the Central Intelligence Agency and then was later ambassador to Russia before he retired, or after he retired, rather. A great friend of Ike's, he was an infantry officer.

When we were in France, it was the job of my general, who I was executive to, General Barker, to draft the surrender documents. And I assisted in doing that, had them in my hand. And they were signed in the little town of Reims where the surrender took place.

And I've often been sorry that we didn't have the reproductive facilities because for a couple of days I had the, or one day I had the surrender documents, the signed surrender documents in my hand. And they would have been a wonderful memento to have, but I didn't have. The British staff, I mean the chief staff was integrated staff.

A little sidelight, we did have some French too. And de Gaulle was, he was a military man, later President of France. When we went into France, he was insisting on certain things, which he didn't have much power in the way of military strength.

But they bowed to his wishes. As a matter of fact, when they took Paris, I think they pulled back to some extent to let him and some of his forces go in, maybe first, something like that. We had a lot of conflicts over there.

Among, and I say I was in the British, we had what they called a communication zone. General John C. H.

Lee was commander of the communication zone. He was a three-star general. That was under Ike, but also under General Somerville in Washington, who was the head of the Army Service Forces.

And General Lee took all of his people into Paris when the town was liberated. And Ike didn't want him in Paris. He told him to move, and he didn't move.

I remember a telegram that General Beatlesmith sent to John C. H. Lee says, when General Eisenhower asks for an order, he expects it to be obeyed.

But he never did move. He stayed in Paris.

[Speaker 2]
Surprised he got away with that.

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, him too. Well, we had a difficulty back then too. They handled the nuts and bolts of the personnel and the replacements.

And it became apparent that they were draining off combat replacements for their service forces back in Paris and other places, breaking them up and getting some of the cream. So there was quite a row about that.

[Speaker 2]
Why did General Eisenhower want this guy out of Paris?

[Speaker 1]
Well, there were a lot of other places they could have operated just as well. And Paris was a den of inequity and a flesh pot. I guess that was the reason.

And we didn't stay in there long in the chief headquarters. Oh, while we were in Paris, we had, this is just a sidelight, we had in our headquarters a Russian liaison. And we had a Russian major general by the name of Dragoon.

And we'd overrun some Russian prisoners of war. And so we had liberated them and had them in a compound someplace. And some of them were giving us an awful lot of trouble.

And so we complained to this Russian major general Dragoon about the trouble these Russian prisoners were giving us. Well, he says, if you will give me their names, I will go down there personally and shoot them. So that was another interesting sidelight I had.

We were responsible for prisoners of war and their welfare, both ours and the enemy's too, the G1 section that came with them. So it was apparent that the Russians were going to overrun quite a few of our prisoners that the Germans had taken in their zone. So a British brigadier and I went up to the town of Torgau on the Elbe River.

And we were there when we first met up with the Russians, the U.S. forces and the Russians met at Torgau. And we negotiated at least for three days just to get the Russians to agree for us to go over into their zone to try to pick up, find our prisoners of war. We never did get there in time to pick them up, they infiltrated out before we could get in.

We had taken 200 C-47s, that's aircraft, 200 aircraft, to haul those boys out of there. And we never did get there. We got to sign a few of them, but they straggled out and got out themselves.

[Speaker 2]
They did get out?

[Speaker 1]
Yeah. Oh, yes. But that was some experience in meeting up with that Russian.

They were a little bit brutal.

[Speaker 2]
And they weren't going to let you in there?

[Speaker 1]
They didn't. I guess they had to get some higher approval. This was a three-starred Russian general that we were dealing with.

I guess he was an Army Air Corps.

[Speaker 2]
Weren't you all using a tarp here so you could talk back and forth?

[Speaker 1]
Usually, yes. And some of them could speak English. That was an interesting experience.

I remember landing, going that way in these puddle jumpers, we called them the Artillery Observation Airplanes, those bitty fellers. But more than $1,700 worth of airplanes. And we landed at Leipzig on the way to Torgau.

And there were holes all over the runway. And we dodged them, of course. Just as we landed, the Germans came in and out there.

There were mines out there all over the airport. Luckily, we missed them. I'll take a look back on those things.

It kind of gives you the gold, too.

[Speaker 2]
I'll tell you. A lot of luck you're still here, I guess. Well, what next?

You're continuing on with your service experience.

[Speaker 1]
Well, after the shift was over, I came back with General Powell. He commanded the 26th Division during the war. He's in this Third Army history.

General Eisenhower made him his personnel G1 in Schaef. So I was in Schaef, so that's when I first met General Powell. And he put me in a little office off to the side to handle the redeployment of general officers going to the Far East.

The war went over there. And that's the way I got started in that general officer business. General Powell came back to Washington and the Pentagon and brought me back and gave me a similar job in Washington.

One of my first jobs, in addition to this reduction of the generals, was to figure out how many generals we'd have in the postwar army. And General Powell told me to figure out close to 500. I used his wrapping paper and took it to my apartment out in Farlington and worked on it for days and days.

I wasn't getting anyplace. I was a greenhorn. I was a lieutenant colonel.

So I went to him one day and asked him for a little help. He said, well, I'll tell you. I'll send you down.

Let's talk to Big Simp. Oh, hell, I didn't know who Big Simp was. He called Big Simp and said, he's sending this young maid down there to talk with you.

He said, so-and-so in the Pentagon, so I went down there. The secretary issued me in. And there was a table that looked like this, as long as from here to the University of Tennessee.

And they were surrounded by about 12 generals. And the head of it was General Simpson. He was an army commander in Europe during World War II.

And they were studying the reorganization of the army. He sat me down right beside him with all these damn generals there looking at me. And he said, now, young man, what is your problem?

Hell, I didn't know whether or not I had a problem. But if I did, I didn't know what to ask about. But I finally, we finally got some help from him.

And that was my introduction into the Pentagon incident. I guess General Paul figured the baptism of fire is the best way to kill a man.

[Speaker 2]
What did you think of the British in general?

[Speaker 1]
Boy, they're good. They're good. They had a decoy plan, both in communications and in rubber tanks and so forth down on the coast that just threw the hell out of the Germans.

The traffic on the radios. And then from an aerial observation, they would think you were down there going to jump off at a certain place and you jumped off at an entirely different place. Let's see now.

That's about it. Over here is an island. It was an island in 1942.

We were billeted in a castle, Castle Welland. And it was not too far from Belfast. We were there for I guess four or five months.

Trained up and down those hills. It was awful. Running every morning before breakfast.

But I met my first member of the Irish Republican Army there.

[Speaker 2]
Oh, really? Yeah.

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, they were in existence then.

[Speaker 2]
How did they behave during World War II?

[Speaker 1]
Well, you can hear it. Okay. Oh, I'll tell you.

You can't reproduce this without short figures. When we were in Paris, we lived in the home of Dr. François Debas. He was a pharmaceutical, owned a pharmaceutical firm.

And he had this great big house out at St. Cloud. And had a wall around it. Had three staff of maids in the house.

Had a yard gardener. And a little house at the gate with a gatekeeper. And that's where I lived with this John Barker while we were in Paris.

[Speaker 2]
Well, that wasn't hard to take, was it?

[Speaker 1]
Living like you'd like to become accustomed.

[Speaker 2]
Oh, boy. There wasn't really much damage done, if any, to Paris, was there?

[Speaker 1]
Very little.

[Speaker 2]
It was an open city, as far as the Germans were concerned.

[Speaker 1]
Well, while we were there, we had several visitors. David Niven, incidentally, was on our staff, G1 staff. And he visited us out in this chateau several times.

And that's where Glenn Miller came over and stayed with me. Yes, sir. I think it was about a week before he flew over there and was lost.

[Speaker 2]

I talked to a pilot that served both in the ETO and then was transferred over to the Pacific. And I asked him, how did he prepare? He said, they don't prepare.

He says, when it comes to killing people, those Germans know how to do it. He said, the Japs don't prepare. He said, they weren't nearly as efficient in their fighters or their anti-aircraft or anything as the Germans.

He said, those guys will kill you in a hurry. I guess that's pretty much the way of thinking it was back then.

[Speaker 1]
Now, when I was... Let me see if I can find it here. When I was in Panama, I was deeply involved in negotiations with the Republic of Panama.

This is a letter from the governor to me, Governor of Panama, Joe Potter. Which will describe a little bit about what I...

[Speaker 2]
It's a nice letter.

[Speaker 1]
We made several trips to Washington. We were working on trying to establish a single wage scale for the Panamanians and the United States citizens down there. And I worked with the governor and his staff and the ambassador and his staff.

We made several trips with the ambassador back to Washington. This is a letter that Joe Potter wrote to General Montague, the commander.

[Speaker 2]
How long were you in Panama? Four years. What years were you there?

[Speaker 1]
Fifty-three to fifty-seven. Incidentally, when I first went there, the Secretary was Lieutenant General William K. Harris, Jr. Incidentally, he was an ordained Baptist minister. He's the one that conducted and signed the Panamanian-Jordan talks in Korea. Just after he signed those, he came to Panama and became a very close friend of mine. He's since died, but we used to go deep-sea fishing.

That was a playground down in Panama. We did work, but we played too.

[Speaker 2]
This General Lacey, I remember, I mentioned he was a cousin of mine, and he was a Panamanian-Jordanian.

[Speaker 1]
What's his name?

[Speaker 2]
L-A-C-E-Y, Lacey. I've got some pictures of him.

[Speaker 1]
I believe he came there just shortly. Was he a one-star? Yeah, at that time.

I think he came there as chief of staff to the Air Force commander down there.

[Speaker 2]
Could have been. He picked up some sort of bug over there that he never really got over. I don't think they know him as they would in Korea.

[Speaker 1]
General Harrison was quite a character. He didn't drink, didn't smoke. Typical Baptist.

Typical Baptist. We'd go out on the deep-sea fishing. We had a 65-foot criss-cross which was used for fishing.

He'd get up early in the morning. He wouldn't wear glasses. He said he could exercise his eyes, and if he kept the muscles strong enough, he wouldn't have to wear glasses.

He'd get up and do these funny eye exercises in the daylight. He was a pistol. I dearly loved the fellow.

He was a wonderful person.

[Speaker 2]
Well, I bet the fishing was good down there, too.

[Speaker 1]
Oh, yeah. He caught about a—he was over a 300-pound black marlin. I never did hook one, but he did.

And he fought that thing for the better part of four hours. He wouldn't let anybody touch him. We had chairs in the back of the boat with harness and the whole thing.

It almost got him. He was in his 60s then. Well, that's a tough fight, I'll tell you.

It nearly got him, but he fought him and got him in there.

[Speaker 2]
Well, let's see.

[Speaker 1]
I was down there in Panama when they assassinated one of Panama's presidents. Oh, is that right? Yeah, I was dubbing him a Ramon.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah, I remember that.

[Speaker 1]
The rumor was that Mrs. Ramon was involved in his assassination as his wife. She was the owner of all the boaty houses down there. The night before he was assassinated, there was a little club.

I was at Corey Heights, and there was a little club just down the hill. We had some sort of little party, and I was sitting down there at the bar talking to somebody sitting up at the bar. And here came old Ramon and sat down next to me.

Well, if you're in Panama, you don't associate with those people too closely, do you? So I moved away into safer territory. Luckily, they didn't try to kill him that night, but they got him several nights later.

[Speaker 2]
You all didn't socialize with them very much?

[Speaker 1]
Oh, yes, with the senior ones. But it was just everybody had an embassy down there. Everybody had an ambassador and an embassy.

And the senior was a papal nuncio. He was the senior ambassador there in the Vatican. And they all had their cocktail parties once in a while.

And it was about the senior military. And the senior military, the three-star general would get tired of going. He'd tell the two-star to go, and he'd get tired of going.

And on down the line, and I almost wore myself out going to those parties, because they were all the same.

[Speaker 2]
You know, I was thinking the other night, doing this thing, and there were some of the younger guys. He called his staff. Evidently, he had to have a junior officer or this, that, and the other.

And he was showing me that life was nothing but a ball. The war had about a year to go, and all we did was play.

[Speaker 1]
Incidentally, back during my ROTC college days, there was a young captain came there by the name of Bruce Clark. He was an engineer officer. And he became a warrior, I remember, assigned to the assistant PMS. He had the shiniest boots and these high-peg bridges, and he was a sharp one. He became one of my closest friends, and he ended up four stars commanding the European theater. I remember there was a Sergeant Sullivan, an old man, a regular Army sergeant assigned to the ROTC teaching detachment. And a Sergeant Johnson, he was the first sergeant, the meanest son of a bitch I've ever known.

Oh, he was mean. But Sergeant Sullivan was, there was three of us just trying to get out of jail. There's Bill Weigel, you know, one of the Weigel boys.

Yeah, I know Bill. Bill, he's dead now. Todd Hanley, you know, and myself, we were buglers.

So Weigel were, and this old Sergeant Sullivan was our instructor. I understand Todd is pretty sick now.

[Speaker 2]
I've heard that. I haven't heard that.

[Speaker 1]
I haven't seen him in years and years and years. I didn't even know his name was Gustave until...

[Speaker 2]
Yeah, he was chief up there at Miller's for an awful long time.

[Speaker 1]
But we were the buglers. But this old Sergeant Sullivan was a great big old fat... I guess he was in his 60s at that time.

Oh, and in this CMTC camp that I went to in 1930, there was a... I met a Sergeant Napier, and I will forget him, and he had a crooked nose. And they took us in down there, took all of our civilian clothes, and we were put in this great big building.

Took every one of our clothes. We were just naked as a jaybird. And they showed us our uniforms, put them in a knapsack, and told us to go to a certain campsite.

And when I got to that campsite, the old Sergeant Napier hadn't arrived. I just arrived at my tent. He says, you have made your bunk.

You're on KP. That was his way of selecting people for KP. He knew you had to have some KP, so he selected it that way.

Son of a bitch. Then when I was a second lieutenant in 1945, went to the CC camp at Maryville. I had to go to Fort Oglethorpe to...

That was the headquarters of our CC camps. I went down there, and there was... It was Private Napier.

He'd been busted. And he was chasing prisoners. Well, I waited until Private Napier got off duty.

I said, you don't remember me, do you? I was a second lieutenant then. You know, a second lieutenant's the lowest form of life.

You know, to begin with. But I said... And I told him what he did to me.

[Speaker 2]
Did you ever hear of this Colonel Moore over here at Knox High School, head of the ROTC unit over there? No. Oh, he was the meanest one I ever ran into.

Major Moore. He wasn't Colonel, he was Major Moore. Why?

[Speaker 1]
Well, he probably wasn't even in the Army when I retired. I haven't retired in 21 years. I retired in 68.

[Speaker 2]
Well, let's see. I was over there in...

[Speaker 1]
Oh, you mean back...

[Speaker 2]
Yeah, back a long time ago. 37 and 38, I guess. And they had ROTC in high school.

They had some good units, man. They were very competitive.

[Speaker 1]
I remember the... What was the principal's name at Knox-Woloski? Was that Evans?

[Speaker 2]
Yeah. Evans.

[Speaker 1]
And he had a son.

[Speaker 2]
Right. I forget that boy's name.

[Speaker 1]
His son had the same name as his father, as a matter of fact.

[Speaker 2]
You know, it's so unusual, and it's almost forgotten. Give me a little history back on this CCC thing. Even though it's not...

[Speaker 1]
Well, it was established by Roosevelt in 19, I guess, right after he came here. To give people jobs. And they established camps all over the United States.

And in the TVA area, they were mostly all forester camps. And in the Smoky Mountains, too. And there was about 200 to 220 in each camp.

They had two army officers and a doctor. And I don't remember what they called him. He was sort of a special-service man, an entertainment advisor or whatever you call it.

That was one staff. And then the Forest Service had a superintendent of the camp. Several people that supervised the crews as they went out to work.

All of the crews in the camp that I was in cut the trees in Norris Reservoir before it was impounded. They cleared the reservoir. But they built, you know, up in the Smokies, to Clayton's Dome, that way.

This road goes around, down to the tunnel. They built those tunnels. Rock work.

And there's a lot of retaining walls all the way up through there. CC's built a majority of those.

[Speaker 2]
But they were put in there to give them jobs. Tell me, how much were they paid?

[Speaker 1]
$21 a month.

[Speaker 2]
$21 a month. And they wore military-type uniforms.

[Speaker 1]
Yep.

[Speaker 2]
They got $5. In the camp.

[Speaker 1]
The rest of them went home. We had a canteen. A PX, we called them canteens back then.

It sold various items. And they could get canteen checks, which was kits to buy stuff based on what pay you might get. And, of course, the senior leaders would give some of the poor boys a dollar for a $2 canteen check.

Give them a dollar. So you'd make money that way.

[Speaker 2]
We had a lot of canteens there. And what did you say, cost of feeding them, and how well were they? It was $0.45 a day.

[Speaker 1]
And you could have T-bone steaks and anything you wanted at $0.45. That was the ration. We could buy on the local market, and then we'd get supplies from Fort Oglethorpe through Tazewell, and ship them up to Tazewell.

[Speaker 2]
That was a very successful experiment. It was very successful.

[Speaker 1]
And it trained a lot of Army officers, not in any tactical sense, but in the administrative sense.

[Speaker 2]
Right. It resulted in a hound of people, I'm sure.

[Speaker 1]
That's the only experience that I'd ever had. I was in the CC, and then one and two weeks active duty between that and the time I was called active service in 1942. Incidentally, there was a, I remember, another officer in this ROTC unit, the captain head of the GAD, and I wondered if he was any kind of a coach over there.

He might be.

[Speaker 2]
And he was a local girl from up here in Sevierville, I think.

[Speaker 1]
He could have retired and lived here. That would have probably been her grandfather.

[Speaker 2]
Could have been. Yeah. When did you get back in the States?

It doesn't have to be exact. No, I know that.

[Speaker 3]
You got it there.

[Speaker 1]
It was November of 1945. Incidentally, I got married 50 years ago, the 22nd of this month.

[Speaker 3]
Did you?

[Speaker 1]
And I was called active duty then the 24th of January. Then immediately went overseas January of 1942 and got married in 1945.

[Speaker 2]
Congratulations. That's a long time.

[Speaker 1]
That's the way to have a happy married man and leave him. I was back for about three months or so during the time I came back from Africa and went back to Europe.

[Speaker 2]
Let's see, I guess you're right. He was in Panama with you.

[Speaker 1]
Yeah. That's the only foreign service he's been with.

[Speaker 2]
I see.

[Speaker 1]
I had the unusual, very few country boys as dumb as I was and as inexperienced as I was and was lucky to get to be associated with people at General Highstown.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

Churchill used to come to our headquarters quite frequently in Montgomery and I knew General Matt Ridgeway quite well and all those senior officers. We dealt with them because I was handling the assignment of all generals. They were interested in that.

[Speaker 2]
Well, I guess you were pretty sophisticated by that time.

[Speaker 1]
No, I wasn't. I never did get more confused as it went on. The interesting thing, there was a general, John Dahlquist, who was commanding a division in Austria, I believe it was, and he shook hands with Hermann Goering when they captured him.

[Speaker 2]
Is that right?

[Speaker 1]
Boy, that set the press afire. They didn't know why in hell he would shake hands with an enemy. So on this merit list that I told you about, he ended up quite a ways down.

He was a major general two-star at this time. And then during the pre-war, or post-war, he went back to one star. But he later made it back and was four stars and commanded Army ground forces at Fort Monroe, Virginia.

He's since died.

[Speaker 2]
What possessed him to do that?

[Speaker 1]
Well, the gentleman soldiers.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah, well, he...

[Speaker 1]
Incidentally, while I was in Paris, another interesting trip I took, this General Barker, who I lived with in this chateau you saw there. One other colonel lived there. There was three of us lived there.

We had three maids, gatekeeper, gardener, whatever. We went back to Luxembourg, and that's where the incarcerated Goering and all the senior German characters that were still living. So we went back there, and we spent a couple of days there talking with them.

I was in the party. General Barker and myself, two of us, and his aide.

[Speaker 2]
Was it just general conversation, or were you trying to get...

[Speaker 1]
Just general conversation.

[Speaker 2]
Wasn't Goering commit suicide, or was he... He did.

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, before he took some sort of capsule and smashed it in his mouth, you know, before they hung him. He was tried at the time. I mean, at the Nuremberg trials.

But to be so insignificant as far as the Army is concerned, and then get that opportunity to know all these people. It was a liberal education to me. I could have never dreamed of having had the experience that I've had.

[Speaker 2]
Oh, gosh, yeah. I've loved every minute of it. You've had a very interesting life in the service.

[Speaker 1]
I've loved every minute of it. Oh, another experience that I had. Officers are ranked from the day they graduate from the military academy or they're appointed.

The rank among themselves depends on where they stand on the promotion list. The senior and the best graduate at the military academy, usually an engineer, is at the top, so he's senior to all the rest of them, all of his career, if they have the same rank. They go back to that promotion list.

But during the war, when they had temporary promotions, I was all jumbled up. So General Eisenhower decided while I was there, and this became my job too, to get them all back to their relative permanent ranks if they were all in the same grade. So we tried to do that, and that brought on some peculiar situations because here there's a senior man who'd been promoted over several people, and he's two major generals, and he was senior to this other major general who maybe had worked for him.

And then when we adjusted these dates of rank, they had to get authority from Congress to do it, then it just became the opposite. Another reason they did that, though, we were integrated with the Navy so long, the Navy Rear Admiral, they don't have a Brigadier General. They had the old rank of Commodore, but they don't use it.

They had the rank of Rear Admiral, Upper Half and Lower Half. The Lower Half is equivalent to our Brigadier General, and the Upper Half is equivalent to our Major General. But this Rear Admiral of the Lower Half would keep the rank, the date of appointment when he went up to the Upper Half.

So invariably, Navy officers would have rank in Army officers in the second. So that was an attempt to correct this. Back during that time, the National Defense Act, I've forgotten when it was, promulgated probably in the 20s, the Army was only allowed 21 permanent major generals.

I've forgotten how many brigadiers. And that permanent major general could stay on until he was age 65. There was much sought after.

There was one man, whom I won't name, told General Eisenhower that he was about to retire at age 62. He says, if you'll just appoint me permanent major general, I'll go ahead and retire right now. Well, General Ike, one of the 21s, promoted him.

And the old gent decided not to retire then. I've never seen a madder man in my life. Ike had a terrible temper.

He had a fiery temper. He did? Yeah.

[Speaker 2]
I bet he was hot.

[Speaker 1]
And then another interesting experience I had, not related to Army activity, but when General Bradley was chief of staff, when he was the second lieutenant at Fort Benning, he was class of 15 in the military academy, they started a poker game down there. And from 15 on, whenever a bunch of them got together, they played poker. So when General Bradley was chief of staff, I got invited to join that poker game one winter.

Played over his quarters at Fort Myer, somebody else's house. He was a cagey poker. He played no limit poker and didn't settle up for a tenth.

I remember one time we were playing, and it was obvious that we were playing stead poker. It was obvious that I had a pair of jacks back, and he had a pair of queens. And for some reason, I got stubborn, and he kept betting the hell out of me, and I wouldn't turn.

Finally, on the last card I had, the third jack. Beat it too quick. He said, young man, he said, you will never beat it worth a damn in this man's army as long as you don't use any better judgment than that.

I rigged it, and I said, thank you, sir, thank you, sir. He was a wonderful fellow.

[Speaker 2]
I'll tell you, that can be a big game, though, even playing back on all those games.

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, it was a big game.

[Speaker 2]
A lot of money changed hands with that. He played what was called Mississippi poker, and that pays off the 20th. But he can get up there pretty good.

Of course, it wouldn't be so bad, but they got to play in these damn wild games, and that's one thing that made sense.

[Speaker 1]
Things like that come to you after you start talking to them. Another interesting thing happened to me when I was over at the university just to show you how times have changed. Dean Massey was the dean of men over there, and the girls' glee club was going up

to King College to sing, and I finagled the car for my dad, and I took one or two of them up there.

I think it was just one. I was kind of sweet on her. Sing, and we didn't get back until after daylight the next morning.

She was staying in the dormitory. That was my downfall. At 10 o'clock that morning, I was called to Dean Massey's office.

The matron had reported that and who the boy was, and boy, did I get it.

[Speaker 2]
I bet.

[Speaker 1]
I remember the girl's name, unfortunately. I wouldn't tell you if I did, but I think he suspended me for two days or something like that. Back then, we had chapel every day, and you were assigned a seat number at the chapel.

It first started down Jefferson Hall. It was down there, an old frame building down next to Common Avenue. Then they finally built that new memorial stadium there, or whatever you call it.

But they'd go by and take your numbers if you weren't filling that seat. I've forgotten how many absences you could have, but you couldn't have more than one or two.

[Speaker 2]
My wife stayed at Tyson's house over there. This was before I met her. She got in trouble.

There was a perfectly innocent bunch of them, five or six of them, and they piled in a car and went to Chattanooga one afternoon or night. The car broke down, and she got back in at 4 o'clock in the morning or something like that, and boy, she really caught it. I'm telling you, they could really throw you out if you did another offense.

I think they were out of the university.

[Speaker 1]
They were very strict.

[Speaker 2]
This was before I met her, but I'd heard about it. I said, I hear you're a pretty wild girl. She said, well, it sounds that way, but I'm not.

[Speaker 1]
What year did she go there?

[Speaker 2]
Let's see. We were in the same class. We were in the class of 43.

I guess this was 41 and 42. I didn't go back.

[Speaker 1]
My sister was in the class of 64 years after me. I was 34. She's 38, I guess.

[Speaker 2]
They came through there, and we'll forget it, talking to a bunch of us that had a little ROTC, and said, we'll commission you into the Marine Corps now, as second lieutenants. I said, I got to think about that, because the guys that did, they ended up in Guadalcanal. Not many of them came back.

[Speaker 1]
Well, I'll tell you, I told you there's 30 of us lieutenants. I was in the first lieutenant for the rest of them, for seconds, incidentally, assigned to Fort Knox in 1942. Three of us assigned to division headquarters, and I was assigned to the Agent General's office.

One assigned to G3, and one assigned to Signal, I believe it was. I guess he'd answer the telephone sometimes. It was about that simple.

But the others were assigned to the regiments, and very few of them got back. Going in that early.

[Speaker 2]
Pretty high attrition right back then.

[Speaker 1]
I remember when we went into Catherine Pass, which is a famous battle we had down there. We were greenhorns. We hadn't fought.

Our division commander, his name was Orlando Ward, was a lead. And I think unjustly so. But they felt that the division had been together too long.

The officers, everybody knew each other. Everybody knew each other's wives. Too friendly.

They couldn't look at him personally. They brought a fellow named Ernie Hartman, Ernest H. Hartman, Major General, and he was a ripped, snorting bastard.

He brought all of us officers together. Right in that damn swale where we could have been bombed. And he said, All right, most of you bastards have lived too long already.

That was his introduction. He went from there. But we had these tanks that we had then.

They were riveted tanks, not welded. And one of these armor-piercing shells would hit that tank and it'd just form a pretty big red spot. And those rivets would fly inside that tank just like this in there.

Kill several of you like that. They had us outgunned. They had this 88-millimeter famous German gun.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah, I've heard of that thing.

[Speaker 1]
And we had, I remember, we had a little old Colt 37 over at the university, ROTC, a little bitty old gun, 37-millimeter. And you'd get the pop gun. And we had some of those.

But we had three artillery battalions in the division. The division had an infantry regiment, two armored regiments, and three artillery battalions, reconnaissance battalions, and a signal company. About 20,000 men in armor.

[Speaker 2]
Well, which was the first battle, the one we lost over there in North Africa? That was it. The one we lost.

Yeah. We didn't lose it, but we didn't win it.

[Speaker 1]
Yeah. We pulled back, we pulled back. It was the Kasserine Pass.

[Speaker 2]
That's what I was saying. Yeah. And the general was relieved, and this fellow you were talking about.

Harmon came in there. The state's Harmon. Then you won from then on, didn't you?

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, definitely. Well, what happened to us? That old Rommel just got his line of communication too long.

He couldn't support it. We ran in front of him, and he couldn't catch us. That was the substance of it.

But that place was flat down there in the sand dunes. And I thought it would be deserts. I've always thought of Africa as a desert country and hotter than hell.

Boy, it was cold in the winter. We went down there in November, cold as whiz. We were north of the Atlas Mountains, right across North Africa.

From there to the Mediterranean Shores, it was pretty cold.

[Speaker 2]
I remember when I was flying over India, flying over that thing in North Africa, you could see those tank tracks, the little burned-out tanks below, as you know, all those swirls back and forth where those battles had been, and then all the stuff that was laying there that had been shot up, blown up. I guess it's there yet.

[Speaker 1]
Incidentally, when I was at Fort Meade, there was a Lieutenant General Brooks commanding Edward H. Brooks. He was an artillery and armor, basically armor.

And we took a trip with one of our units from Fort Campbell. Fort Meade commanded all of that area, including Fort Campbell. Had a winter exercise in Alaska.

So I went with General Brooks and a fellow by the name of Palmer, Charlie Dog Palmer, another general, and an aide. The four of us flew up on a converted B-17. Did you ever see one of those converted B-17s?

Well, they don't seat four people in a B-17. We were in the bomb bays converting. And we were flying up there.

We stopped someplace up at Great Falls to get winter gear, and then took off and had to cross the mountain range out there, Rockies. Rockies didn't go all the way up there. And we had taken on ice.

That ice would come off that propeller and hit the side of that, and it sounded like it was coming apart. And to get to the, we had the intercom with the pilot. And the pilot said, We haven't any problems?

No, no sweat, no sweat. So to get to him, you had to crawl through a little companion way to get there, on your hands and knees. So I decided I'd go up there and talk with him personally.

But he had on these blue Air Force shirts. And he had a, it was cold weather, and he had a ring of sweat under both arms like that. We just barely made it across the Rockies.

I wouldn't be surprised. We landed in, I've forgotten the name of the town. But it was cold.

It was a town where they had underground tunnels from one house to the other and one office to the other. Which one was that? Fairbanks, Fairbanks is where it is.

And then we went up north to the Arctic Circle and spent the night and left the engines on that C-47. If it ever stopped, you never would have stopped it. No, I'm sure it wasn't.

And on that same trip, we went out to Kodiak, which was up in the Aleutians. I remember we got filled the tail gunner's compartment full of these big king crabs. They were that big around.

I'd never seen one of those things. And when I got back to Fort Meade in the wintertime, I got back with them still frozen. I threw one in my front yard.

My wife, she didn't know what they were. Also, when I was up there, this General Brooks and I went out to Dutchman Flats to witness an atomic explosion. And that, you ought to see.

They had trenches built. I don't know how far it was, maybe three or four miles from ground zero. But they had the trenches built for us to be in there.

And I remember there was a four-star general right in front of me in that trench, named John Hodge. And he was commanding Army Ground Forces at Fort Monroe. He was up there.

And he was just as scared as I was because when that damn thing went off, it was a civil defense exercise. They had houses built up there. And this was a tower explosion.

And when that thing went off, it just made quite a difference. And strangely enough, we went into ground zero, walked in, and that's how that happened.