

Edward Stoehr Oral History

World War II in Carver County Oral History Project

November 16, 1999

Interviewer: Stacy Helmbrecht-Wilson

Interview with Edward W. Stoehr

Interviewed by Stacy Helmbrecht-Wilson

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Stacy Helmbrecht-Wilson: SHW

Edward Stoehr: EWS

SHW: This is the World War II Era in Carver County Oral History Project. The date is November 16, 1999. My name is Helmbrecht-Wilson, and I am the interviewer. I am a staff member at the Carver County Historical Society, and I am interviewing Edward Stoehr today. If you just want to say your full name and spell it, we'll get started.

EWS: My full name is Edward W. Stoehr. What else do you want to know?

SHW: Why don't we start with simple stuff—where you were born and when you were born.

EWS: March 25, 1919. I was born in Tacoma, Washington, where my folks lived at that time.

SHW: Did you grow up in Tacoma?

EWS: We were there until I was four years old. Business took my dad to Chicago. He was a printer, a linotype operator who worked at a newspaper in Tacoma. Things kind of slowed down. He was down to four days a week. My uncle, his brother, also an Edward, who I was partially named after, was a linotype operator on the *Chicago Tribune*. He wrote to my dad and told him to come to Chicago, because the industry was booming there. So my dad did; he packed us up and we moved to Chicago and got a small apartment out in the west side our near Garfield Park. He got a job right away with Kuneo Press down at Sears Roebuck, the original main Sears Roebuck store in Chicago. They had their own printing plant there, and Kuneo operated it, where the only thing they set was the Sears catalog. From there I lived in Chicago and went to school there until I went into the service in July of 1941.

SHW: How old were you at that point?

EWS: I was twenty-two at that time. I'll back up a couple years. For high school, I went to Crane Technical High School, which was on the corner of Jackson Boulevard and Oakley Boulevard, a mile and a half east of where we lived. It was one full city block square, four stories high, with a large basement underneath. In the school they had a ROTC unit. We had between three and four hundred guys in ROTC. I joined right away as soon as I went into high school and gradually worked my way up. By the second year I was a sergeant, and before the second year was over I was first sergeant of Company A. We had four companies—A, B, C, and D. I got to be senior first sergeant of the whole battalion.

SHW: After school, what did you do?

EWS: I went to night school for about a year, taking printing, again in my school. They had night school classes. They had every kind of shop you could think of, everything you could think of—metal, electric, woodshop, print shop, automobile welding, blacksmithing, everything. I've done just about everything. There were two I didn't get a chance to get in. One was automobile shop and the other was aircraft. They had a full size airplane in one of their rooms, a small plane you know, a bi-plane. But I could not fit that into my schedule. We had certain things we had to take besides.

SHW: During the day were you working at the printer?

EWS: At that time I hadn't quite got into a job yet. I had a job, but not as a printer. I was working as a delivery boy for a printing company. They'd do stuff and put the proofs in a big case and tell me to take it to here, there and wherever. That's what I did. After a while, that kind of faded out on me, so I got a job working at Manville Brothers, one of the large department stores just one block from the original Marshall Fields Store. I worked as a stock person, bringing different items down. I worked there for two years doing that. After a year of that, they had an opening in the mailroom, and I got a job as a mail clerk. I sorted the mail and put it into the bins. Then I'd take it around to the different departments in the whole building. I did that up until July 1941, when I went into the service.

SHW: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

EWS: I volunteered. You might say I enlisted. I didn't wait to be drafted. I went in on July 9, which was six months before Pearl Harbor.

SHW: Did you think your being drafted was inevitable?

EWS: It probably would have been, because eventually they took sixteen million people, and I was A1 healthy, although I was married and we had a kid by that time.

SHW: When did you meet your wife?

EWS: We met in October of 1940, and had our first date in January 1941, and got married on March 25, 1941—three months later. Four months after that I went into the service. I had to go. My family tree dates back to before the Revolutionary War on my mother's side, and her forbears fought with Washington against the British. On my dad's side, they didn't come over from Germany until 1847, the earlier ones.

SHW: That's pretty early.

EWS: That's pretty early. On his side I had somebody in everything from that time—Civil War, Spanish American War, World War I. On my mother's side, her grandfather—my great grandfather—formed up his own company of volunteers out of southern Illinois, which was

where she was living at that time. He and his Illinois volunteers fought all the rest of the Civil War, and he did get to come back home. He was lucky. A lot of officers didn't.

SHW: Where were you in the late '30s and early '40s? What was going on in Europe and Asia? Did that seem like a big deal in your life or was it sort of distant, with the German expansion and the Japanese expansion?

EWS: I think since I was old enough for them to talk to me, and I could understand any part of it—like three, four, five years old—I had the American flag preached to me. They told me about it and all these things. When I was about five or six years old, my dad had a book that was about eighteen inches wide, twelve inches high, and it was a good half inch thick. It was all pictures and articles—short articles, but mostly pictures—from World War I. They'd read it to me and eventually I got to be a fast learner in reading. By the time I was six years old I was able to read the thing myself, the pictures and whatever the title was under the picture. You might say I came up kind of militaristic like. Then getting into ROTC, I just felt right at home. I took to that like a duck to water.

SHW: Where did you take the basic training?

EWS: Camp Lee, Virginia, to begin with. I went in at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and after three days they put us on a train to Camp Lee, Virginia, which is just outside of the town of Petersburg, which was one of the big battlegrounds of the Civil War. I stayed there for three or four months—I forget exactly now. Some of these days are too many years behind me to pin them down that close.

SHW: Fifty years is a long time, for sure.

EWS: Close to sixty really, now. When I first went in, I wanted to go into the air corps. I wanted to fly. At that time, before the war started, you had to have a year or two of college and you couldn't be married. You had to be single. Well, I didn't have that college, and I was married. After Pearl Harbor came along, or just before Pearl Harbor, they opened up a little bit. So as soon as I could I put in my application for transfer to the army air corps. I passed everything—physically I was okay, mentally I was 99%. I had trouble with mathematics, but I got enough to pass their exams. I was in transfer to what they call SAACC—San Antonio Aviation Cadet Center. Actually, it was part of Kelly Field, just outside of San Antonio. That was pre-flight. Most of the guys that came in hardly knew right from left. They had to learn how to march and do about face and salute, and the whole bit. I knew all that. I had that from when I was in ROTC. That was duck soup for me. In fact, when I went into Camp Lee I had no problem fitting right in because I knew all the rigmarole. Anyway, I was there for about three months, then got through with that. We had a lot of close order drill, and we had all this stuff that pilots were supposed to know, the type of mathematics you had to do to figure out what direction to fly and how fast and how long it would take, and all these things. Despite my shortcoming in math, I was able to get through with that. We also had Morse Code. When we graduated from cadets, we learned to "hit a brace, mister" and sit at the edge of your chair and eat a square meal like that—no kidding. If you didn't, you were in trouble, believe me. They had a class system—upper and lower class. When we were lower class, oh man! It struck me funny because I had military already, and these

guys would come around and tell me to hit a brace, and I'd stand at attention. They'd say something to me, and I would bust out laughing. "Oh, funny boy, huh?" So I caught holy hell every once in a while for that. When I got to be an upper classman, then of course I, along with the rest of our class, got to haze the lower class that came in behind us. We did nothing dangerous to hurt anybody or anything like that, but they did their best to us and we did our best to them to make them feel like they were less than nothing. The purpose behind this was supported by the military on the assumption that, if you can't take it, you can't dish it out. So we took it, then we dished it out. Later on, some of us had to take some more, but that's the way it went.

SHW: From there did you go into flight training?

EWS: From there I went to flight training at W & B Flying School, Wilson and Bondfelds in Chickasha, Oklahoma. I was there probably less than a month. We were flying Fairchild PT-19As. They were low-winged monoplanes, two cockpits—one for the instructor, one for the cadet. The instructor sat in front, the cadet sat in back. That's the way they had it set up. As it turned out, I can understand why, from my problems. I got airsick. If anybody has ever been seasick, it's the same thing. On straight flying I was fine. Everything was working; all my physical things that were necessary were there except the inner ear got out of balance. When we were doing things like pull up, star lot, spin out, or doing a thing they call the Dutch roll, I got airsick. So after a few flights the instructor said, "Eddie, I can get you through this and get you to flying. If I pass you and you happen to get sick in combat, you could either get killed or you might cause one of your buddies to get killed if you couldn't take the guy off his tail. So I'm going to have to turn your name in for ground duty only," which they did. They stamped my papers with a great big "GDO" in black—Ground Duty Only. I didn't like it, and I wasn't the only one. We had quite a few guys who washed out for various reasons, several more for the same reason I did. They said, "What do you want to do now?" They gave us a little bit of a choice because in essence, we were like officers. We wore officer's pants, officer-type jacket, and the officer's cap, only with a big set of wings on it instead of the eagle. I said, "If I can't fly, I'm not going to walk through this man's war," so I put in for Motor Pool, and I got it. So from then on I drove a half dozen different kind of vehicles. The air force had their own motor pool. Each branch of the service had their own motor pool, so I stayed in the air force, and I drove two and a half ton 6x6, and stake trucks, and Jeeps, and command cars. I'll digress back a bit. My wife's older brother—older than her, about my age—was single, and he had gone into the service about three months before I did. Maybe about the same time, but he got into the air force right away because he was single. He went into the navy air force instead of the army. He had progressed further, and he was fortunate he didn't get airsick. He had gone through primary, mid, and advanced. He was in advanced, within two weeks of getting his wings and his commission as an officer in the navy, and his plane and another collided in mid-air and crashed and burned, and they both got killed. This is a picture of him. His name was Wilson Orville Zweifel—that's my wife's maiden name. You can see he's quite a guy. He was just about twenty-two at that time. I don't know just where he fit it; he may have been a couple of months older than me or a couple of months younger, but real close. Anyway, I was flying yet at that time, and when my wife got word that her brother's plane crashed and he had been killed, she just about went nuts worrying about me. But it was two weeks later that I got washed out, and that took a lot of the load off of her mind that I wasn't flying anymore.

SHW: Was she with the folks in Chicago?

EWS: She was with her mother at that time back in Rochester. I belonged to a Presbyterian church in Chicago out on the west side—Calvary Presbyterian, 4200 West Jackson Boulevard—and her aunt was a member of the same church. My wife came down to visit her, brought her out to church and introduced us. That was in October. On succeeding Sundays we saw each other, said hello, and that was it. Come January, we had a very active young people's group. I wouldn't say I was a leader, but I was always very active in it. Every year in January we'd have a banquet. Anyway, her aunt came to me and asked me, "Eddie, you've met Verlane?" I said, "Yes." She said, "She's kind of lonesome. She doesn't know anyone her own age and I wonder if you would ask her to go to this banquet." [Unclear word] was the young high school age, and Forum was about the time you were eighteen to about twenty-four or twenty-five. I said, "Sure, I'd be glad to." I owned a car at that time, a brand new 1939 Ford. Anyway, I went over and picked her up at her aunt's place and went to church. It so happened I was Master of Ceremonies that night, too. We had a head table, and we had quite a large group for a small church. The church had between 300 and 400 members, but we had thirty or forty kids our age; there were thirty or forty high schoolers, and there were younger ones. We had over two hundred kids in the Sunday school—kids and young people. She sat at the head table with me. I remember how she looked. I have a picture upstairs of her I'll show you after a while, similar to the way she looked back in those days. She had on a dark blue velvet dress and a string of pearls, and shoulder-length kind of ash blonde hair. I was favorably impressed at the time. But I was going steady with a girl at that time. After the meeting we stopped at Garfield Park and talked a bit and smooched a little bit. I never had another date with that other girl, and Verlane and I didn't miss a night seeing each other for the next two weeks. We missed one night, then we went two weeks again before we missed seeing each other the second time. It was one of those things that . . .

SHW: . . . that just worked out.

EWS: This last March [Verlane talking in background] . . . Honey, go! Just stick your nose back in the tube there! I hope you're going to edit this thing, and delete some.

SHW: Well, we put everything in when we do the transcript, but . . .

EWS: This last March 25, we had 58 years together.

SHW: Oh, wow. That's a long time.

EWS: There was a young lady in our group. She was one of the greeting females in our group. Back in those days, I was quite a lady's man. I had different girlfriends and stuff. One girl I went with for four years back from fourteen to eighteen.

SHW: Oh, wow.

EWS: Anyway, this girl said to someone else, and someone else told me about it; she didn't say it in front of me, but they told me later, she said, "Well, I'll give them six months." Six months

turned into fifty-eight years, seven kids, fourteen grandchildren, and seven great grandchildren now.

SHW: She clearly guessed wrong.

EWS: She guessed wrong. She was about 5' 2" or 3". She married the tallest kid in our crowd, he was 6' 5", and they didn't stay together more than about three years. They got a divorce. She was no one to talk. We definitely made a liar out of her. What else do you want to know?

SHW: Let's get back to when you were in the service. What was the biggest adjustment from civilian life? Was there a big one, or was it pretty seamless because of ROTC?

EWS: Practically no adjustment at all for me because I had four years of ROTC. The military was ingrained in me and I knew the stuff. I can hand salute today just as good as I could then, and I still do the manual of arms and throw that rifle and bring it up on my shoulder and never duck my head. When guys start to do that, invariably they'll duck; they'll pull their head over because they're afraid they're going to hit themselves in the head. I can bring that rifle up right here and I don't move; I don't blink an eyelash. To this day I can do that, and right now I'm eighty years old.

SHW: That's ingrained, that's for sure. Were you stateside for your whole time in the service?

EWS: No, I was stateside for about three years. I had about three months or so in Camp Crowder, Missouri, the signal corps. They wanted me to have some signal corps . . . not so much Morse Code but doing other types of things, doing radio and stuff like that. I got three months of that, then from there I got transferred to . . . they hadn't quite decided where they wanted me, but they took me out of there and I went to the north end of Texas, way up north. I was there for about two or three weeks. Then they transferred me to Hammer Field, California, and they figured I was getting close. That was near Fresno. We'd get a night off or an evening, and we could go into Fresno and do what we wanted to do. After about three weeks there, they stuck us on a train, shot us up to a train station in Oakland, and we sat there in the train for about six hours. Then they did some juggling around cars, switching, and they got the train rolling and pretty soon someone said, "It looks like we're going east and then south." After a while he said, "We'll be down in Nevada pretty soon," which is the way it was. Pretty soon we were in Reno. In Reno we had to sit for another six hours. They let us off the car, then. We had our own car; it wasn't part of another train. It was a strictly military train. We were able to go and leave our stuff in the car, and we went there, and we went around town and stopped and had a bite to eat in Woolworth's. From there, back in the train, pretty soon we were heading south. Where the heck is this going to take us? We didn't know. Pretty soon some officer came through and said, "In case you guys didn't know it, you're going to Tonapah, Nevada."

SHW: They never told you where you were going before you went away?

EWS: Very seldom did we ever know where we were going. That was standard procedure back in those days because loose lips can sink ships, or however else you want to term it. We were told, "If anybody asks you any questions, just clam up and say, 'I don't know.'" We got that

preached at us and preached at us and preached at us. Pretty soon we could see lights up in the hills; a town lit up like about twenty miles ahead of us or so. We got closer and closer, and pretty soon we pulled off the main track into a siding that took us right into Tonapah.

SHW: What did you do in Tonapah?

EWS: They had a whole bunch of old trucks that loaded us up and took us out to Tonapah Air Force Base about five miles east of the city of Tonapah. I had to stop and think of my directions for a minute. They'd run us into different barracks and give us bunks for the night. We were there temporarily for a couple three nights. In fact, we were so crowded that my cot was actually in the middle aisle of the building. A whole bunch of us had cots down the middle aisles. They were still building. Tonapah at that time was a new base. They were still building buildings for us. They got the building ready after about three days, and took us over and all the guys in the motor pool they put us all in one building. I managed to get a lower bunk; they had double bunks and I managed to get a lower bunk because I was one of the first ones in that day. I was a little older guy; I was twenty-two. Most of them were between eighteen and twenty. A couple days later a young fellow came in and got the bunk above me. He and I became good friends, and to this day we still exchange Christmas cards to he and his wife and me and mine. We visited him one time in Ohio where he lives, the town of Middletown, Ohio. Anyway, then I got a truck assigned to me—two and a half-ton GM 6x6. Six-by-six means six wheels on the ground, and all six have power. If it was a four-by-six or two-by-six, that means only the back ones would be. But this one had front wheel drive, and I think there were something like eight gear shifts up front that I had to learn all those because I hadn't had that much before. I was driving before that. Anyway, it didn't take long to figure it out. They had one set for the front and one set for the back, and they had a super low—that thing would grind along at about three miles an hour, but you could almost run it straight up a wall. It had all kinds of power—big, heavy 8-cylinder engines. Steering wheel was wood. Oak steering wheel about two feet across, a great big thing. The part you were holding on to was this big around.

SHW: Oh, wow.

EWS: They had other trucks there that they had black plastic on most of them, no bigger around than my thumb or what cars would be today. But I had the only one like that in the whole motor pool. I loved that thing. That wheel just fit me perfect. Of course, in a truck like that you have to learn to double clutch. I had to stop and think of the word. If you don't use that for a long time, you forget. One of the things they had us do, they'd put a little rock about as big as a walnut, big enough that you could feel it if you run over it, they put it down and said, "Okay, I want this left front tire to go across that rock," or the right one, back and forth. If you did that, then they said, "Okay, you're doing all right." If you didn't, you had to keep practicing until you got so you could run over that rock.

SHW: I can't imagine. What was the point of that?

EWS: The theory was that if you ever got into combat and you had to steer clear of mines or anything like that, there could be a mine . . . mines have a little thing about this big that sticks up, and if you'd see that and run over that, bye-bye truck and maybe you. You got so if you knew

where your wheels were, you could bypass that. That was the theory behind it. I drove that two and a half ton 6x6 out across the desert sometimes for a whole day just up and down gullies and through cactus and everything else, laying telephone wire. They had a couple great big spools in the back of the truck, and two or three guys back there taking care of that. I had a guy up front with me, a sergeant that knew where we were supposed to go, and he'd tell me to go here, go there, so I went where he told me. Sometimes, like I say, it was like going through no-man's land.

SHW: I bet.

EWS: I enjoyed it. I had a better job than one of our guys who got the job of driving the garbage truck, which I wouldn't have liked doing that. He complained and complained, but never got out of the job.

SHW: How long did you stay in Tonapah?

EWS: I was there for ten months. We went in in early January; I had Christmas down in Hammer Field, just outside of Fresno, California, at that time. Somebody had sent me a little Christmas tree, probably no bigger than this vase here, about a foot high. I had that in our tent. I was the only one that had a tree. We were living in those big army tents at the time. There were six guys to a tent at that time. We got to Tonapah in January. In February they had quite a snowstorm. For some reason, after my day's work of running back and forth, I gassed up. Most of the guys didn't. Most of them gassed up in the morning. But for some reason that night I gassed up. The next morning, the other guys had maybe a gallon or two left in their tanks. I had a full tank. I was running all day long. I was one of the few trucks that was able to travel for the next twenty-four hours. They had to carry gas over in a few smaller trucks, a couple pickups, to the different places and get the trucks gassed up so the other guys do their job, too. Mostly what I did was haul pilots, plane crew members back and forth from their barracks out to the line and stuff like that. Tonapah was a B-24 field, Liberator B-24; nine-man crew, and a big heavy plane. The runway they put on was over two miles long and must have been a hundred feet wide. It was one of the biggest runways in the country at that time. It was bigger than the average runway in an airport today. Those planes were heavy and they carried a heavy bomb load. They carried as much as two 2,000-pound bombs on a B-24.

SHW: That's a lot.

EWS: They carried four 500s or two 1,000-pounders, or six or eight 250-pounders, it depends. There was a lot of weight on them. After I was there about eight months, we had one problem one time. These crews would take off and fly; they had certain target areas and they had live ammunition. They had guys in certain places who would put out targets. These guys with the machine guns would aim for them. Then they'd check the things for bullet holes and see how good they did. Then they had big circles for bomb drops. They didn't drop bombs, but they dropped five hundred pounds of flour, something like that. When that flour would hit, that bag would bust, and then they could tell how close they came. Of course they had the Norton bomb site, which was probably the best bomb site that's been ever made. I don't know what they are using today. They might have an adaptation of that. But that was the best one at that time that

anybody had on either side of the war. They would practice different things—different approaches, things with one engine out or two engines out, or if engines were out on one side. This one plane came in one time and somehow one of the waste guns that shoot out the sides got swung around and started firing, and a bullet hit one of the guys on the crew, one of the crew members pretty seriously—50 caliber bullet. They were all upset on that plane. Anyway, they came in and landed and had an ambulance waiting there. One of the crew members jumped out of the plane, and usually when they land they cut their engines right away. Well this guy jumped out real quick before they got the engines cut, and he walked right into the prop and the prop just chewed his head into hamburger, just that quick.

SHW: Oh, my gosh.

EWS: So they lost two crew members out of that one plane that time. That was the first problem. Anyway, a little later on, about ten months in, I was gassing up my truck in the morning and all of a sudden, way out in the end of the runway, which was like a mile from our motor pool headquarters . . . Boom!! . . .and we looked at a great big row of black smoke going up and flame going up into the air, just like pictures you see on TV. Within thirty seconds, our guy that keeps track of telling us what to do . . . I had a staff car that day, not a truck, by the way . . . and he says, "Get over to the hospital quick and pick up the colonel," the head medical guy, "They had a plane crash; get out to that plane." So I went over there, I beat it over to the hospital real quick. I had just gassed up, and as I pulled up he came running out. He was pulling his pants up with one hand; he had his shirt on but not buttoned, carrying his cap and his tie in the other hand. He finished dressing and putting himself together. I started out. We had a sign, "35 mph maximum on base." I started out and he said, "The hell with that 35 mph! Hit it! We've got to get out there!" So I said, "Okay." I hit the gas pedal and I was going 55 miles an hour going through the roads in camp to get out to the flight line. When I got out there he said, "Go right down the runway," because they were right off the end of the runway about a hundred feet or so. This plane had slid in, nine guys on board, and it exploded and killed all nine of them, of course. Anyway, I got on the runway and he says, "Hit it." I hit the pedal again, and I was doing 75 miles an hour, and there was a B-24 coming down behind me. He was gaining on me, because by the time they take off they've got to be doing over 100 miles an hour to get lift. I was still ahead of him when I went off the runway into the sand. I went about another hundred feet or some, a couple hundred feet possibly, before I came to a stop. By that time they had a few MPs out there that were keeping some of the guys that were stationed close by in their barracks to keep everybody away from the place except those that were supposed to be there. Anyway, we went around and I stopped and he said, "Stick with me. I may want you to do something or go somewhere." So I stuck close by him. Do you want me to go into detail, what the thing looked like?

SHW: If you want to.

EWS: I can still visualize some of it. I don't know who they were, whether they were pilots or gunners or what, but one guy, the top of his head was completely like someone had taken an axe and chopped a hole. He just had an empty skull here. Another guy, he must have been their radio operator or something, he had wires . . . of course in the radio they had all kinds of wires in the board, and he had all those wires completely through his whole body. When they hit, aviation

gas is like TNT going off. It's as bad as any bomb. It just blew those guys apart and blew stuff into them and everything. There was pieces laying here—an arm here, a foot there. A couple of the doctors came out from the hospital beside the colonel. They had two or three doctors there. One of the MPs was eating breakfast in the mess hall when he came out, and he was eating a sandwich, and he's standing around there watching all this eating a sandwich, and this one doctor looked at him and said, "Oh, my God! How can you do that? How can you eat?" It just made the doctor sick, and he'd run over a few feet and threw up his breakfast. He lost his whole breakfast. It bothered the doctor, but it didn't bother the MP. Some of the guys had pillow cases, the guys in the medics. They had a whole string of guys come out from the medics at the hospital. We had a nice hospital on the base. They brought some pillow cases and they were picking up body pieces and they were putting it in them. I was walking around a little bit, and it didn't bother me that much, but I happened to look down and there was a thumb laying there. I said to a guy, the nearest one to me, "Here's somebody's thumb." He said, "Pick it up and toss it over here." I said, "The hell with you! I found it, but you have to pick it up!" I wasn't about to do that.

SHW: That would be a little much.

EWS: That would be a little much, I think. I said it just the way I said it now, too. "Here it is—you come and get it!" And he did, he came over and got it. That way they could tell by the thumb print who it belonged to, but we didn't know where the rest of him was, or which one of the bodies it was from. The same day, that same morning, we had another plane go down forty miles out in the desert. That part of Nevada back then, and it may be still, was very wild and rugged. But another plane went down out there, and we lost another plane and another nine guys.

SHW: Sounds like training was really dangerous.

EWS: The only time in ten months that we actually lost a plane, we lost two of them the same morning, not an hour apart. They sent a couple ambulances out and a couple trucks to see what they could do out there, and they brought all those guys back, one whole body into a pillowcase—pieces, you know. Those things were fierce. Then they took those guys and laid them all out . . . we had a big gymnasium on the base . . . they went into the gymnasium and used it like a morgue. They laid all the bodies out so they could fit all the pieces together, and they had the dental charts and everything, so they had them all identified. So far as I know they were all identified anyway, but I know they had names on some of them. Then they sent the bodies down to Reno and had them put in regular caskets. Several of the guys were married, and they gave me the job of taking four young wives like her age at that time up to the funeral parlor in Vegas. A couple of the girls asked me, "What was it like? Were they hurt bad?" I didn't go into any detail with them. One girl had her husband's ring; they had saved that and given it to her. She says, "His ring looks pretty good." I said, "They probably took that off to just leave it with you. I didn't tell her how bad they were burned; there was burning flesh and everything because the plane was just full of gas at the time. I don't know if they had bombs or not; that I don't recall, but it sure made one hell of a bang when it exploded. Anyway, I took them up, and I went into the funeral parlor too. They had eighteen caskets lined up there—nine from one plane and nine from the other. There was a full crew of nine each time. That was my first baptism into seeing anybody killed. Combat couldn't have been any worse for the appearance of those guys.

SHW: Oh, I bet. That just sounds nightmarish.

EWS: It turned out that that very night they had the crash . . . I think it might have been a Saturday or Sunday they had a big dance going on the base, and I went to that, but all across the base all you could smell was that odor of burnt bodies. It was terrible. I went to the dance and stayed about an hour and then left. I couldn't hack any more.

SHW: Where did you go after Utah?

EWS: Tonapah, you mean.

SHW: Yes, after Tonapah.

EWS: From there, I got shipping orders to go overseas. This was in about October 1944. I had about a six day layover at home. I could go home first, and then go overseas. I went home to Chicago, then down to Greensboro, North Carolina. The base maybe had a name, but they just called it a "repple-depple," replacement depot. To us, we were in a repple-depple. There we witnessed something that to this day was one of the funniest things I've ever seen in my life. They had a large building, an insurance building, like twelve or fourteen stories high—tallest building in the whole town, and a nice big restaurant up there; a real good restaurant. In those days you could buy a good meal for two or three dollars—steak or whatever you wanted. Even in wartime, the place was crowded. So about four or five of us guys altogether went up there together. We had to stand in line and wait to get a table. We were not allowed to make reservations. These guys would come out carrying a big tray and go up to a table, and they'd set the thing down on a little stand, and then serve people. The hostess was really a beautiful girl, and just as nice and friendly, a good hostess. Well, this one boy comes out, a young fellow, carrying a tray, and those trays were this big around; they must have been three or four feet in diameter across. The floor was tile, and somehow someone had spilled something there—water or something—and when his foot hit that water, he kind of leaned back, then caught himself and came forward, but he had too much going forward, and the whole tray and everything just went down, Crash! Right onto the floor. Boom! We all looked for about a split second, and of course we burst out laughing; we couldn't help it. Even the hostess . . . She burst out laughing, and all of a sudden she realized what she was doing, and she said, "Oh, the boss better not see me laughing. I'll get fired!" Anyway, the boss came out to see what the racket was, and everybody was hooting and hollering. He took one look and told this guy . . . the kid got up and didn't know what to do . . . and the boss said, "Go get a shovel and clean up the mess." We asked the girl, "What's going to happen to him?" She said, "He'll probably get fired. He's been kind of a smart Aleck anyway. It couldn't happen to a more deserving guy." Anyway, from there we went to Norfolk, Virginia, one of the ports. They put us on a large ocean liner instead of a liberty ship. We were very lucky. It was an Italian ship called the S. S. *Columbie*. All Italian crew; we had taken over the Italian liner, but we kept their crew on because they knew everything was aboard ship. They had a complete detachment of marines on board to make sure they did what they were supposed to do. They had us all file in; I was down about three decks down. I happened to get a lower bunk, and it was two more above me. I think it was three going over, and when I came home it was four. I got a lower bunk both times, both going and coming. Anyway, that was in the evening, and they weren't scheduled to leave until I guess early the next morning or something. You've heard the

expression: "There are no atheists in fox holes?" There are no atheists in the hole of a ship that's going overseas when there are submarines on both sides trying to sink you.

SHW: Oh, I bet.

EWS: As I lay there in bed, I felt kind of choked up, but here and there . . . like I said, I was twenty-four years old then . . . a lot of these kids were still eighteen or nineteen years old and first time away from home. We'd hear sobs and occasionally some kid would make a prayer out loud or something like that. Everybody was scared as could be. Anyway, the next day we were out at sea. With the ships we had, there were two other liners about the size of ours, and a fast tanker, fuel tanker, and a couple others—I don't know what all they did. But they were all fairly fast. They could do 12-15 knots maybe. Plus destroyers all along the side on either side. We were moving along . . . it wasn't rough, it wasn't a stormy day, but the ocean is always on the move. It's got this little bit of a sway to it, swing, in and out. Pretty soon, I felt it coming on. I was getting airsick again, only seasick this time. I went up to the medic's room, and I got up to the doctor and he said, "What's the matter with you?" I said, "I'm seasick." I'd been down to the head—you know what the head is? That's navy slang for bathroom. Anyway, I'd been down there a dozen times and lost all my dinners and everything. He said, "Oh, you guys, you're always putting on an act." I said, "It's no act." And all of a sudden I said, "It's going to come again." I started looking . . . He said, "All right, if you're going to, use my wastebasket." He had a metal wastebasket there. And I did, and this time nothing came out except green bile. I was empty. He looked at it and said, "You weren't kidding! You are sick, aren't you?" I said, "Yes. I told you I was." He turned to one of his medic boys and said, "Put this guy to bed, get him a tray of food; make sure he eats it. If he throws it up, bring him another one. We've got to keep stuffing his stomach." He turned to me and said, "You know, if you keep on going like that, you're going to rupture your stomach lining. Then you really will be in trouble. I'm glad you came in." At first he was giving me the needle, you know. Anyway, I spent six days in sick bay going over. It took us six days to get over. When we went through the Strait of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean, the Mediterranean was like a table top. There wasn't hardly a ripple on the water. Right away I got feeling better and out of the sick bay. We landed at Naples, we pulled into Naples Harbor, and the Germans had originally held Naples. Our bombers had gone over and plastered them real good. They had a big ship tied right up to one of the docks in Naples, and it got sunk right there, sunk and burned out, and all it was was a great big rusty hulk, but it was quite solid yet. So what they did, the Americans had just built a big wide gang plank across the ship and we pulled our ship right alongside. They pulled our liner, *Columbie*, right alongside. We went out, walked across the sunken German ship onto the concrete docks, and we lined up there. We sat there for about four hours waiting for trucks to come and take us to wherever we were going. From there they took us to Cesenatico, a little town maybe eight miles—I forget distance now—not too far out of Naples. They had pup tents already set up out in a great big field. They assigned two of us to a pup tent. The guy who was assigned to me, his name was Jerry Munson—Gerald, he went by Jerry. He and I got to be pretty good friends on board ship and then while we were there. We were in that pup tent for a couple days. Then we got a chance . . . they gave us a pass to go into town, into Naples and we went down to Pompeii, went through the ruins of the old city of Pompeii that had been covered by ash when Mount Vesuvius blew back in 76 AD, seventy-six years after the birth of Christ. We went all through that. When you got into town, there are all kinds of kids trying to get money out of the soldiers for one reason or another. "Hey, Joe,

chocolato," "Hey, Joe, give me [this, that, and the other thing]." "Hey, Joey, want a girl?" They were even selling their sisters or their mothers or whatever. They'd get a kickback if any of our guys would take them up on it. There were four of us guys together. We didn't want to get involved with someone like that. On board ship they'd take one group at a time—they did this twice—and we went to a big room where they could show movies. They had very explicit movies of what happens to a guy that would fool around with a woman that had venereal disease. They showed anatomical pictures and everything. Frankly, it scared the heck out of us. We didn't want to have nothing to do with anybody!

SHW: I can see why that would make you think twice!

EWS: I don't know if you ever ran across that before.

SHW: I've never actually seen movies, but I've heard about them before.

EWS: You've heard about them before, probably from other guys like me, I suppose.

SHW: I think they still show them in the army.

EWS: Yes, they still do.

SHW: My brother-in-law was in the navy for a while, and apparently they still use some of those films. The fear got into him!

EWS: Anyway, we didn't want to do that. Then going, we got to get back to our place. We knew which road we had to take back. There was a lot of traffic—trucks and stuff. Finally, a big two and a half ton 6x6, the kind I drove back in the states, came along and there were about ten guys in the back. There were about thirty of us lined up waiting to get on. So my buddies and I managed to get on the back of the truck. They took off. It turned out it was an Italian guy driving it, native. He drove like a madman; that's the way they do over there. To this day they do. Anyway, he came to a curve, like an "S" curve. He made a right-hand curve, and then he made a left-hand turn. When he made the right-hand turn, the thing almost tilted, he was going so fast. He was going over fifty miles an hour. Even in a big truck, that's fast to try to make a turn. There was a young officer standing right next to me in the back, and he was hollering to the guy, "Hey, slow down!" I told him, "Don't worry, lieutenant. You can't hardly tip one of these things over," because I knew; I had driven them. They are very stable on the ground. Then the guy made the left turn. When he did that, he hadn't slowed down any. He made that, but they had been working there and there was water and mud on the road. He slid completely off the concrete. There was a little bridge abutment there of some kind. He plowed directly into that thing going full speed. He never had a chance to put the brakes on. It threw everybody out of the truck. I flew about twenty or thirty feet out into a farmer's field. I could tell I was going face down. I shut my eyes. It turned out . . . I had my eyes shut; it even took the skin off my eyelids. It skinned me up there, and my cheeks and my lip; my mouth was a mess. My lips were all chewed up landing face down in that dirt. Thank goodness it was a plowed field. It wasn't hard packed like a table cloth or something. But some other guy came right down on top of me; an elbow or something caught me right in my hip. I tried to get up; I got up on my hands and knees and I couldn't get any further. I rolled over

onto my back. I couldn't hardly move. I couldn't move my feet, my legs or nothing. Pretty soon there were all kinds of people around us. Other trucks had stopped, and most of them were British. A British gal and a guy came up to me and the girl had the old pocket flask. The British carried them a lot. We didn't, but they did that all the time over there. She says, "Would you like a shot of brandy?" I said, "I'd like to, but my lips are raw. I'm afraid that's going to sting too much. I'll pass." Anyway, pretty soon a British ambulance . . . they had ambulances from everything, all kinds of them there . . . but a British guy got me and they picked me up and put me in. I said, "Boy, we hear a lot about you . . ." And I used the expression that we did about them at that time, "We hear a lot about you limeys." They don't like being called that, but I didn't know it. But he was nice to me. He didn't hit me or anything. Anyway, they took me into an American field hospital that was not far from there. I had a real nice little sleeveless sweater on under my field jacket because it was chilly there. I'm having trouble remembering some of the titles and terminology. Anyway, I had this nice jacket that this girl back home had sent me, not my wife, but someone else had sent me. It was olive drab color and very heavy and nice. Anyway, to get to my chest and that, instead of pulling it off of me, they cut the darn thing! They cut it off me. It made me mad. He said, "Well, we've got to get to you. We can't move you because of your back." They thought maybe my back had been broken. I said, "Don't throw it away, anyway. I want to keep that." I just him, "A girl gave me that. I want to keep that." He says, "Okay, we'll save it for you," which they did. Then this doctor comes in and he's poking around in me and says, "Can you raise your arms?" Yes, I could move my arms. He says, "Raise your leg," "Raise your foot." I couldn't do it. Shock had set in on me. I actually could not move; I could not make my legs go up this much. I couldn't even move my foot that way, raise them. He said, "C'mon, raise them, dammit!" I says, "Dammit, I can't!" He says, "Don't swear at me!" I says, "Well, you were swearing at me!" It was a very tense moment in this. I was on one of these hospital . . . like an operating table that they were checking me out on. He says, "Well, do it, raise your foot." I says, "I can't." He says, "Don't talk to me like that." I says, "I can't. The only thing I can do, I can wiggle my toes sideways a little bit. I can do that." He looked down there, and I was able to do just about this much. He says, "Oh, good. You're okay." Because if my back had been broken I wouldn't even have been able to do that. But it just turned out that I had a bruise on my hip about this big that felt like the skin had been cut off with a knife. It was that tender. That's what shock set in on me on. Anyway, he says, "Okay. You're okay. We'll just put you to bed for a while until you get over that." So they sent me down to one of the ward rooms and put me in bed. But I was in that dang hospital for about three weeks, in fact, over Christmas then. I spent Christmas in the hospital. After about the first week, I was able to get up and walk a little bit, but it was still sore as a boil. After a week of watching the British guys playing soccer outside, I'd walk out through the door—they'd let us do that. A bunch of our guys that . . . ambulatory could do that. Anyway, after the doctor saw me being on my feet for a while, he said, "Well, I guess he's moving around good enough to put him back on duty." Next day they gave me all my stuff, and I had a real nice big hunting knife, about a ten-inch blade that my dad had given to me just before I went overseas to carry, and I had that strapped on my belt, and they gave me my knife back and my clothes and everything. I went back to where our tent had been, and they had my stuff all in storage there that I had left in the tent there—my duffel bag with all my clothes and everything. Then they took me down, put me on a plane. The little town we were at where the field was was called Caserta. They put us in a plane and flew me to Ancona, which was over on the east side of the Italian boot, on the Adriatic Sea. From there a truck came down and picked us up and took us up to a little town called Fano. Ancona was north of Bari, and Bari

was a big Allied port prior to that. They'd had a terrific explosion there at one time. Bombers came over and bombed a ship that had some kind of toxic explosive thing, and it blew up and killed I don't know how many Allied guys—American, British, and Indian and whatever, you know. But we went up to Fano, and there they put me up in what they called a . . . a small hotel anyway. They had a different name for them. Anyway, I got a cot there and it was out in the hallway. They had rooms, but they gave me a cot and two extra blankets. It was cold that night, oh, it was cold. Later on that night, one of the officers came around. "How are you doing?" I said, "Okay, but I'm cold." He said, "Well, tough it out tonight. We'll have you in a room by tomorrow," which they did. The rooms had cast iron radiators, but over there they didn't have any fuel. The only coal that ever came in was brought in by American planes. They'd come in and land at Fano, then they'd unload and take them to . . . the military got 9½ tenths of it. A few Italians would get some and that was it, but mostly it was just our guys that got it. So anyway, I got put in a room where we were fairly comfortable. When I went in, I went in as a replacement, and the guy I was replacing was getting sent home because he had done something bad and they were sending him home and giving him a bad discharge. Anyway, when we left he had a real nice pillow, so he said, "Here, you might as well have this. I know I can't take it with me." So he gave me a pillow, so I did have a decent pillow for the rest of my time in Italy.

SHW: That's good. What did you do while you were in Italy?

EWS: I drove a Jeep all the time.

SHW: Was it a command car?

EWS: That little military Jeep that you see on the TV army movies. Well, I drove one of those. That was what I drove back and forth all the time for a year. One time I had a truck, and one time I had a command car, and that was when American troops broke through to go through the line, we went into Bologna. I did get to see Benito Mussolini and his gal hanging by their heels in that gas station.

SHW: That must have been unbelievable.

EWS: It was. At first we didn't even realize what it was until somebody else who was a little more knowledgeable . . . Me, I was still kind of a young kid and it was all new to me. Today I probably would have caught it quick, but back then I was slow catching.

SHW: So were you mostly shuttling people from places to places?

EWS: Yes. If an officer needed a driver, the officers were not allowed to drive over there. They had to have an enlisted man driving. When we went into Bologna, they gave me a 45 to strap on my hip. In this command car in two or three places we had to jog off the road and go around it because there were mines in certain areas. They had signs up, "Mines. Follow the tracks." They had flags all the way along, little marker flags.

SHW: That must have made it exciting.

EWS: Yes. You know, that was one of the things we got so used to all the time was watching for mines—thinking about them, thinking about them, thinking about them, because we had it preached to us constantly. When I finally came home back to Chicago, and my wife and I took our little boy over into Garfield Park and there was kind of a slow, sloping hill . . . nice trees. When I was a kid I used to lay down on those hills and just roll down—roll, roll, roll. Anyway, Todd started to run up there and I said, "Hey, hey, no! Come here!" She says, "Why? What's the matter?" I said, "Oh, I guess nothing now. But over there that would have been an ideal spot for someone to put some mines under a tree where a guy would like to lay down under a tree." I said, "I just had that in my mind." I didn't want the kid to get blown up.

SHW: When you are used to thinking about it, it must be hard to come back to normal life.

EWS: It was pretty hard to get back to being a civilian again.

SHW: What else was hard about going back home after the war? What was it like to go home after the war?

EWS: I got a couple of things I want to tell you first. I was assigned to the 19th Air Supply Squadron. We were headquarters squadron in that. We were supplying the 79th Fighter Squadron, which was a P-47 fighter bomber. Mark Clark and his 5th Army was on the west side of Italy where Rome and Naples are, and the British 8th Army was on the east side, where the Adriatic side was. They didn't have enough air squadrons to support their guys, so they borrowed three from the U.S., and ours was one of them. We were the closest ones to the line. Five miles or so behind us was another one, and another five miles behind them was a third one. The bombers were all out of Foggia, at the south end of the boot. A B-25 came in one day and landed on our runway. It had been pretty well shot up, and the guys braked down and stopped as quick as they could, right in the middle of the runway, the middle of the length. Our runway were these steel pads like air holes and stuff. You've probably seen pictures of that. Those guys all piled out of the plane. We had a little bit of a tower, maybe ten or twelve feet high, to give the guys the go-ahead and all that. They hollered up to the guys, "Hey, get out of there. That thing's going to blow!" It turns out, what happened was one of their bombs didn't release. It released part way and the thing was spinning. And when it spins so many times, it explodes. That's the way when they drop . . . When they drop that old propeller spins, and by the time they hit the ground that has exacerbated the charge that explodes the bomb. They says, "Get out of there. It's going to go!" So these guys all run over there and dove into a ditch, and the guys up above got out of there, and they weren't down there hardly a minute when that bomb blew up, blew that plane into bits and made a hole in the runway about as big as this kitchen and about as deep. Just off of our field was a whole bunch of tents that belonged to some Gerka Indians, guys from India that were fighting under the British. The explosion blew a whole plane engine right through a couple of their tents. As luck would have it, those guys were all off on duty somewhere, so nobody got killed. Nobody did get killed, but it took them pretty near half a day to get our runway back in condition so our planes could land and take off again.

SHW: Oh, my gosh. That's exciting.

EWS: Then they moved us up to the town of Cesenatico, about fifty miles farther north. Instead of a hotel, there we lived in a steel Quonset. We were right down on the beach. Well, we were back a hundred feet from the beach, but there was a real nice wide beach, and it spread for it must have been two or three miles you could see nothing but smooth, sandy beach. By this time it was summertime, and a bunch of us were down there one day in our swim trunks. We were just laying on the sand, soaking up sunshine. A couple of our planes, B-47s, come in from the north, and they came maybe a mile out so we could see them real plain. They went south past us, and then they came back and came down right over the beach. Their propellers were as close to the beach as this tabletop is to the floor. Right over us. They came and we saw that they were coming down close. They were doing it for fun, you know. They were coming so fast we figured we'd never have a chance to move. I even laid my head over flat because it's not as wide this way as it is this way. I didn't want them to take the top of my head off. We were just burrowing into the sand. We had a couple officers with us, and one of them said, "Get that guy's number!" They went up north again, went past us, went out over the thing, came back and did the same damn thing the second time. Scared the heck out of us. I never knew what happened to them, but I hope they got chewed out good for that.

SHW: I'm guessing nothing good could happen for that.

EWS: To me, that was the most scared position I was in the whole time I was over in Italy. We'd been bombed a couple times and strafed a couple times by German planes, but that didn't bother me near as much as our own guys coming over and buzzing us.

SHW: That's just nuts. So the Germans were still flying attack missions on the Americans when you got to Italy?

EWS: Oh, yes. They still had planes, although they didn't have as many by the time we got over there because our planes were better and we were shooting them down three or four to one.

SHW: I think being bombed would be pretty scary, though. Did they ever get close?

EWS: Not to me. We had slit trenches and places to dive in so we wouldn't be seen to be targets for them. Then comes V-E Day, and we just did what we wanted to do. They opened what they called an R & R trip—Rest and Recreation. We got a choice of a trip to the Holy Land or a trip up to Switzerland. So I took the one to Switzerland because we heard that two planes that had gone previous had to ditch into the Mediterranean—something went wrong with their engines, and the planes crashed and a few guys lost their lives after being in for the whole war. So we said the heck with that. Most of us guys in our group decided to go to Switzerland. So we had an eleven-day trip through there, and that was very interesting. I go to go up on the Jungfrau, the big Alp mountain that has a cogwheel train go up through the ice. They tunneled up through the ice into a big, big room. They had a hotel up there and everything—restaurants and everything. Anyway, we had an eleven-day trip up there; it was very interesting. I bought a wristwatch; it's upstairs right now. It just went on the fritz for me about six months ago.

SHW: Fifty-four years isn't too bad.

EWS: Let's see. It was September '45.

SHW: So what they say about Swiss watches is true. They do last forever. [end of tape 1]

EWS: Cut our trip short a couple days. Word came up that our outfit had been notified we were going to be moved clear down to Foggia, clear down at the foot of the boot. So we had to get back to our headquarters squadron again.

SHW: Were you at all worried that you would be sent to the Pacific?

EWS: We might have, but as it turned out, by the time I got back, the whole thing was over with. Right at first, they took a few guys from our field and sent them someplace. Whether they went to the Pacific or someplace else for more training, I don't know. That we never heard. Again, it's one of those things; you don't know nothing because loose lips sink ships.

SHW: It must have been weird to spend so many years of your life not knowing what was going on. Was there a lot of gossip? Did people try to guess what was going on?

EWS: We always guessed. There were rumors flying all over the place. Over there, the Italians had practically no food, very little. We had a building that would be our mess hall, and to protect us our engineers put up a long double-row fence with an aisle down the middle. The Italians would come up with these #10 size cans, like a big coffee can, you know, with a piece of wire on it to carry it by, and, "Hey Joe! Manciatti! Hey Joe!" Every GI was "Joe" to everybody—GI Joe. A lot of times when we'd go through, they'd dish up. We didn't help ourselves; they'd dish up, they'd throw this on, that on. Sometimes you'd have your dessert right in with your mashed potatoes and gravy, or something. A lot of us guys didn't eat everything that was in our mess kit. So we'd come out and down at the end after we'd dumped it, we had a place to dump it, but before we'd get to the place you could dump it, all these Italians were lined up outside the fence and sticking their cans through the wire. "Joe!" They'd all have two cans—one for liquid and one for solid. All kind of solid, no matter what it was, went in one can—potatoes, meat, vegetables, bread, whatever. Liquids—coffee, milk, tea, beer, whatever . . . not beer too often, but occasionally a guy would smuggle a bottle in—whatever they had, all the liquids you drink went in the other can. So they must have had some god awful mixes by the time they got home sometimes. They'd do that. Then we had a couple great big garbage cans over a hot fire. We'd dump it first, then we'd throw it in one to wash it all off real good; this was all soapy. There were three cans actually—one to dump, one to wash, and one to rinse. The third one was boiling hot water to dip your mess kit and your canteen cup in. You'd hook all that stuff onto the handle and put it in and slosh it, and that was it. Fortunately we never died of ptomaine or botulism. After we moved down to Foggia, I was up in a building one time on the second or third floor . . . I had some reason to be up there, I don't remember why now. I could look down over on the next house. On the roof was an Italian woman, and she had caught a sparrow, a little bird. And all she did was pluck the feathers off of it—I watched her—and she threw it in the pot to cook it. Never took the feet off, the head off, nor gutted it to clean the insides out. The whole thing went in there to make a pot of soup.

SHW: Oh, wow. I've heard how bad it was after the war in Europe. It sounds just awful. When were you sent back stateside? How long were you in Italy after the war?

EWS: Actually I was there eleven months and some days, but I always say I was over there for a year. For practical purposes I was if you consider the time I was on the water going over and the water coming back.

SHW: Well, when you're shy about three or four days, it's no big deal.

EWS: If they want to know, I say a year in Italy. Who's going to explain all that stuff otherwise?

SHW: When you went back were you directly discharged, or did you stay in for a while?

EWS: We were in Foggia for about a week. While I was there a very interesting thing happened one time. You've heard of the 442nd, the Nisei Regiment?

SHW: Yes.

EWS: They were down there at the same time I was, getting ready to go home. Foggia was like a repple-depple in reverse to go home. There were guys from all over. All different kinds—regular army guys, infantry, air force, and whatever else. There was one flight guy—a big nice looking guy—but he was . . . pardon if I use the expression . . . a "smart ass." These old Japanese guys were the most highly decorated unit in the whole United States army during the war. Every one of them, they weren't afraid of anybody or anything. The biggest one is no bigger than me, and some of them were a lot smaller. The Japanese boys were not big by American standards. Anyway, this guy was making comments about the Japs and what a bunch of pigs they were, and you name it, he was saying something nasty about them. Finally, one of them stopped and looked up at him and said, "Yeah, I'm talking about you." We were waiting to go into a chow hall. He hands his kit to one of his buddies and says, "Hold this a minute." He walked up to that big guy and he hit him half a dozen times before the big guy even knew what happened to him. He hit the holy hell out of him. That guy was down on knees crying, "Don't hit me anymore. Don't hit me anymore." All of us were gathered around. "Come on, kid, hit him again!" We were all for the little Jap boy.

SHW: It sounds like the big guy had it coming.

EWS: He had it coming. Like I said before, he was a smart ass, and he had it coming. I tell you, we really got a kick out of that. Then they put us on trucks and hauled us into Naples, and they had big ships there again to take us home. This time I got the *S. S. Wakefield*. It was the liner America before the war, one of our fastest liners. The only ship that could carry more than that was the *Queen Mary* or the *Elizabeth* back in those days. They could carry better than ten. We had something over eight thousand, almost nine thousand guys on the *Wakefield*. So we went in there, and again on the *Wakefield* I was lucky and got a lower bunk, but I was again about three or four decks down. This time we didn't have to worry about submarines because Germany had surrendered, and the Japanese didn't have anything over in the Atlantic area at all. Anyway, I was feeling good and checked in my stuff. In the meantime while I was down in Foggia—we were

down there for close to a month before we came home—I got to be a chaplain's assistant and type up his sermons and notices if he wanted to put in the *Stars and Stripes* and stuff like that. I learned to type there a little bit. I didn't know much about it. Anyway, I put in for the job and I got it. When I got aboard ship, they wanted to know if somebody could work in the library. I said, "Yes, I'd like to try that." So I went in and I got a job sorting books and handing books out and stuff like that. All the way across the Mediterranean, we go through the Strait of Gibraltar and get into the Atlantic; pretty soon that old roll comes on again. Before one day was over I was down in the head tossing my cookies again.

SHW: And back in the infirmary again?

EWS: This time I couldn't get in. They wouldn't let me in. I was feeling horrible. At first I felt like I was going to die. Then I was afraid I wouldn't. Anyway, I'm going down a flight of stairs . . . what do they call them in the navy . . . the ladder . . . all of a sudden I kind of blacked out and I fell. There was a landing there, and there were six or eight guys all sitting around. They had a blanket spread out and they were playing cards. I fell right in the middle of their card game. Boy, were they mad. I was about half conscious. They were yelling at me, and I just laid there. Then one of the guys said, "Hey, this guy is out!" I can remember him saying that, but it was just like I was out. I had no chance to move or nothing, no feeling to move. Two or three guys came along, and there were some other guys on the ladders, and they said, "Hey, better take him up to sick bay." What do they call it on the ship?

SHW: Infirmary.

EWS: Infirmary, yes. Thank goodness you're here with some words for me. Anyway, a whole bunch of them—three or four guys—grabbed me and they hauled me up there and told the doctor what had happened. By that time I was starting to come to a little, and he said, "How come?" I said, "I came up before and told them I was sick, and no one would do anything for me." He said, "We will. Put this guy to bed and give him something to eat." Same procedure again. Going across the Atlantic was a little smoother this time than when we went over. And we were in a bigger ship, too. So it didn't roll quite so bad. So after about three days in sick bay, I got to feeling pretty good and was able to hold stuff down pretty good. The doctor said, "I think we're going to put you outside." I'd heard in the meantime that if you eat soda crackers, that'll settle your stomach so you don't get sick. I asked the doctor. I said, "I've heard about that. Is that right?" He said, "Yeah. You want soda crackers?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Okay. I'll give you a prescription for them," which he did. He said, "You take that down to the galley and tell the mess sergeant I said to give you as many soda crackers as you need until we get in." We were heading for Boston going home, not the one we came out of in Virginia. He said, "You can have all the crackers you want until we land." So I took it down and they gave me a two-pound box of soda crackers, and I ate that whole box up over the next two days. Then I ran out and went back, and they gave me another box. By that time we were one day out of Boston, and we pulled into Boston Harbor in the daytime and pulled up against one of the docks with the aircraft carrier Enterprise. So we saw that and we felt like we were right back home with a U.S. warship there. The minute we got off the boat, there were Red Cross and Salvation Army and a few other things there, and they had stacks and stacks of doughnuts. I'll bet you they had a million doughnuts, and pints of milk—real full milk, not 1% or 2%--regular full milk. We each got a carton of milk and

all the doughnuts we could handle. Then they put us on a train and took us up to Camp Miles Standish, outside of Boston. That was November 1, and we were in Miles Standish three days. They put us on a train heading west. All us guys were from the west part of the country. The train I was in pulled in to Camp Grant, Illinois, on the third or fourth. We had I think a day and a half or maybe two days in Camp Grant. Then they had us line up and we all lined up and came up to a desk one at a time. "Give us your name, serial number." "36041192, Stoehr, Edward W." Anyway, there was a lady lieutenant, and she said, "Do you care to re-up again?" I said, "No." She says, "We'll upgrade you two ranks if you sign up." All we could think of in those days was getting home. The heck with rank or anything else. But looking back at it now today, if I had it to do over, knowing what I know now, I would have done it. I would have re-upped again. I would have had a thirty-day leave to do whatever I wanted at home for thirty days before I'd have to report back to someplace, and I'd still be in the air force. I said, "No, I don't want any part of it. I want to get home. I've got a wife and kid at home." "Okay." She turns to the person who was sitting next to her and says, "Give me three hundred dollars and a duck." That's that old ruptured duck pin. Did you ever see one of those?

SHW: No, I don't think so.

EWS: Well, it looks like a little bird that they've got something going across it. It looks like he's got a broken wing. They called him the ruptured duck. I got that pin to put on my uniform and three hundred bucks, and out I went. I went out the gate and pretty soon there was a car coming along. I was standing there with my duffel bag. There were several of us along that street thumbing our way to get to someplace. And this car came along. "Where you bound for, soldier?" I said, "Chicago." He said, "Well, we're going to Chicago." I said, "You got room for one more?" He says, "I guess we can squeeze you in." And it was a squeeze with that great big duffel bag. It weighed about fifty or sixty pounds. Anyway, they got me and the duffel bag in, and in they went to . . . I forget what road they took in. I think it might have been 20, which goes through Elgin, Illinois, before you get into Chicago. When we finally got into the city, they came to Cicero Avenue, which is 4800 West, and that was one block from where my folks live. They live in the 4700 block on Monroe Street. So I said, "When you get to Cicero Avenue, I'll get out then." They said, "Okay." So on Cicero they let me out. The streetcar came along, I got on the streetcar, paid my fare, and got down to Madison Street, the dividing street between north and south in Chicago. Monroe is the next street south. I got off when it stopped at Monroe, I got off, swung the duffel back on my shoulder, walked down the street past about eight houses, and went right to my mother and dad's place. My wife at that time was still up in Rochester. I can't remember now whether she came down or if I went up there. I think she came down with the boys.

SHW: You had two kids at that time?

EWS: I had two by that time. I went off and left with one and one coming. To this day, she's mad at me for going off and leaving her.

SHW: I'm guessing two toddlers are a lot to deal with, or an infant and a toddler.

EWS: One time . . . do you want this on the record, too?

SHW: Is this something having to do with the war or is this . . .

EWS: It's about her and the kids on the train.

SHW: Sure.

EWS: They were going I forget where now, it might have been from Chicago to Rochester or something, but she had the two. The one was walking and the other one was a little guy. But the oldest one was the one who got sick on her. He started getting sick. Of course, back in those days any young wife with kids, in the military, people went out of their way. Anyway, everybody on the train was real good to her. She had to take him to the bathroom, so somebody in the next seat said, "We'll watch the little boy." She starts out with him, she had him up on her shoulder, and he upchucked right then. He didn't just blew it down—he blew it, and he hit about six or eight people all up and down that car. Verlaine says, "I could have died. I had to clean him up, I had to clean me up, then I had to go back and face all those people. I could have just died!"

SHW: I can't imagine!

EWS: But she said, "When I came out, nobody gave me a dirty look or anything. They were all so nice to me." She said, "I felt awful." She was kind of a young, good looking gal. With two kids, everybody . . . I guess they felt sorry for her.

SHW: After the war, what did you end up doing? Was it hard to find a job?

EWS: No, I came home. I spent two or three days with my folks. She was staying with her mother up in Rochester. But they just had a small house—two bedroom. And she had a younger brother at home yet. So it made it kind of a tight fit. They had some of the kids sleeping in chairs in the living room and dining room. Anyway, I got a job. I was up there I think two days and . . . My trade was printing. It was the only thing I really knew. I was good with words, but lousy with math. I went into this place called Whiting Press and told him what I wanted to do, and I wanted to be a linotype operator. I said I had some linotype. He said, "We'll take you on and give you a crack." At that time it was tough to get help yet. They had another guy, he was a pressman. He'd been in service, but he got back before I did. But he'd worked for him before, so he was an older guy. I worked there for about six months. I don't think it was even six months. It was January, February, March and April—four months. But I saved up enough money to buy a used car. I got a 1940 4-door Ford, maroon color. It wasn't too bad. It turns out the shocks were bad on it. Later on I had them replaced. While I was working for this guy in Rochester I put in for membership into the International Typographic Union, the printers' union. My dad was a member of that for fifty-four years. My uncle was a member for seventy years—his older brother. He worked for the *Chicago Tribune*. My dad worked in the *American Medical Journal*. They're both from Chicago. The local guy in the union in Rochester asked, "Where did you work?" I said, "I worked in Chicago." So he writes to the secretary-treasurer there in Chicago, who knew me and he knew my dad. He said, "We have this man here, Edward Stoehr, who wants to make application for membership in the union. Do you know anything about him?" The guy in Chicago said, "Was he competent?" He said, "I guess he is as far as we know." He said, "Okay, then, give him a card."

As it turned out, I didn't have to serve a regular full six-year apprenticeship. Because I was a veteran, I got what they call they bridged my time. So I got it relatively easy.

SHW: That's a good deal.

EWS: Then things weren't going good at home. The house was too small and stuff, and there was no way to get a place to live in Rochester at that time. There was just nothing, no matter what you paid. And, of course, we couldn't afford to pay a lot because while printers paid good, but it wasn't good enough. It would be like if I went from here and went out and tried to buy a house in San Francisco today. It would be about the same. Anyway, every month we got a union journal from the Typographic Union, and different companies would put it classified ads for help. This one came in from a place called Rotocolor in St. Charles, Illinois. I told the boss I wanted to go down and see about it. He said, "All right. You go ahead." So I went down and they took me on right away. They said, "How soon can you start?" I said, "I'd like to give the guy two weeks to get someone else." "That's kind of generous," he said, "but we'll still hold it for you." I did that, and two weeks later I went down and went right to work as Rotocolor's linotype operator. I worked there for seven years.

SHW: You worked there seven years?

EWS: I worked there for seven years before we left there to come up to Minnesota.

SHW: I think that's a good place to stop. That was a great interview.

EWS: For quite a few years I worked at the trade. I got a job in Minneapolis *Star and Tribune* as a linotype operator. I worked nights and could never make any meetings, so I never joined anything—Legion or VFW. I was eligible for both. I belong to both now. When I retired, which was seventeen years ago—1982 I retired—I joined the American Legion. The guys there asked me to join. I couldn't do it before because working nights I could never make a meeting. I couldn't do anything. Second year I'm at the Legion, I got to be adjutant. They pushed the adjutant job off on me. I kept that for three years. Then the guy who was commander left; he had to move. I thought, heck, I'm going to run for commander. So I ran for post commander over at Post 343 in Norwood. Nobody ran against me; I got the job. I held that job for four terms, four years. They wanted me to do it again a fifth year. I said, "No, four is enough. Let someone else take it," because prior to that it was only one year at a time for everybody. Another guy said, "I'll take it." He's still commander, and that was seven years ago. If they've done the same thing, some joker will stand up and say, "I move we have the same slate of officers as we had last year." And that's been going on now for seven years. In the meantime, the second year I was out, I decided to run for third district vice commander. We're in the third district here in the American Legion in Minnesota. They have five vice commanders in each district. They have ten districts. In our third district we have five, and I got to be one of them, and I carried that job for two years. I ran again the second year. The third district vice commander's job is membership, to get new members. I got five new members myself besides talking our guys in the post to get a couple more. The second year I did it again, and the second year Butch Miller, who is the national commander, put out a plea, and he called it "Give Me Five." You know the old "give me five" deal. He wanted five new members. Everybody who would do that would get some kind of a

prize. Well, I got five members real easy and sent them in. He sent me a real nice Garland pen. Do you know what a Garland pen is? I got one of those with a "Give Me Five" award with the year on it. Before that year was over with, Butch came through Minnesota on a tour of the whole country, and he was down at LeCenter, and I went down there. As a vice commander, I had to go to these meetings. He was there and I got a chance to meet him. I said, "Commander Butch, I want to thank you for the "Give Me Give" pen," and I pulled it out of my pocket. He looked at it and says, "Is that one of them?" I says, "Yeah." He says, "You know, I sponsored that thing but I've never yet seen one." I said, "That's it." He said, "Jiminee! That's great!" He had a local state guy going around taking pictures for our state paper, and I said, "Commander Butch, would you mind if I get him to take a picture of you presenting me with that pen?" He said, "Sure, I'd be glad to." Anyway, he made a point of it, and the guy took the picture. By golly, the next paper that came out they had a picture of him presenting me with that pen.

SHW: That's great!

EWS: Anyway, that's quite a thing. Our year runs from July to July; it doesn't go from January to January. At the end of July, there was a traveling trophy that I wasn't even aware of for membership on a percentage basis so that just the biggest posts wouldn't win because they'd bring in maybe forty new guys and a smaller post could bring in five or six or ten or something. But it went on a percentage basis, and the percentage I brought in to my post was the largest percentage in the whole third district. I got this trophy. It's this wide down here, stands this high, and it's a traveling trophy. Every year since 1977 when it was started, some post has their name and number on it. Our post has it, and it was due to . . . I'm bragging now . . . but it was due to my efforts in getting new members for our post. And for the first time since this post has been founded, we've got over a hundred members.

SHW: That's a lot. That's great. I'm going to stop the tape right here. [end of interview]