Interview with William Cantrall
# VR2-A-L-2012-039.01
Interview # 1: August 15, 2012
Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Wednesday, August 15, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, the director of oral history of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I'm in Oak Brook, Illinois with Bill Cantrall. How are you, Bill?

Cantrall: I'm fine. We say "Cantrŭll," but it's got an "a," all right.

DePue: "Cantrŭll."

Cantrall: Yes.

DePue: I should have started with that. I was more concerned whether I should call you William or Bill.

Cantrall: Bill.

DePue: We're here because you've got a great story to talk about your World War II experiences but quite unique from a lot of other people. I don't know if many Americans even know much about the American Field Service [AFS], and that's what we're here to talk about. We're thrilled that you have the opportunity to talk to us. We'll be referring to the book that you've written, not too many years ago, I think, *Just Like a Taxi: Frontline Ambulance, Italy 1944-45*, written by this guy by the name of Artful Dodger Bill Cantrall.

Cantrall: (laughs) Yeah.

DePue: Why Artful Dodger?

Cantrall: Why Artful Dodger? That's a little complex, but I got into a lot of trouble, from first shot to the last shot. I also dodged a lot of trouble, and I ducked orders, and I did things my way. I really had a reputation for this, and it was important. I did better than people that went by the book, especially officers.

There were all kinds of officers that I encountered from seven different national armies. My first job was to keep from doing anything so dramatic that I wouldn't be just reported to my own officer in the AFS [American Field Service], who usually just laughed his ass off (laughs) about what I had done again. Many of these officers were British, and they were also troublesome. But I had Polish officers. I had Indian officers. I had American officers; they gave me a lot of trouble. We had to take orders from everybody.

DePue: Would you suggest that it would have been better if everybody went their own ways and didn't follow orders?

Cantrall: I was pretty dramatic about what I did, but if we didn't skip around, we would never have been able to do our job. We were the most efficient ambulance evacuation group in the whole combined Allied armies. The ones that were going strictly by military orders didn't get half the job done that we did. Plus, we were volunteers, and we had volunteered for the frontline service, but many of us were physically handicapped as well. That wasn't our problem.

Our problem was that we had too many people to answer to. If this guy tells you to go that way, and you're going down the road a half a mile—I should put that in kilometers—and somebody tells you something else, that keeps you from carrying out your orders. But, most of all, we were looking after the patients. That was our job. And we were following the Geneva Convention. I never found an officer who was. (both laugh)

DePue: All of this is to say…People are saying, "What in the world is he talking about? I still don't even know what the AFS is." We'll get to there in due time. Let's start, though, at the beginning of your life. Tell me when and where you were born.

Cantrall: I was born in Fancy Prairie, Illinois, which is a bit north of Springfield, maybe twelve miles. At one time, it was called Twelve Mile. That was in 1924, June 30.

DePue: June 30, 1924. I've got a map here. Even living in Springfield, I wasn't sure where Fancy Prairie is. It looks like it's right here. It's due north of Springfield. Now, that's not too far from this little town called Cantrall.

Cantrall: That's right. That was settled by Levi Cantrall in 1818. He got the first land grant that was for sale. He paid money for it. It was probably $1 an acre at that time. He had a whole bunch of children, sixteen, and he was a miller. He had come from Bettencourt in Virginia and brought in his brothers. So, there were more Cantralls than anybody else north of the Sangamon [River] for a good many years. He built a horse mill and then a water mill on Cantrall Creek, which fed into the Sangamon. It's still there. There's a sign on it. There's a post office.

DePue: I assume that Levi is an ancestor of yours.

Cantrall: Yes, direct.

DePue: What's the relation?

Cantrall: I would have to calculate a little bit.

DePue: Is he a great-great-great-grandfather or something?

Cantrall: Yeah, that's…He's my great-great-great-grandfather.

DePue: You said he got there in 1818?

Cantrall: Eighteen eighteen.

DePue: Which happens to be the year that Illinois was established as a state.

Cantrall: That's right, and it was the first year that any of the land that was taken from the Indians, after the 1812 war, because the Indians, or some of them, had sided with the British. So, this land was opened up from there—I don't know—for all the way north, I guess. It was pretty much starting just across the Sangamon.

DePue: Anybody who knows a little about Lincoln's history, knows that Lincoln, his young adult years, were in New Salem, which—I'm looking at the map—would be practically due west of Cantrall. Did any of your relatives know Lincoln when he was growing up?

Cantrall: They all did. All of my great-great-grandfathers and grandmothers knew him personally. Levi signed a bill to Sangamon County for surveying a road from Cantrall to Athens. Abraham Lincoln was the elected guy, surveyor, I guess, and he was in charge. But Levi may have been the person that actually knew the mathematics and helped to teach Abraham Lincoln, who did not know the mathematics of surveying, until he learned them for this job.

DePue: You had just handed me a document that's obviously signed by Levi Cantrall and A. Lincoln, and then it's signed again by A. Lincoln. This is a copy. Where's the original of this, or would you not—

Cantrall: The original is in the library, in the Lincoln [Presidential] Library, I should think.

DePue: So, exactly where I work?

Cantrall: Yes.

DePue: Let me just read what it says up here. “We, the undersigned, being appointed to view or”—I think it says—“relocate a part of the road between Sangamon town and the town of Athens, respectfully report that we have performed the duty of said appointment according to law, and that we have made the said relocation on good ground and believe the same to be necessary and proper,” I believe it says. Signed in Athens, Illinois, November 4, 1834. Then there’s three names. I can’t quite make out the first name, but the second is your great-great-grandfather—

Cantrall: Great-great-great.

DePue: Great-great-great. And the third is Abraham Lincoln. That’s pretty cool stuff. You mind if I keep this?

Cantrall: No, that’s for you.

DePue: Excellent. You just never know what you’re going to stumble across when you start these interviews.

Cantrall: That is right. I met a number of people named Cantrall, spelled e-l-l, or a-l-l, or other ways, and the first thing they say is, “Did your great-great-great-grandfather have sixteen sons?” which is an exaggeration. And I say, “I sure did, cousin.”

DePue: He didn’t have sixteen sons; he only had sixteen children, huh?

Cantrall: Yes, and I think one of them was a stepson and two wives in there.

DePue: Did you grow up hearing about these ancestors and hearing about their connection with Lincoln?

Cantrall: Yes. I grew up, I came to…as a person, I guess, about two, I was living in Athens, and I thought everybody in the world was a relative. I thought everybody was related to everybody else. That was very, very close to the truth there, either by marriage or by blood. I remember one girl, Harriet Cantrall, that was my third, fifth and eighth cousin.

DePue: All wrapped up in one.

Cantrall: Yes.

DePue: A little bit more about your father. You were born in 1924. Was your father, by chance, a World War I veteran?

Cantrall: No, he was not. He had two children at that time. I guess that kept him out of it, or they didn't get that far along this time. His younger brother was in the Navy, but there wasn't really any real service. But, my father's grandfather, that's my great-grandfather, died at Vicksburg. I actually visited the battlefield there and went to the Illinois pavilion. I was following my son, who had taken his children there. All of the names on the walls [are] in brass. He says they found Cantrall, or his kids did, and there were thirteen Cantralls. One was Young, and that was his grandfather's name, and he had been named for **his** grandfather.

DePue: The Illinois monument, memorial, whatever you want to call it, at Vicksburg is massive. I would certainly recommend anybody to go see that. It is impressive.

Cantrall: I was thrilled. But there were thirteen in this one company, and they were brothers and cousins. That's the way the war was carried on.

DePue: It gives you a sense of how a company, with that many direct relatives going into it, and then have that number of casualties, that had to be devastating to the larger family.

Cantrall: He had one son, and so he left a widow very early in the war. But that Company C, I guess they were taken over by Sherman later and went right into the South and marched through Georgia.

DePue: Do you remember what the regiment was that he was assigned to?

Cantrall: I can track it down. My son knows it.

DePue: Maybe when we get the transcript to you…

Cantrall: Yeah, Yeah.

DePue: We're not but a year away from the 150th anniversary of that battle.

Cantrall: Oh, god, that's right.

DePue: What did your father do when you were growing up?

Cantrall: When I was born, he was actually carrying mail, but he then started teaching school. He may have taught some before. He was like my mother. The same thing happened, finished high school. He went to the high school in Petersburg, as a matter of fact, and he was the valedictorian. All of those guys were teaching school the next year, ordinarily, in, very often, a one-room school, which he did his whole life. Sometimes it was a little bigger. He loved it.

DePue: Did he keep that job of teaching all the way through the Depression years?

Cantrall: Yes. Yes.

DePue: Was that enough to keep the family going?

Cantrall: No. He got a job in Sherman, which is not too far away. He was getting a hundred a month there—we were. They ran out of money and knocked off a month off of the school year. That summer, he worked for a cousin of some degree, back near Athens, for board and a $1 a day, and we needed it. He slept in the barn.

DePue: Where was the rest of the family? Were you all living in Athens at the time?

Cantrall: We were all in Sherman. We had about three-quarters of an acre and a garden truck, everybody in the family. I was nine by this time. I worked in raising tomatoes and corn and potatoes and sweet potatoes and peppers, the whole depth.

DePue: Nine years old. That would have been 1933, which is the very heart of the Depression at that time.

Cantrall: The very heart, and you're talking about a drought. That was zip! The cornstalks were baked right into the soil, nothing.

DePue: Did you get to haul plenty of water, then, to the plants?

Cantrall: Yes. I pretty much pumped most of it.

DePue: Well water.

Cantrall: We lowered the pump so far that I was the only one that could conveniently work the pump handle. (both laugh)

DePue: How many siblings did you have?

Cantrall: I had two sisters and a brother, all older. We had fruit trees, too, and I was picking all the time. I was picking potato bugs off of plants by hand. I'm not saying I never had any fun, but I know that my mother canned a bushel of tomatoes a day for more than a month. That's how we survived.

DePue: Did you have chickens or hogs?

Cantrall: Oh, yeah. We had a big hog for a while. There was a barn in back of our property. It was right in the middle of the town, and there was a barn. That's the only animal around, pretty much. We kept that one and had him butchered.

The head of the school board was a good friend, plowed the big, former barn lot, which was very rich. But we had to haul everything. That's just what we did. I got sick from the sun more than once, from working in that heat.

DePue: We'd probably call it some kind of a sunstroke or—

Cantrall: Yeah. It was a town that had a lot of Italians, some of them first, second and third generation, very much mixed. Everybody had a garden. There was a Belgian lady behind us. She was out there in wooden shoes doing her garden work. But mostly it was Italian, from the south. They were eating dandelion greens, and we tried that. That was just terrible.

DePue: I think most people would be surprised that the little town of Sherman, Illinois would have a large Italian population. You know how they got there?

Cantrall: Yes, exactly. Peabody, and may his descendants never rest.

DePue: (laughs) You're talking about the Peabody Coal Company, perhaps?

Cantrall: I sure am. My future brother-in-law went down in the mine. The young men, Italian, went to school in this country. But the thing is, Peabody invited these people over. He went down to Hardin County and Henderson County and got people from there that were miners and moved them into the neighborhood. Now, everybody got to work a day or two a week. But this was keeping the wages down for the whole state. By the way, the Peabody estate is right over the way.

DePue: Here in the Chicago suburbs?

Cantrall: Yes. I've been in it. Among other things, it had a secret hole, hidey hole, for him to go hide in when the mob approached. I don't know whether they ever did. But, you know, I'm eight and nine years old, and I'm going to the store, the general store—this is really old-timey business—where the men hang out. There were the United Mine Workers, and then there was another one, Progressive Miners. Among other things, I saw a man in there with a revolver, wrenching it around. He says he was going into town and kill that bastard, John L. Lewis.

DePue: When he was saying that, was he talking about going into Springfield?

Cantrall: Yes.

DePue: Was that where the mines were, or were there mines also in Sherman?

Cantrall: The mines actually were in Andrew, which is halfway between Cantrall and Sherman. That was the local mine, but there were Peabody mines all over southern Illinois. Actually, I knew John L. Lewis, and I would stop and see him every so often. He lived in town. I think it was Eighth Street. I used to ride by his place, going to the swimming pool.

DePue: The John L. Lewis lived in your community?

Cantrall: I'm sorry?

DePue: **The** John L. Lewis lived there?

Cantrall: Yes, in Springfield.

DePue: I should have known that.

Cantrall: Okay, we lived in a really dilapidated, thrown-together place in Springfield. We moved there after my tenth birthday, or eleventh, somewhere in there. This was Edmund Burke's house—in a mostly nice neighborhood—and he was the United Mine Workers' lawyer, and John L. would show up there, with a bodyguard probably. I knew him, let's say, five or six years later, as a kid still. He sat on his front porch in a swing, like [an] ordinary person, and I'd stop and go up and talk to him. I sat there and talked about union affairs and political affairs, and he enjoyed it.

DePue: Was this on the north side of town?

Cantrall: Yes, north—

DePue: They call them North Enders, the people on the north side. That's where an awful lot of the Italians lived in Springfield.

Cantrall: I've got to get oriented here a minute. Down there north is somewhere else. I lived on North Walnut, near Jefferson. I went to school on the other side of the tracks, at the Stephen A. Douglas grade school. That's where the Italian lived, over there, and the Irish, and anybody else that was poor. Those are the kids I went to school with. There were only three or four of us that came from the other side of the tracks. My mother hadn't figured that out, but this was the poor section, and it was called the "Cabbage Patch." I never really ever told my parents the struggles that I had there, especially after I got glasses. There were a lot of poor kids that were getting into trouble and going to reformatory, and when they came out, they came to that school, where they were bigger and older and kept us little guys in good order. Of course, I was a good citizen.

DePue: How old were you when you got your glasses?

Cantrall: Eleven.

DePue: So, pretty young. I would think, at that age, there's a stigma attached to that.

Cantrall: There's more to it than that. I was so blind that when I was…I've got a great-grandson. He's five years old. He's got glasses. I needed glasses when I was five. When I was given the eye test, I figured out what everybody was doing. I wanted to pass this test. I gave the right answers, not the true answers. I couldn't see the letters really. I just lied about it.

DePue: Did you know that you needed glasses, that your eyesight was bad, or did you just think that was normal?

Cantrall: When I was eight, I knew it. My father wouldn't believe it. He was telling me to read the signs off of a billboard, I guess. I said, "I can't. I can't see it."

DePue: Were you near-sighted, then? You could read up close but not at a distance?

Cantrall: That's right. There's also the problem of it costs money. (chuckles)

DePue: Maybe your father didn't want to believe it, because he didn't have the money anyway.

Cantrall: There was something to that. I know that I had blood poisoning, and we didn't get a doctor, and they didn't take me to a doctor. I ran a roofing nail through my foot in a chicken yard, and it really got sore. We used plantain leaves and a bread poultice. Red lines were going up my leg.

I had a toothache, and I went to bed at night with a hot water bottle, and I burned my face; it was so hot. I put up with that for over six months, and we couldn't afford a dentist.

DePue: This is with your father being a teacher and also taking up odd jobs here and there. Bill, we haven't talked much about your mother yet. What was her maiden name?

Cantrall: It was Ruby Mershon, M-e-r-s-h-o-n, Cantrall. She was from Stafford, Kansas. Of course, she was the valedictorian out there and taught school for two years, with boys bigger than she was. Her twin sister was salutatorian, but she taught her whole life. Listen, the last thing in the world that I wanted to be was a schoolteacher, but that's what happened. (both laugh) But we were poor.

DePue: What's your earliest memory, growing up?

Cantrall: Oh, I just saw a cardinal. (laughs)

DePue: A pleasant distraction.

Cantrall: Yeah, I'm sorry. Well, I got a great view myself. The earliest, exactly, I remember my rompers, and I was two. I had three sets, with big buttons, which I could fasten and unfasten myself. At the age of two, a revivalist came to town. I had learned a game, I guess. In the living room, it was a game. But, we were in church, and it's not a hardwood floor. It was a pine floor. What I did was, when everybody stood up to pray or sing, I slipped off the pew and crawled underneath there, and when I got to a lady's knee, I tickled it. And that, by God, is my earliest memory. (both laugh)

DePue: That's a pretty good memory.

Cantrall: Got me into a lot of trouble later. (laughs) But that actually is.

DePue: I think this is a good time to mention one of the other attributes that you had. You referred to it a few times in the book. The memory you have. Tell us a little bit about the memory, because you obviously figured that out at a pretty early age, as well.

Cantrall: I talked with kids, and even in high school, nobody could remember back [to] that age. It certainly was a rare thing. I remember, I thought I was…All right, I'd better put it this way. My sister, Luella, was four years older. My brother was six years older. And my big sister was nine years older, I think. They all took care of me, but Luella especially. The oldest girl had been taught to read when she was little and skipped the first grade. She was a little person. Now she is even littler with these kids, and she can read. So, they decided not to teach any more kids.

DePue: Because your parents saw that as a bad thing?

Cantrall: My parents decided this was bad. Maybe they read it in a book or something, about social stuff. Anyway, there were orders from my big sister not to teach her brother how to read. So, she would read to him, with him sitting across from her at a child table.

DePue: What's your brother's name?

Cantrall: Young, after his father. But with a different middle name, named after my mother's father.

DePue: But spelled just like it sounds, Young?

Cantrall: Yes, Y-o-u-n-g. He was generally called Brubby, which is— (laughs)

DePue: Grubby?

Cantrall: Brubby, yes. I don't know whether his big sister was having trouble, but my mother called him Brubby forever. Of course, I was Billy. Young is not a small name. Young, my brother, learned to read upside-down. (chuckles) She was reading, and he could figure this out. It was a smart family. (laughs) Okay, alright. Now, Luella has strict orders, but her notion of fun, besides playing jacks and skip-rope with her buddies, girlfriends, her notion of life was reading. We would play school, and she would be the teacher, and I'd be the student. The teacher would read to the students.

DePue: How much older was Luella?

Cantrall: Four years. She got paddled for breaking down and teaching me how to write "Bill." She got paddled, by god.

DePue: By your mother or father?

Cantrall: I don't remember that part, probably Mom, because…But, where this is leading to is the best part of all. They told me this hoopla about, "This is hard business, learning to read, and you'll do that next year. You'll work on that all year." The night before, there had been one of these switches. I was a reading teacher myself, developmental and remedial reading teacher, and these things swung back and forth, between sight reading and phonics. My father, the night before I'm starting in the first grade, pulls out the phonics chart, teaches me the sounds of all of the combinations and of the letters. I go to school the next day, and I can read everything in the room. And I am furious! (both laugh) I scold everybody, and I won't do anything for anybody for a long time. This was such a bad thing.

DePue: You were furious at your parents, because your dad had broken down and actually taught you—

Cantrall: No, I was furious, because they had kept me from reading all these years. I mean, there are certain things kids have to develop. They have to be ready to see distinction. They have to be ready to hear distinction and to make blends. Not everybody learns to read in the same way. This was really an important thing. Now, I had some difficulty, but there were extra books around, and there were other things to do in the first grade, but they wouldn't skip me.

DePue: Was there a moment that you realized that you had a whole lot better memory than most of the other kids did?

Cantrall: I realized when I…You know, the first two years, Athens was a fairly well-to-do town, and the Depression hadn't landed on us as hard—

DePue: So, you were living in Sherman, but going to school in Athens?

Cantrall: No. My first two years, I went to school in Athens. Moved when I was in the third grade, starting the third grade.

DePue: To Sherman.

Cantrall: To Sherman. There I realized that I was not only the smartest kid in the third, fourth or fifth grade, I was smarter than the teacher and better-educated. That was a kind of burden, but it—

DePue: Did that set you apart somewhat from the rest of the kids in the class?

Cantrall: Yeah, but I had to survive anyway. The tough kids were from Kentucky. I still didn't have my glasses. So, the first day of class—this wasn't so bad—a redheaded kid with a lot of freckles, just come up from Kentucky. We're out for recess in the schoolyard, and everybody was there, eighth grade, whatever. This guy said something derogatory about my father, so I go after him. He was a year older than I am. He pulled out a knife, a jackknife, opened it up. I took that knife away from him, got cut, and threw it over the fence. My father is the principal, and he gets out there, and he sees the two of us tangling, and he paddles us both. Oh, the kid's name was Staley. We probably shouldn't add that in there.

DePue: Gee, that sounds like a familiar name now for Springfield. Go ahead.

Cantrall: Okay. I'm bleeding. I really got cut. I used to show people my scar there.

DePue: On your hand, was it?

Cantrall: It was right in here. I'm taking a knife away from him.

DePue: So right between your thumb and your first finger?

Cantrall: Yes. I'm wrestling with him. I got hold of his knife arm and his knife hand, and, to get the knife out of his hand, I get cut. He was just aping his uncle and his father. This is the way life was conducted in Kentucky. There were a lot of these kids, most of them living in worn-out farms.

DePue: Did it upset you that your father paddled both of you, or did you understand why he did it?

Cantrall: No, but…Yes, I probably did. I mean, you have a choice. I was defending his honor. Maybe I didn't get it fully. My mother was not at all happy and probably let him know it, when I came home. I think I came home for lunch, or maybe it was after school, but anyway, it needed to be kept clean. It healed without a stitch, so it made a considerable scar. I guess I resented it. It didn't do me much good. I'll tell you one thing, I still had a lot of fights to fight with this kid, because I'd thrown away his knife.

Besides the Staleys, there were Renfros, and all of the names that came out of Tennessee and Kentucky and kept going out into the West. These people were bandits. They were at the Alamo. It's Scotch-Irish.

I was certainly Scotch-Irish, at least half or a lot of me, because my grandfather's mother looked after my father, I guess. Okay, his mother, alright, she was Scotch-Irish. She was really Scotch. She was Scotch, and taught my grandfather, and then my father, all kinds of Scotch things. I heard Bobby Burns on his birthday. We were read to from Bobby Burns' book.

My mother was English. Even though the name was French—it was Mershon—it was changed from Marchant, the French spelling. His father had come over, I don't know, 1640 or sometime—a Huguenot—and had gone back for the rest of the family and never returned. So this sixteen-year-old boy was adopted by an English family. Instead of being Henry le Marchant, he was Henry Lee Mershon. And there have been Henry Lee Mershons ever since. (both laugh)

DePue: Bill, we probably ought to move along a little bit here, as fascinating as this is. Do you remember an encounter that was a bit too close with a rattlesnake, growing up?

Cantrall: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. This is something that I thought was memorable. When the school ended the first year, at the end of April, we all went barefoot for the picnic. Whatever lunch we were bringing, and we went barefoot until school started again. That wasn't but four months. You could go to Sunday school with shoes on, if you were lucky. They were probably pretty cramped.

I spent a lot of time on a farm that was near town, because there were two boys, one my age and one a little younger, that were my best buddies and on my side in many fights. This is a better place to be. I was interested in being self-sufficient, I think, and these kids had to work. When you were eight and nine and you lived on a farm, you had chores. I wanted to be in on that. I would sneak up there, or maybe sometimes with permission, and help them pump water for the stock and feed the cows or go after the cows. I loved that stuff.

There were six boys. They were big boys that are going out doing full-bodied, man's work. By the time Bobby was eight, he was able to drive a cultivator—that's with fast horses to go through the corn rows—and knew what he was doing, and doing his share. He was trying to do everything his brother could do, of course.

Anyway, I would have to make it back home and wash my feet before supper. (laughs) I was a little late once, because we were messing around. So, I'm headed for home, and I'm cutting through the pasture. This is before I had eyes. I mean, real eyes or four eyes. Suddenly, I could see movement in front of me and hear the rattle. There is a rattlesnake sitting in the cow pad. It doesn't turn into a rattlesnake until…You know, it looks like another circular cow pad. I am running, and my next step is to land on him, or my next pace. But I don't. I got a surge of adrenaline, and I come off of that ground and leap clear over him, faster than he can strike. He's not expecting this kind of thing. Of course, he's trying to get me out of this mess, but he's hearing my feet pound along the path and trying to warn me off. Anyway, I don't know whether he ever struck or not, because I never turned around. I ran like a…(laughs) I broke the record to get home. I ran that whole quarter mile, and I never said, boo.

DePue: Did anybody else witness this?

Cantrall: No. No. I told Donny and Bobby Smith about it, because they needed a warning; there's a snake out there. I think we tracked it down, but that's pretty fuzzy. I remember that as one of a great many things I never told my parents.

DePue: (laughs) They wouldn't like the idea of going barefoot, maybe.

Cantrall: I had to protect my individuality, my freedom and my chance to make my own choices and to stay out of fights with…None of the Italian kids wanted to fight with me.

There was one girl I know that was a little older, who wanted to educate me to the ways of the world. I think she was probably two years older, and she kept saying things like, "You want a piece?" That will look good in this. (laughs) I, of course, pretended great ignorance. She was a lot bigger than me, for one thing.

DePue: Well, here's a completely different change of direction for you. Was the family religious? Did you attend church fairly often?

Cantrall: Yes. Yes, and a distinct no for my father. He had been raised a Catholic by his mother, who was a Whitney. I think that was English instead of Scotch. I think the rest of them were Catholics, meaning his brothers and his sister and their kids were Catholics. I've got Catholic cousins in Peoria.

DePue: That would suggest that was the Irish coming out and not the English.

Cantrall: I don't know. What I'm talking about, Scotch-Irish, it's very complicated that—

DePue: I didn't mean to complicate this thing. I'll go ahead and let you—

Cantrall: The people that came to this country in great torrents were from Scotland and the Scots from the north of Ireland. Of course, all of them had been Irish, before they went to the mainland, but the Scots were definitely Presbyterian, if that was even close.

DePue: But it sounds like your dad wasn't much of a churchgoer at all, then?

Cantrall: He would go to sign up, but mostly not, and stayed out of them. He would go present himself, with a tie and so on, to join the church as a family, but that was the last he would get there. Exactly what it was all about, I'm not sure. We went to Sunday school. That's what I know.

DePue: It sounds like this was your mother's doing?

Cantrall: Oh my god, yes.

DePue: What church did she take you to?

Cantrall: In Athens, there was a Catholic church; there was a Baptist church, and there was the Methodist church. When I was five, we joined the Methodist church. We joined, and I joined the church when I was five. I'm sure I was baptized before. But, I knew what was going on, and I knew all of the songs. (laughs)

DePue: You mentioned you spent some of the summers with some boys who were farm kids, so they got to do the farm chores. Did you have some jobs of your own, growing up?

Cantrall: That was very much picking grapes, fruit, doing the enormous amount of garden work. Even when we moved to town, we got a garden. I did all of the work there, by the time I was eleven. That was my job. I had a good-sized plot to look after.

DePue: But you had older siblings. Were they not helping out with the gardening?

Cantrall: They were…(pauses) Okay, that was tough for me, but…We are there.

DePue: We're talking about when you lived in Springfield.

Cantrall: I'm sorry; we have moved to Springfield. My father has a job, far from Springfield. Boy, we may need that map again. Not as far as Chatham…Glenarm, Glenarm. This is a one-room school, and that's where he taught, the rest of his teaching life. But he had to go with the milkman or whatever and wade through the streams. But we were in town.

My sister was going to high school. Maybe she's starting the ninth grade. I'm starting the sixth grade in Springfield, and I believe she's starting the tenth grade. She's into things, and she has work to do in the house. So does my older sister, who is working in a hospital, doing low-level stuff, washing sheets and stuff.

DePue: When we first met, you mentioned that you were carrying newspapers. How old were you when you started doing that?

Cantrall: I had to be twelve. I was doing magazines before that. I had a route, selling *Liberty*, *True Story*, and I was making some money. When I was twelve, I got a Social Security card. This is when it was starting. My mother got one the same day. I got the complicated one, and she got…You know, when they were giving her the next number, she says, "I can't remember all those numbers." And, by god, they gave her one with three zeroes at the end. (both laugh)

Then, I made pretty good money. I just kept adding on routes and selling new subscriptions, which I was very good at. By the time I was a junior in high school, I made more money than my father did, teaching school.

DePue: During all those years you were carrying newspapers, were you also reading the newspapers?

Cantrall: Yes, starting when I was eight.

DePue: Were you paying attention to what was going on in the world, or did you turn straight to the sports page?

Cantrall: When I was eight, I was selling the weekend *Chicago Tribune*, and then later, it was the *Herald Tribune*. This was a nickel. I went all over town and out on country roads, to places where they didn't have any nickels, trying to sell these. I think I got a penny and a quarter out of a nickel. I could do them then.

DePue: You mentioned before, at twelve years old, you're carrying newspapers. That would have made it 1936. Things are happening in the world by 1936. Were you paying any attention to that?

Cantrall: Very much so. Very much so. There's the Olympics. I am following the Olympics. I have chronic asthmatic bronchitis. When I was a baby, I had it probably all my life. I've probably got it now. I thought, from what I could read in the Book of Knowledge in our school classroom, that I was likely to get tuberculosis. The U.S. Army felt the same way about me.

DePue: That's a few years down the road, but go ahead.

Cantrall: Yes, but already I know. I am drinking skim milk, a lot of it. In those days, it was ten cents a gallon, as nobody wanted it. I could go to Palazzola's Dairy, which was in town—it was the one business in town—and get all of this milk for ten cents. I drank milk every meal, and I—

DePue: Were you doing this because you thought that would help with your medical condition?

Cantrall: Yes.

DePue: And that was the cheapest milk you could get?

Cantrall: Of course, yeah. We were all drinking it, because it was cheap. We were getting enough sun, believe me. Even tried to make cheese out of it. It doesn't work. I got the greatest benefit out of it. But I was the guy that went and got it.

DePue: You started this by remembering the 1936 Olympics, which, of course, was in Berlin. So, my question for you there is, do you remember it because of the sports, or because it was Hitler's showcase?

Cantrall: I knew about both of these things. I was really, really for the League of Nations. I was very unhappy because we hadn't joined it. I knew what all of this was about. My family were all readers.

Once every three months, we got a ride into Springfield with a guy whose brother was running the general store. He would bring things out in a panel truck from Springfield, and he would take in eggs to sell in town, both. Now, he was Irish. He was Patrick, and his brother had eight kids and living over the store. We got a ride in, and two or three of us could go. If somebody had real business, which was more often than not my mother, and two other people could ride in there. At first, two of us were dropped off at the Centennial Building, where the library was.

DePue: This would be part of the state capitol complex there.

Cantrall: Yes. We were bringing back twenty-five books. I think that was the number. Anyway, we would go into the library and take these back, and I and whoever else was there would find the books or types of books. Each of us, I think, could take twenty-four. We had Mom's card, and we had two more cards. I had a card. When I was eight, I had a card, by golly. Anyway, we had to get books for all of us. Carrying them was a problem. Then we would have to meet Pat for the return trip, to get delivered back there. Once in a while, people had to have shoes or something, and once in a while, I was taken shopping, but mostly that was my job. Everybody read all of those books.

DePue: What kind of books did you prefer, did you really like?

Cantrall: Mysteries. We were all sort of nutty about mysteries. Had a lot of those.

DePue: Was Agatha Christie on the list, or is that too early for her?

Cantrall: I know we did a lot of Agatha Christie in Springfield, so she must have been there already. I was after war stories and spy stories, in particular. We had a bookcase full of books. It's in the other room. You'll get a look at it later. I inherited it.

DePue: All of this is to say that your family was…sounds like they were devouring books. We got to this by asking you if you were following what was going on in the world.

Cantrall: I was reading my brother's and my sisters' textbooks and everything. I read *Lorna Doone,* and I read most of Dickens. We ought to throw in the World's Fair, the centennial.

DePue: Also 1936, I think, wasn't it?

Cantrall: Yeah, it lasted two years. I think it was thirty—

DePue: I could be wrong on the year. You're talking about the Chicago World's Fair?

Cantrall: I think you count from '96.

DePue: We can figure that out in the transcript. [1933 World's Fair, "The Century of Progress International Exposition."]

Cantrall: Okay. My brother and my sister and my father all got to go to the World's Fair, riding in a cattle truck for a small fee, with a truck full of cattle behind them. My father went into a bookstore and bought an edition of Dickens, an old one, of course. There was a lot of discussion about that, after the fact, but I read most of it.

DePue: The discussion was centered around how much it cost?

Cantrall: Yes. But it did me a world of good.

DePue: The question I have for you, since this is all leading to your experiences during World War II, you were pretty young, but you were already paying attention, it sounds like, to what was going on in Europe and Asia.

Cantrall: Absolutely.

DePue: What were you thinking about all of that?

Cantrall: We had a radio. I listened to H.V. Kaltenborn, and it took him a while to figure out Hitler. He did not get it right away. I was ahead of him. The idea of dictatorship had not been…out of our minds. I mean, the old Italian guys were talking about Mussolini.

DePue: Were they talking in admiring tones?

Cantrall: There were arguments. There was somebody on each side. He made the trains run on time. I listened to them. I could understand what they were saying. Sometimes they spoke in English, but sometimes they didn't. But apparently, it didn't make any difference, because I was absorbing what they were saying.

DePue: In other words, you could understand them, even when they spoke Italian?

Cantrall: Apparently. I didn't realize it at the time, but I could go back and tell my family what they were saying. They didn't ask me what language they were talking. There's a big porch in the front of the store, and there were steps on each side, and these were ideal for a town full of people with nothing to do. Also, you could go down there and get in a fight. But I still got to go to the store, because my mother wasn't about to go past all of those men. (laughs)

DePue: I take it, when you came home and talked to your parents about it, that you all shared the same views, the deep concerns about what was going on in Italy and Germany at the time?

Cantrall: Yes, I'm sure. We got a newspaper. It was the *Register*, was delivered to…

DePue: The *Ritster*?

Cantrall: The *Illinois State Register*.

DePue: Oh, *Register*, okay.

Cantrall: I'm not sure we had it all the time, but I read the *Register*. I mean, I read everything in the *Register*. When she started it, I read "My Day," Eleanor—

DePue: Roosevelt?

Cantrall: Eleanor Roosevelt's column. I read Bugs Baer [Arthur "Bugs" Baer]. He might have been in the other one. I read William Randolph Hearst. We shared a middle name. There were a regular turnover of lurid tales in the *Chicago American*. They would recycle these things every three or four years, the same stories, but nobody but me noticed that they'd done this before.

DePue: I should know this, but was the *Illinois State Register*, when you were growing up, was that the Republican or Democratic paper in town?

Cantrall: It was the Democratic, and the *Journal* was still the Republican. It took quite a while. How I made all of that money, when I was a junior in high school, was I fibbed. (chuckels) I played both sides in the newspaper war. (both laugh) I'm selling people the afternoon *Journal*. I'm selling people the evening *Register*. I sell them subscriptions for anything, and it costs me less than I had to pay, for one thing. But usually, I was a busy kid.

DePue: It sounds like you were growing up in a day when you not only delivered the newspaper, but you knocked on the door and collected for the paper, as well.

Cantrall: That's right. I knocked on the door and sold everybody on my streets the afternoon *Register*, and four of them, I had to promise never to tell, because they worked for the *Journal*. But I was everybody's favorite newspaper boy. I put the paper inside the screen door. I rolled it up and tucked it inside the doorknob. For years after that, my mother would meet people who would ask about me, which was kind of nice. I'm

Bill Cantrall's family gathers in 1936 for older brother Young's graduation from Springfield High School. From left to right are his sister Ruth, mother Ruby, his sister Luella and Bill.

going into apartments, and I'm going to a liquor establishment, a bar, and buying one of my customers a whiskey, which is illegal for **anybody** to do. I was getting a dime. It was a hell of a ride. I must say that.

I remember one sweet lady, who lived in an apartment house. I had to collect from her, and she had to find the money, and she had to find the cards for me to punch. Every so often, as she can't quite remember where it is and is looking, she's saying, "Oh, fudge. Oh, sugar." (both laugh) I'm twelve, and I've got to keep a straight face. They were all so nice.

DePue: What was the neighborhood in Springfield? Where was your house, and what was the neighborhood where you were delivering the newspapers?

Cantrall: I lived at 118 North Walnut, eight blocks from the train station.

DePue: So, pretty close to downtown, then.

Cantrall: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: And that was the neighborhood you were delivering the papers in, as well?

Cantrall: It was Walnut, further down.

DePue: Further south?

Cantrall: Yeah, further south, past the Presbyterian Church—I think that's Edwards—and some part of Monroe and then, bigger routes for the evening paper. I was riding all over hell for that. But those are the people that remember me the most.

DePue: Where did you go to high school?

Cantrall: Springfield High School. It's now…I guess they call it Central.

DePue: No, it's still Springfield High School.

Cantrall: It was Springfield High School—

DePue: The one that's directly west of the capitol building, just a few blocks west.

Cantrall: Yes, and it took me under two minutes to get there, running.

DePue: Did you run all the time?

Cantrall: Yes. I was thinking about Glenn Cunningham [American distance runner], and I was thinking about the Indian runner. [Jim Thorpe of the Sac and Fox Nation in Oklahoma]

DePue: Thorpe?

Cantrall: Yes. And I was thinking about the runner at the Olympics. I thought this was going to make me strong, and I thought that this would make me famous, perhaps. And I rode a bicycle, and I rode miles every day.

DePue: It sounds, Bill, like you were a young man in a hurry to get to someplace.

Cantrall: Yes.

DePue: Where were you in a hurry to get to? What were your aspirations in those years?

Cantrall: (pause) Well…it was pretty hard. I was good at cabinetry in school. I made things that were shown at the Illinois State Fair. I was learning everything I could about auto mechanics from a guy that had a gasoline pump and a shop half a block away. I built a motor scooter, with some of his help, but that was a little later. I read books about salesmanship, and I thought I might be that.

I signed up for college prep at the school. This was my mother's idea. My oldest sister even got in a year in junior college. My younger sister got a scholarship—the one that's four years older than I am—got a scholarship to Illinois Normal. And it was deserved.

DePue: Was that a college at the time?

Cantrall: It was the Normal school, Illinois State Normal School.

DePue: Didn't they specialize in training teachers?

Cantrall: Yes, two years. That's when she started. She actually went back and finished a degree years later.

DePue: What were your favorite subjects in school?

Cantrall: (pause) It shifted around some, but I'd say history. I had four years of history in high school, and I'm still reading history. I got a book in the other room, *Beyond the Blue Horizon*. It's by an archaeologist and about figuring out the oceans, great stuff

And English. When I went to Springfield High School, it was the first year that they had done the Iowa exams, I think. I was put in four honors classes. I was meeting kids that were going to the best schools in town. I never saw many of my grade school colleagues again.

[I] Had an English teacher. She was brand-new, but great. She really tried to teach us everything she knew. We had two Shakespeare plays when we were freshmen. (chuckles) We had *The Iliad*. One of our assignments was to find all of the figures of speech. Plus, one of our assignments, we were writing, and she says, "Everybody is saying, 'He said, she said, and he said, and she said.' You've got to think of more words that have the same meaning but are more particular. I want everybody to come in with a list, Monday." I came in with 320. The next kid was thirty, and this is this great honors class.

She kept doing those things, not putting limits on it. I'm sure she remembered me for a while. I just loved those things. Plus, I liked to write already. I had two great English teachers there. One of them was Elizabeth Graham. Actually, definitely with that name, she was a relative, because five Cantralls, boys, had married five girls named Graham, all from different families.

DePue: So, somewhere in that mix, she was related.

Cantrall: This was a Scotch…There were a lot of these people. The lady that finally caught on that I couldn't see a thing was married to another relative, and she knew a nurse that was related to me and got me to that nurse to have an eye test. That got me those glasses.

DePue: What did it mean to you when you finally did get a pair of glasses?

Cantrall: Very typical, I'm sure. I'm looking at the bricks in the street, my god. As I come to the house, I'm looking up at the leaves in the trees. I can see individual leaves—even on the first pair—that just hadn't been there. I recognized people across the street. That was usually too hard, unless I could pick it up from how they were walking or something like that. Boy, I needed them.

DePue: Was that one of the most important events of your young life, then?

Cantrall: Yeah. Getting a Social Security card, that was…I've been grandfathered, I mean, I qualified for Social Security before I actually graduated from college. I had worked so many places.

DePue: Why was getting the Social Security card so important to you at that time?

Cantrall: I followed every move that Roosevelt made. I got to travel along with my parents, who were picked up in what, for me, was a limousine. It was probably a Lafayette. Somebody had driven over to Sherman to take us over to Athens, so they could vote, the first time either one of them had voted Democratic in their lives.

DePue: Was that something that was discussed at home quite a bit, politics?

Cantrall: Yes. Yes. We had a big, round table. This isn't round. But, I mean, a **big, round** table. We talked about things around the table, which included my future brother-in-law, who was a bum that had asked to sleep in the barn and was still there years later.

This family with the six boys, I talked with their father, who was the collector for the township, and who everybody respected. He really needed to be respected. They respected him as a farmer; they respected him for his brains, and how he smelled. His family had come in from the Azores. It was a Portuguese name. I had to swear never to disclose it, what their name was in Portuguese, to the kids, so I better not tell you. (laughs)

DePue: Apparently not too flattering.

Cantrall: Yeah, but their first cousins are still around. Every Portuguese name you hear in Springfield is one of their relatives. I talked with him about the AAA, which was the American Agriculture Association. This was found unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

About the dumbest thing that Roosevelt ever did was this idea of packing the court, not to be crippled by nine old men. He was going to bring it up to fourteen. He wanted to do what he wanted. We had Henry Long, who would have been glad to be a dictator. We had Father Coughlin[1], who would have been glad to take over as a dictator.

DePue: Do you mean Huey Long, not Henry?

Cantrall: I mean Huey. Sorry. Huey,[2] god, yes and his brother, Earl, for that matter. Earl had more character, actually, maybe the last honest Republican. I don't know. But there were arguments. I think that Roosevelt kept us out of a dictatorship. You know, the NRA, everybody had the NRA, the National—

DePue: The National Recovery Act.

Cantrall: Yes. That also got—

DePue: Not the NRA [National Rifle Association] we're thinking of today. National Recovery Act [National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933].

Cantrall: Yeah, National Recovery Act. I saw that everywhere.

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[1] **Charles Edward Coughlin**, commonly known as **Father Coughlin** (October 25, 1891 – October 27, 1979), was a controversial Roman Catholic priest, based near Detroit at Royal Oak, Michigan's National Shrine of the Little Flower church. He was one of the first political leaders to use radio to reach a mass audience, as up to thirty million listeners tuned to his weekly broadcasts, during the 1930s. He was forced off the air in 1939. Early in his radio career, Coughlin was a vocal supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal. By 1934 he became a harsh critic of Roosevelt as too friendly to bankers. *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Coughlin* (accessed December 4, 2015).

[2] **Huey Pierce Long, Jr.** (August 30, 1893 – September 10, 1935), nicknamed "The Kingfish," was an American politician who served as the 40th Governor of Louisiana from 1928 to 1932 and as a member of the United States Senate from 1932 until his assassination in 1935. A Democrat, he was an outspoken populist who denounced the rich and the banks and called for "Share the Wealth." *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huey_Long* (accessed December 4, 2015).

DePue: Let's move ahead a little bit here. Who would you say was your strongest influence on you, growing up? Who had the biggest impact on forming your views and mentoring you, working with you?

Cantrall: We're talking about my mother. You want somebody else than that?

DePue: You're saying it would be your mother? She was the one who had the strongest impact on you?

Cantrall: She meant to.

DePue: (laughs) That was her design right from the beginning, huh?

Cantrall: And she kept doing this. She helped raise my kids; she helped raising both of my sisters' kids and unto the generations. Well, that's a different story, but my siblings, all of them were important, my two great English teachers and Cue Ball Thompson, my history teacher.

DePue: Cue Ball?

Cantrall: Cue Ball. He had a bald head, perfectly bald.

DePue: So this was the nickname, it sounds like, that students gave him.

Cantrall: Oh, yes. That's what he was called, but I did not call him that. I called him Mr. Thompson. He had had my brother in history. Young was plenty smart, but he was also into sports. And he was also handsome. So, he was not a perfect history student. He had had my sister, Luella. She had been a straight-A student and just [a] great student. So, he didn't know what to expect when I came along. The two oldest kids were far-sighted. Luella and I were near-sighted. (laughs) That makes a difference.

I know that he regarded me as—and he told my sister, who told me, who probably shouldn't have—he said, about me, "He's a genius, at history." I had this library card for the state library. I never gave it back. I could go over there and check out books on rhetoric. I could check out books on history, really big books. I read in history from the beginning. I had four years of it and pretty good teachers.

DePue: Well, let's move on here a little bit. You would have still been in high school on December 7, 1941.

Cantrall: Yes, I was.

DePue: Do you remember that date?

Cantrall: "A day that will live in infamy" and memory. We were in the high school, in the auditorium. We heard the broadcast, Roosevelt, and we heard the bulletin.

Then we heard from all of the guys that had been in World War I on our staff. We had never heard boo about this, never had the slightest idea. The principal hadn't been, but these men told us, "This is going to be a different war. You will need what we can teach you *here*." (weeping) That did influence us. Nobody ran for the exits. Everything was different. Chemistry. We heard quite a bit about the elements at the bottom of the chart, for one thing. But the biggest one—

DePue: The heaviest elements.

Cantrall: Heavy ones, yes. But not too much on that. There was plenty to learn. There were plenty of jobs for that. The mathematics was…Immediately we're studying radians, and we are getting stuff that's about artillery arcs and that stuff. We just worked harder. We worked harder to get everything in.

DePue: It sounds like, because you had devoured so many books, that you loved history, you read the newspapers all the time, that it didn't take much for you to figure out the world had changed that day, then.

Cantrall: Yeah. Well, there was another thing. I was vying for best student in the class, in the mathematics course, which took some work. I'd never really had to work at anything.

DePue: But you hadn't mentioned, before, mathematics as being one of your favorite courses.

Cantrall: We had a coach that also taught algebra. I had one semester, fortunately, with a mathematician, who made sense. The coach that also taught algebra, I could not understand. He could not understand me. In fact, I was asking intelligent questions, which he was belittling me for. I had to stop listening to him altogether and stay with the book, which was not only simpler, but I had no trouble getting and A in that.

DePue: Do you think maybe you were intimidating him a little bit with the questions you asked?

Cantrall: I think maybe he only knew one way to teach it and that was to follow the book. He also belittled other people that were trying to eliminate some possibilities, whatever they were up to. I'll tell you, I understood it's got to be this way or that way, and I didn't know. We had these problems to do. I had to understand it for myself, and he was simply leading me in the wrong direction by whatever he was doing.

DePue: Let's go back to hearing about Pearl Harbor. That obviously had a big impact on you. How did that change your future plans, what you thought you'd be doing?

Cantrall: Well, it was such a shock. It was such a shock because, as far as we knew, my brother was at Pearl Harbor.

DePue: This was Young?

Cantrall: Yes, Young.

DePue: He was already in the Navy?

Cantrall: Yes, he'd been in for four years and had re-upped. He could either re-up, as they call it, or he would be drafted, because they had gotten through, by one vote, a—

DePue: Yeah, the draft was extended just a few days before Pearl Harbor. It had gone into effect in early 1940, I believe, or late 1940, because of what was going on in Europe.

Cantrall: He re-upped beforehand and got a leave to come home. He was on the *Maury* [USS Maury DD 401] at that time, which was the guard ship for the *Enterprise*.

DePue: The *Enterprise* would be an aircraft carrier. Was the *Maury* a destroyer, then?

Cantrall: Yes, yes. We expected him to be at Pearl Harbor. They expected to be at Pearl Harbor

DePue: The Japanese?

Cantrall: No, Big E, plus escorts and others. This had been a total accident. They had stayed out to come in on Monday, rather than on Sunday. But, they were within range, and their planes made it to…They were involved that night. They had been doomed to be in there on Saturday, but they had been delayed.

DePue: That's probably one of the most important delays, important events, in American history, because—

Cantrall: Absolutely.

DePue: …none of the aircraft carriers were there, and so none of them were targets for the Japanese attack. How much later did the family find out that he had not been there on the day of the Pearl Harbor attack?

Cantrall: It was more than a week. We got word from the Red Cross that he was alive.

DePue: Was that one of the longest weeks of your mom's life and your life?

Cantrall: We knew nothing about this, until a year later, really. I carried a lot of papers on Sunday, and then I would usually lie down and listen to the New York Philharmonic and have a nap. They interrupted the program at the end of a movement, apparently, to make the announcement, right then. It was carried on radio, as well. It certainly wakes me up, and I hear that Pearl Harbor had been attacked, but I'm up in my room. I run downstairs. Some of the family was still there and report this, but we stick with the radio from then on. There was very little more information.

That certainly was compelling for me, about getting into the service as soon as I can, even after I have been told I'm not going to be able to sign myself in until I'm eighteen, and I'm not eighteen.

DePue: Were your parents supportive of your brother going into the Navy, when he first enlisted?

Cantrall: This was probably the best thing that he could do, and my mother did sign the papers, with great regret. I have to argue more. When I'm twenty, I think—let's see—the whole country is under turmoil. I can't get in when I actually do try.

DePue: I think, Bill, this is probably a pretty good place for us to stop today. A logical place to stop. We've been at it for over two hours, a little over two hours. It would be a nice place to pick up the story next time and just start with your struggles to get into the military, and then joining the AFS, and then taking it into your experiences in Italy. Thank you very much. This has been a fascinating discussion. You really do have a great memory for these years, much more than most people that we encounter, so I thank you for that.

Cantrall: If you're actually having an opportunity to read in the book, go ahead. Mr. Thompson and what he did with history, he finally has a class full of seniors ready to work, and he works our tails off.

DePue: Suddenly history meant something, huh?

Cantrall: Yes. This was a guy that…He was a student of history, by golly. We had so many people that could have been professors. They were so smart and so well up on their subject. Believe me, we had a better education with some of these people than can be found today.

DePue: That's a good place to finish. Thank you, Bill.

(End of interview Session 1)

Interview with William Cantrall

# VR2-A-L-2012-039.02

Interview # 2: October 23, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Tuesday, October 23, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, the director of oral history with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm in Oak Brook, Illinois today for my second session with Bill Cantrall. Good afternoon, Bill.

Cantrall: Afternoon.

DePue: It feels like a typical fall day outside, a little bit of drizzle, a little bit overcast, but otherwise the leaves are pretty. You're going to have a lot of work here in a couple weeks, getting rid of all those leaves, aren't you?

Cantrall: Oh, yes. We're right in the middle of a forest, really, primarily an oak forest here, with the forest preserve across the road. We've got a lot of leaves, pretty.

DePue: We've got a lot to talk about, though. Last time, you and I talked about growing up in central Illinois. We got you pretty much through high school and to your graduation from high school, which is in 1942. You had mentioned that you'd like to start with reading something here to get us going today.

Cantrall: [reading from a document] Mine is a story of World War II, all right, but a strange one, told much better in my memoir, www.justlikeataxi.com. I spent years of research and writing this book, but to get back to the story—I had as hard a time getting into the war as we all had getting out. I was a senior at Springfield, Illinois High School [SHS] when Pearl Harbor was attacked. At seventeen, I saw myself as a hardy, self-reliant outdoors type, with ideals. A senior Boy Scout, tough as nails and highly motivated. My brother, in the

Navy, SHS left tackle Young Cantrall, was in that battle and twenty-five more.

Like always, I had studied the system and thought I could beat it, even the selective service system, with the help of my buddy, Jack Proctor. We were both widely known at SHS as lacking in discipline, as too smart for our own good. But I persuaded him to go with me the moment we were eighteen and get into the Army or the Navy or, hopefully, the paratroops. (laughs) So we went there with the arrangement that Jack Proctor, who was a puppeteer, among other things, could get into doing the eye chart just before me, and he could do it in a punch-squeak, so I could catch it and memorize it. So, I came in next, recited the eye chart from memory, and the eye examiner looked askance, took my glasses and put them under his little device, and saw I was way overboard. (laughs)

So, Jack got into the paratroops, and I didn't. I was sent back to Springfield from St. Louis and immediately appealed. I had to study that part, too. While I was doing that, I worked at Sangamo Electric on Navy radar, a British design—this is June '42—and they loved my background. They wanted me as the tool and die maker trainee.

When I told them I'd appealed—I was determined to get in—they put me with the other rejectees, who had been rejected for mental insufficiency. So I'm sitting there sanding in a sanding booth, sanding away, and I know that one night I sanded through seven layers of paint, fast asleep. (laughs) But it was an edifying experience, working with these guys.

In August, I got sent back to St. Louis for another try, with a good report from the medical advisory board. I flunked that one, too. This time, I got back home, and I resigned from my sanding job at Sangamo, so I'm looking for a new one. Suddenly, there pops up, "radio engineering trainees for the Signal Corps." I thought, that sounded very good for the Army, and I joined that, with Gene Brown. That's another graduate and fellow Boy Scout, same Scout troop, longtime friends. And we were off to Kansas University in Lawrence, Kansas for this quick study course.

We attended classes forty-four hours a week, and we're supposed to study two hours for every hour we spent in class, like everybody else had. We're in class all day long. I'm a champ. I mean, it's math; it's science. I'm great at this stuff. I built a motor scooter already.

But there was one foul-up. They didn't send any pay for us for weeks. We were starving. We were eating cornflakes twice a day. (laughs) This is not the typical getting-into-the-war business. When we're invited to the electrical engineers annual party, and they have cider and doughnuts, I ate so many that I end up in the hospital, and I'm there for a week. (laughs) They're not sure what's wrong with me. I don't understand that you can't do cider and donuts on an empty stomach and hope to survive.

During that time, I get to walk down to Lawrence, Kansas, and I discover that Will Cantrall is known far and wide as the scourge of Kansas and the man that burnt down their town, Lawrence. (laughs)

DePue: That's right, I'd forgotten that.

Cantrall: Yeah. But I meet kids from the Haskell Indian Institute that's there. The girls are short with curly hair, and it's brown, and some of them have blue eyes. You can get into Haskell with one-sixteenth Indian heritage, and I've got it, only it's not enough. My tribe disbanded quite a while back.

When I got an approval from the Fifth Army general for my new appeal, which I had to appear in Chicago for, I purposefully flunked out, with the cooperation of some of the other professors that were sympathetic. They'd been in World War I. I got back to Chicago, and I flunked the one there.

DePue: For eyesight again?

Cantrall: Eyesight, but this time, it's not just eyesight. I'm fine. It might be limited service, but I ended up doing better. This time, I've got too many scars on my lungs. I test positive for being infected with tuberculosis, the tuberculin test, and they won't give.

So, I work in this war plant, I work in that war plant, and they're always glad to see me. I've quit telling them that I'm still trying, I don't have any hope, but I really haven't given up heart, and I work at Allis-Chalmers in Springfield—to get in a local note again—International Harvester. [At] these places, I'm working on tanks. I'm working on bulldozers. I'm working on prime movers for big guns. I'm a big wheel. I'm an inspector, in charge for the midnight or eleven o'clock, seven o'clock [shifts], and I'm back with a lot of guys that have been rejected for low mental powers, again. But I'm more leery this time, and when I hear a huge log chain rustling across the floor, I jump straight up and don't get my legs broken. It's good practice, but after a while—

DePue: Were there some malice behind this chain dragging on the floor?

Cantrall: It was the spirit of fun. You were talking about a chain with links that are five-eighths of an inch thick, to pull a huge truck out of the mire. These guys just aren't too sharp, and they're also pretty crude, but I'm leery.

Anyway, I send in one suggestion after another, and I get $5 for each one. I have figured out how to reduce my work to an hour a night. I'm organized, and I memorize the blueprints for everything that goes on a prime mover, which is a tanked vehicle. I'm the final inspector, and I sign these out or I don't, and I know everything that's in them. I've got this organized. Nobody's ever organized anything with the new plant. They're doing things the old way, but they don't come to find me, put me in complete charge, and I figure out, this is going to be a long war. That was in the fall of '43.

I decide, okay, I'm going to have to get to the University of Illinois in Urbana and learn how to be an engineer, so I can win this war. I came to that place with nothing but a loan that's been guaranteed by my sister or her husband. I don't think she could guarantee things in those days. That was '43.

I get a university scholarship. I get the scholarship for Czech students. They've only got one Czech in the whole place, and they got two scholarships. I kite_checks. I sign up all over the campus as a medical student, here, so I can get Psych 100. And I sign up as liberal arts, with an English major, so I can take courses and I can take exams. And I start taking the proficiency examinations in this place at Illinois, great things.

DePue: I want to back you up just a little bit to make sure I understand what you're telling me. You said, about a minute ago, that you kite—

Cantrall: Kited checks.

DePue: Kited checks. I want you to be more explicit in what you mean there.

Cantrall: Well, I hope we're beyond— (laughs)

DePue: The statute of limitations?

Cantrall: Yeah. The thing is, I had to go into the little, old administration building with a signed check, in my name, and hand it to this window right here. They would give me a paper, and I would go to the next window over and get my scholarship check. Then, I would run like hell a block and a half to my little bank, around the corner of Wright and Green and deposit that check. In those days, they could never catch up. It was always as honest as the day was long, as long as I could run in there. There were no timestamps. (laughs) My whole life was like that.

I lived in a garret, across Wright Street, the other side of the campus, I think, and across from the zoology building. Without telling this person, this guy and this guy, anything, I got a job here, student job, fifty-five cents an hour, and another job here, in a totally different department, fifty-five cents an hour. I lived in an unheated garret, with six other boys, on top of a family with girls in it. There I was. I did better later, but I was busy.

Another thing that I'd learned how to do, University of Illinois—people will love this—I went to the university bookstore at Wright and Green and stood there and read books, textbooks. I also could take the hard ones and pay for them, as long as I had some money, now that I got my scholarship check. I could bring them back on the week and turn them back in, get my money back. In the meantime, I had learned everything I needed to know in those books, because of various things.

DePue: What was your major?

Cantrall: It was, in one place, chemical engineering, as far as those guys were concerned. And another place, it was pre-med, as far as those guys were concerned. And another place, it was liberal arts. That's three different places. This meant hanging around the offices until the head of the department left for lunch or something. Then I went in and talked to the student assistant, explained these things to her, and she signed me right in.

DePue: What was your reasoning behind wanting to have these three majors?

Cantrall: In order to take courses that I appreciated and not the stupid courses that the university wanted me to take. I knew I was going to skip most of the ones I had signed up for. I was going to pass those exams by proficiency, college algebra, trigonometry, hygiene. I read the book in under an hour and had no trouble passing that stupid, required course.

The only proper course I had to take was French one, and that was so terrible that, by the time the second…It was so slow. I could not imagine doing something like this. I had been a star at Latin in high school. I was great. I was the best they'd ever seen. French is so easy for me, after Latin.

So, the next semester, I sign up for everything. I've got my scholarship, no problem, same rigmarole. My mother is doing my laundry at home. We send it back and forth in a box. That was great. I'm studying and working all of the time. That's fine. But, at the end of the next semester, I have two years' college credit. But by the end of the next semester, I'm gone.

DePue: I think that is a perfect transition, then, for us to talk about how you ended up in the American Field Service, after all of these failures of getting into the military in the first place.

Cantrall: That's the next spot, okay. It's January, I think. They're speeded up already. There's ASTP on campus already, and they're marching to class in cadence.

DePue: AFTP?

Cantrall: ASTP, Army Training something P, Army Training Specialist[3]—.

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[3] Keefner, Louis E., "The Army Specialized Training in World War II." During World War II, the U.S. Army ran the single, biggest college education program in the nation's history. The Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) was a short-lived "blip" in the service careers of participants. Relatively few had the opportunity for more than one or two three-month terms, before the program was virtually terminated, less than a year after it started. http://www.pierce-evans.org/ASTPinWWII.htm (accessed January 8, 2016).

DePue: Is this the examination that you have to take?

Cantrall: No, no. These are guys that are in the Navy in V-5, V-7-, V-12. These are guys that are in the Army, and they are learning languages, whatever.

DePue: From what I understand, in some things like the V-5, the V-7, the V-12, when you get done with your education, then you're going into military and going to be an officer.

Cantrall: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. It's like that. They ended up, the ASTP—

DePue: We'll figure it out. I'll take care of that part.

Cantrall: They ended up as replacements in Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge, with no training. They got killed in masses.

DePue: It was a dangerous war to be a second lieutenant.

Cantrall: Yes. That was, of course, my goal. (laughs) I was headed for that, originally. Okay, there's an ad in the school paper, and it attracted my attention immediately. It was a little thing like this, and I took off running from Wright and Green all the way down to Art and Architecture, which was the farthest building, I think, in those days, [looking] for a professor and probably head of the department, who had been an ambulance driver for the American Field Service [AFS] in World War I, with the French.

I was the only guy that ever showed up. I had to persuade him that I understood how bad war was. He understood it. In World War I, there were a lot of Americans that volunteered for that. Droves, whole hospitals full of people volunteered. The French were unprepared for modern warfare. They had no preparations for the masses of people wounded, that started piling up at the Battle of the Somme. This is where all the Americans in Paris were out driving ambulances. The taxi drivers were driving to the Somme to bring wounded back.

DePue: Is this right at the beginning of the war?

Cantrall: This is 1914.

DePue: That would be the Battle of the Marne, I think.

Cantrall: Marne? Okay, we'll make it the Marne.

DePue: Go ahead.

Cantrall: I used to know everything, but now I don't. It was known as the American Field [Service] Ambulance Corps at that time. That was the idea. We don't go from this building to this building; we go from this battlefield, back to someplace else that will take them, a hospital or another place. That's what they did, all kinds of well-to-do college students in those days. That's the only people that went to college, in the East. [They] Took six months off and went to France and did this service and came back.

DePue: This professor explained all this to you, when you first met?

Cantrall: He was mostly questioning me. He didn't know what the program was, too much. In World War II, we started with the French. The French quit. We made a deal with the British, under wraps. And in doing this, they had the problem of a congress that was very isolationist and a president that wasn't, but he had to be careful.

DePue: So, you're talking 1940, early '41 timeframe?

Cantrall: I'm talking about forty—

DePue: The fall of France was—

Cantrall: Wait a minute. I'm talking about November of '41. An AFS officer, with the volunteer force with the Syrian free French…well, the Syrian French. It really wasn't free. But there they are. He goes to Cairo and talks to [General Archibald] Wavell, and a deal starts getting worked out. William Bullitt, the ambassador to France, is the honorary president of the AFS in '42 in France, and '43. It's all under the table or whatever, but this is strictly an arrangement between the governments, and it's run by [President] Roosevelt and [Prime Minister Neville] Chamberlin.

What really happens, the minute that Pearl Harbor happens? It's still '41, but at that minute, the people on their way to the Middle East Armies, all the way around the bottom of Africa, have suddenly changed their status, under the Geneva Convention. They're no longer volunteers, authorized by the U.S. government. At that moment, they're under the command of the American Army, of the U.S. Army, but it is kept quiet. They never tell us. They tell nobody—

DePue: They never tell the American public?

Cantrall: They never tell the drivers. They never tell us. Because there are guys that are pacifists. What would they do? They don't want to be in the army. They don't want to have anything to do with war or whatever. There is no way to do anything with them, except spend another few months. They are traveling, by the way, on U.S. Naval transports, at that time. That's where they're needed, right there in Cairo, in the Near East. They're needed to keep Syria honest, to not let them open the gates for the Germans and go with [French Premier Philippe] Petain.

There are all kinds of problems. As soon as I get the Geneva Convention in my hands, I can see that this is against international law, that we are under command, and we are literally getting orders from the surgeon general to all of the allied forces in the Near East, about what to do with us.

DePue: First of all, when did you join the AFS?

Cantrall: We have to jump back a little bit, to 1943. I have to prove my character. I have to prove that I've got some money. I have to buy stuff, to go. I have to pass physicals. That takes some time. I'm accepted, probably, early May. I fudge a little bit in telling the University of Illinois that I have a military assignment, and I have to leave now, and I'm not paying any more tuition, and I want credit for all of my courses, and I'm ready to take exams. That was probably already in March and April that I was doing that.

I was running out of money. But I was passing courses by proficiency, right and left. I was signing up. I figured this one out. I go on what we call the boardwalk, in those days, in a much smaller campus, and I was having people, "Would you sign my ticket?" It was taller than I was, when it was all unraveled. This guy, G. Washington, signed for department head, and A. Lincoln signed for the dean, and I was signing up for twenty courses, twenty hours.

By the time the dean had caught up with me, I had signed up for French two. I had to. There was no way out. But I'm working for the registration for all of the students, so I get to sign up early. I get my pick of the classes, and I get my okay for the extra hours. I switched jobs. I lie about my experience as a soda jerk. I had none. Claypool's had closed up in Springfield, downtown Springfield, and I gave them as a reference. It took several months before—

DePue: This is when you applied for AFS?

Cantrall: Yeah.

DePue: And you had to vouch for your character?

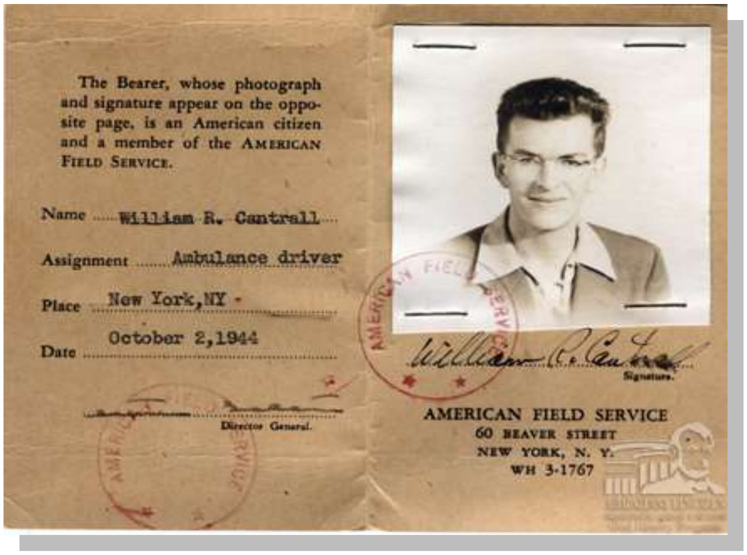
Cantrall: Yes.

DePue: And so you're lying to AFS about all these things that you've done to prove that you have a good character?

Cantrall: Well, that's a different thing. My second cousin, Charlie Montgomery, he was my father's best friend and my mother's first cousin. His father actually knew Lincoln. It's that kind of community. But I worked for him. He couldn't write. He couldn't write a good sentence. He had poor English, but he had a business. Our deal was, I typed it up, and he signed it. I read it to him sometimes, and he was all for this. He was my employer, and I really did a great job for him. But that's a really, really separate story.

DePue: I'm sorry to digress on that one. I did want to get into, once you joined the AFS, what kind of training did you do and how quickly did you get overseas?

Cantrall: Okay, that's the whole thing. I'm accepted in May. I still have to work. Wherever I am, I've got to work in order to live. I'm moving around, but I'm also working. Now I'm waiting. I'm waiting for the call. I'm fully accepted. It is October…No, it's still September. I'm called to New York in September. I get my orders to prepare for Burma, with a list of things to buy, a light blanket, you know. That's what I do. I prepare for Burma.



The Bearer, whose photograph and signature appear on the opposite page, is an American citizen and a member of the AMERICAN FIELD SERVICE.

Name William R. Cantrall

Assignment Ambulance driver

Place New York,NY -

Date October 2,1944

Director General.

William R. Cantrall

Signature.

AMERICAN FIELD SERVICE
60 BEAVER STREET
NEW YORK, N. Y.
WH 3-1767

Bill Cantrall's American Field Service Identity Card. Once Germany and Italy declared war on the United States, the card was sufficient to identify Cantrall as a U.S. Voluntary Aid Society Volunteer, which put him under the protection of the Geneva Convention.

DePue: What did you think your status was? Did you think you were joining an organization that had no affiliation with the American government or any other overseas government?

Cantrall: That is true.

DePue: This was strictly, for lack of a better phrase, a nonprofit organization?

Cantrall: Yes. I knew that it was covered by the Geneva Convention. I got a government manual and read what it said. That was fine with me. I didn't care. You know, I wanted to be there, and that was most of us were like that, by this time.

Now, after we get to New York, there's a wait. I also tell another high school friend and Scout from the same troop—he had been my assistant patrol leader and so on, another buddy, with eyes worse than mine—but that didn't matter, as long as we could pass their physical. I'll tell you, we were in a lot better shape than the Brits that had been there for a while. They were miserable physical specimens and worn-out.

DePue: Was this the timeframe you would have met Michael Scully?

Cantrall: I met Michael Scully in New York. It's the same outfit. By that time, he's still seventeen; he's almost eighteen. I'm just twenty at that moment. I really don't talk with him. I see him, but we were a big group. There were ninety-two of us, in my group. I see him onboard ship.

I see him somewhat before that, because I have talked with him, and I realize he's from Lincoln. I say, "Do you know my cousin, Kenny?" He said, "I didn't go to high school in Lincoln." I said, "Scully, does your family have a lot of land around there? I mean, a lot." (laughs) And he turned red. Lincoln is like thirty-five miles from where I lived, and I lived in farming country. I knew who Scully was. There was Scully land all around us.

DePue: I think overall, there is a couple hundred thousand acres, not all in Illinois, but the family owned that much land in the United States.

Cantrall: When the old man died, Michael had supervision for Illinois, or was supposed to have it, after the war. His brother…What's his brother's name?

DePue: Is it Peter?

Cantrall: Yes, it's Peter. [He] Was in Nebraska, and he had the same deal there. Peter might still be alive. I don't know.

DePue: I think he is. The reason I brought Michael Scully up is because I had an opportunity to interview him, and that was the first time I'd really heard about AFS. So, I'd invite people to check that out as well, but that's away from your story. Go ahead.

Cantrall: I thought about calling my book, *By Hook or By Crook*. (both laugh) But that's the story of my life. (laughs) But I could read, and I could think.

Anyway, let me get on the trip, which is covered in my book, a lot better than me, a lot more amusing. I'm writing this after I'm seventy-eight, at least, anything, and the way that I managed was peculiar. But it really devolved from the fact that, after the war, the guys in the American Field Service decided to start an international, or an intercultural, exchange. We invited students from Germany, Italy, France, England to come for a year of school. (weeping)

DePue: I didn't know there was that link.

Cantrall: This is the greatest thing that ever happened, and I would never have written the book, if it hadn't been for that.

DePue: I wanted to give you an option here. I wanted to read a passage from your book that talks about the ride overseas on the liberty ship. There's just about a paragraph here, so I'll ask you if you'd like to read that paragraph or you want me to read that? It's highlighted here, and it starts on the bottom of this page.

Cantrall: [reads] "With our location, we hicks had the biggest bull session aboard. Me, Michael, George, Ralph, Walt, Elmer, Bill and whoever, anyone but the Eastern elite. And we had a lunar month, in which to sling the bull, revealing ourselves completely, without giving anything away. The first test was producing an acceptably nonchalant answer to questions like, 'What made you join?' Certainly not, 'I wanted to serve humanity' or 'I could not bear thinking of the perils my brother was enduring in the Pacific, without putting myself in harm's way.' Articulating answers like this was not just taboo, but beyond us, at the time. We were asking one another questions in an effort to understand ourselves."

DePue: That's why I wanted you to read it. You did a marvelous job. There's only a couple other passages, I think, I'm going to read from here, because we want to hear the story from your recollections. But I certainly wanted to get a flavor of the book in there, and I thought that was a great passage to start with.

Cantrall: Yeah. I better get us to where we're going, as fast as I can. Anyway, it turns out that we are landing in Naples. And not only that, we're staying there, not Burma. There had been a change of plans. At the top, the combined chiefs of staff have come to this decision.

DePue: Combined would mean several nations?

Cantrall: This means, by that time, there had never been a joint chiefs of staff before in this country. There was in Britain. They'd been in the world awhile. They cobbled together a group from Britain and a group from this country, who met together and stayed together and had a huge staff, and nobody was told, in this country, as there were still lots of isolationists in Congress. The war was run in Washington, because we had more men; we had more stuff, and they were running out of everything.

Also, I should get in, when you came in with a question. We are legally, in fact, part of lend-lease. We have been lend-leased—this group of people that think they're volunteers—we are lend-leased, along with our ambulances, which have been provided by the U.S. Army. They are U.S. Army ambulances, WC-54s. The generals haven't been told. No general knows this, as a fact, except the supreme commanders.

Mark Clark doesn't know it. He's trying to find out. He's the U.S. general and finally the Allied general in Italy. He doesn't know it. He's a Republican and planning to be president. That's how he fouled up everything, with that in his mind. He was that guy. There's a great story, where I offend Mark Clark, and he's after me personally, and he doesn't catch me. That is the funniest chapter in the book.

DePue: How far into the book is that?

Cantrall: Pretty far.

DePue: So, we probably want to hold off on that until a little bit later, for that story?

Cantrall: Yes. Yes, we got to (laughs)—

DePue: That's okay. So, you made landing in Naples, then. How much training had you received, up to that point?

Cantrall: None.

DePue: What kind of a uniform were you wearing?

Cantrall: Khaki and summer wheat. We also had Canadian battle dress, which is wool and sort of fluffy. But it was packed away in the hold, and that took a while to get.

DePue: Did you have any insignia on these uniforms at all?

Cantrall: Zero, at that point. We soon did. It isn't always apparent. We had a badge. It's a winged eagle. Actually, in www.justlikeataxi.com , it shows some of the badges. But we were, just like in high school, suffering from the lack of discipline, especially me. I did not like being dictated to.

All of my teachers—not all of them, but many of them—thought that was their job. I had a teacher that I despised for it. I don't know whether this was unfair. She said, "This is not a democracy in here. This is a dictatorship." I had been hating dictators since I was eight years old, when I knew what one was. I hated Mussolini, and I heard a lot about him.

DePue: What was your notion of what the American paratroopers were going to be like?

Cantrall: I figured, if I had my good buddy Jack Proctor with me, that we could not only fool the eye examiner, we could back one another up. (laughs)

DePue: That might not have been a totally realistic expectation.

Cantrall: That's right. I had the build for it, and he didn't. He was rangy. But we were both, you know—

DePue: Let's get you back over to Naples here. When did you arrive in Naples?

Cantrall: It is something very close to the first of November. It's pouring rain, and it's colder than hell. We have to jump from ship to ship, on gangplanks, to get ashore. The port is still being bombed.

DePue: Bombed by the Germans?

Cantrall: By the Germans, yeah. This is pretty late. It's still getting raids. We're put in a British transit camp and informed that we're there to stay. We start unpacking things. We get out our gas capes. I'm a patrol leader, by god, and our tent had four guys in it, and the tent next door had four guys in it. So, I put on my gas cape, which had a hood, and I go outside, pull out the tent peg, and I dig a trench, or enlarge it, all the way around the tent, because the water is pouring in. And I do it on the neighbors' tent.

We got four light blankets among us. When we go to sleep, that's two under and two over, because that's the way I slept outdoors when I was a kid, until snow time, real snow, not just a little overnight. I slept on a concrete porch like that, and that's what we had. We had concrete blocks.

Anyway, we're in Naples, and I discovered there that I can understand Italian, in Naples, not the rest of the world, but I get it in Naples. Those are the people that I knew, back in Sherman, Illinois. That's close to Springfield, on [Route] Sixty-Six in those days. I grew up with these kids, as well as a lot tougher kids from Kentucky. They were all there, brought there by the Peabody Mining Company, who brought in—

DePue: Brought to central Illinois by Peabody?

Cantrall: Yes, yes. They have overloaded the entire state with miners from Wales and southern Italy and Henderson County and Hardin County, where all of these poor miners are promised big earnings. And they don't get them. That's the Depression, and I'm a Depression kid. I have never spoken a word of Italian in my life, but I've heard it all. They were switching all the time. The kids took orders from it, and the grandparents talked about…That's where I heard about dictators, originally, and I heard a lot about Mussolini. They always switched to Italian when I was around, and I always looked dumb. (laughs)

DePue: But you got to Naples and understood a lot of what was being said.

Cantrall: I understood. This was like a miracle. From the transit cab, we rode down in a funicular railroad. I got everybody, the eight of us, singing, "*La, da, la, da*," you know, "*funiculi, funicula*." And the guy starts telling me, "This is not the funicular," in Italian. He says, "*La. A Vesuvia*." It was a big hit.

When we get there, Vesuvial [Mount Vesuvius] is fuming. It has exploded a little bit already. We've seen Etna on the way, and that's impressive. It fumes all the time we're there. But I understand this guy. I have no trouble, and I tell the guys that.

Then we get off, and there's only one legal place we can go. We're from seventeen, like Michael…I think he's eighteen by now. These are kids that have been in private boys' schools, boarding schools. There are also middle westerners, farm kids like me, who have been working in the big city but want to come. There's one entertainment in town, and it's the opera. I can read the billboards, what's going on and what's coming and what it costs. It costs *dieci lire*, which is ten cents. The fact that we aren't getting paid and don't know that—but we are going to get an allowance of twenty bucks, from which we have to buy our personal effects, beer, candy, if we want it. Boy, do we.

But we go to a different opera every week, and we get propositioned by little kids. "Hey, mister, want to sleep with my sister, clean, eighteen?" There's a voice from the shadows behind him. This kid is ten, maybe. It's an older voice, and he says, "Clean, sixteen." Apparently he sized us up. (laughs)

DePue: But that reflects how desperate the Italians were when you got there, doesn't it?

Cantrall: Oh, yes. Naples is living on the black market. They're stealing stuff coming off of the ships. They're driving U.S. Army trucks down to the docks for a load and driving it away and into the black market. People are desperate for everything. They're on a thin diet. A lot of that is in the book, a lot more.

DePue: Before the Americans landed there, there was a time when, obviously, Italy was the enemy. By the time you got to Naples, did the Italian people see you as liberators or as the enemy?

Cantrall: When I got there, this would have been…The weather has been turning bad, already. That's the end of the war. You don't fight a war of mobility in the mud or in the mountains. You can't go. The reason we were there is, that's a diversion. Anyway, they got Florence, and that's just about it. We're stuck south of Bologna.

DePue: I've got a map here. I don't know if that helps or not.

Cantrall: No, I'm fine.

DePue: Here's Naples down here. It's a pretty fine map. This is out of the *West Point Atlas of Military History*.

Cantrall: Okay, yes, and I know this one. This was quite a bit further south, here. We were getting into Rimini.

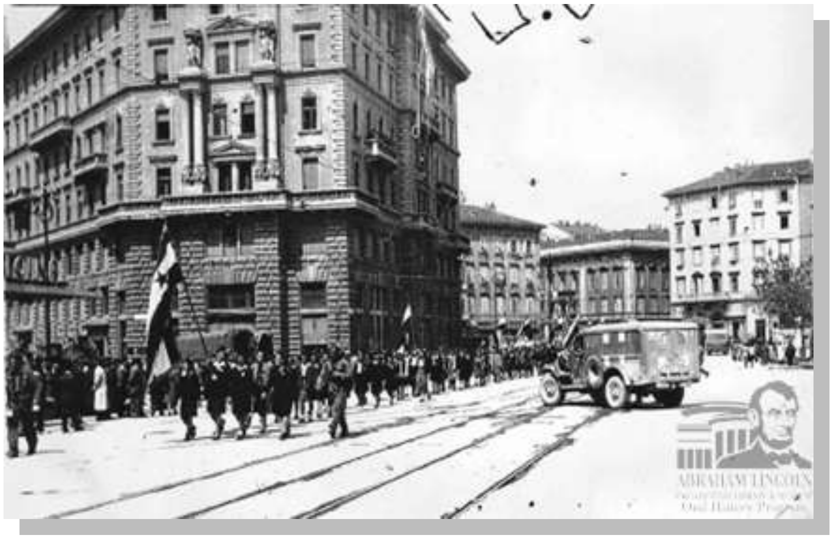
DePue: Which is on the—

Cantrall: Which is right on the coast.

DePue: Northeast coast of Italy.

Cantrall: That's up at Ravenna. We're still in the mountains, all the way across, when we get there.

DePue: How long did it take you to move from Naples, much farther north than the Italian boot? Did you move almost immediately after, or did you spend some time in Naples first?

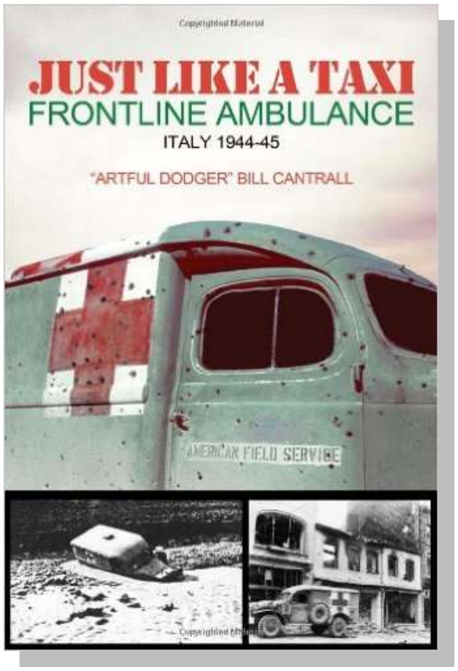


The WC-54 ambulance driven by Bill Cantrall through much of northern Italy is parked in Trieste in May, 1945. Cantrall was watching the Jugoslav Partisan Army parade past his vehicle. (The photo is courtesy of Driver J.P. Brinton III.)

Cantrall: We got our training there. We got a day's training, or a few hours' training, in driving a forward gear forward truck. This is a truck.

DePue: We're going to include a picture with your interview, and people will want to be able to check and see what that ambulance looks like.

Cantrall: What you want to do is call up www.justlikeataxi.com, and you will see one right there. If you click on that truck, you can learn a lot. This is the only color picture of an ambulance, of an AFS ambulance, taken during the war. The only color one we've got—



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JUST LIKE A TAXI

FRONTLINE AMBULANCE

ITALY 1944-45

"ARTFUL DODGER" BILL CANTRALL

DePue: The one that you used on the cover of your book?

Cantrall: That's right, and I only could do part of it. Some of them are sandy-colored, for the desert. This is a very odd color. Apparently, this is for the…I don't know. Is it concealment, hard to see...?

DePue: The color I would call it would be OD green. That's your standard—

Cantrall: Yes, that's supposed to be it.

DePue: I think OD stands for olive drab green.

Cantrall: Yes, there you go. That's it. But some of them were sandy. These things were in the weather all the time, and they faded pretty fast.

DePue: I'm wondering, in your training, did you also receive any medical training? Were you expected to perform any medical tasks, once you had these casualties? Or was this strictly to be a driver?

Cantrall: It was learning on the job, all the way. I'm telling you, we got…Six of us confessed, when we landed in Naples, that we didn't have drivers' licenses. (laughs)

DePue: Were you one of them?

Cantrall: Oh, yes. I knew a little. I had, of course, ridden a bicycle, and I really knew how to ride a bicycle and how to fall off of one and scramble, or I would have been run over by a truck, long since, as my bicycle was. That bicycle cost twelve bucks.

DePue: That was real money, back in those days.

Cantrall: Yes indeed. That was store-rate. My big brother, who was known as Herkie, because he was strong as a bull…He had my build, but he was an athlete. I couldn't see a foot in front of me, or I would have looked just like him. On a good diet, I do.

We had twelve minutes at the wheel, with a trainer beside us, learning how to drive the car, the ambulances. We were in a British Ambulance Car Company, ACC, and I was in Company 465. Some of the guys went to the other company and went into France. I stayed in Italy. We did our training—

DePue: Was the training done in Naples, then?

Cantrall: No, it's done in a really dead town, Pompeii. (laughs)

DePue: I think I've heard of that town.

Cantrall: Nobody was there, so we had it figured out. Man, this is a really bad town. We spent most of our time looking at Pompeii and looking up at Vesuvius, which was still smoking and looking at the graffiti. Ten minutes at the wheel, whether we had ever been behind a wheel already or not. Michael had driven a tractor since he was ten years old or younger. As I say, I was on a bike mostly, but I had driven some.

I practiced driving in downtown Chicago, after 10:00 at night, when nobody was around. I had an eighteen-year-old kid, who is risking his life, teaching me some. I owned a car. I had left it with somebody else. I was practicing driving with that. My big fault was heading towards lights in the other lane. But, once we got into the combat zone, we couldn't use our lights anyway, so I was fine.

DePue: A couple other questions, here, before we actually get you up to the frontlines. Did you have any rank? Did any of the people in AFS have rank?

Cantrall: We had honorary rank, and we had fake rank. Honorary rank was, we were WO1s.

DePue: WO for warrant officer?

Cantrall: Warrant officer, first class. Which, I hope, is better than warrant officer, third class, or is it?

DePue: As you get to the higher numbers, that's a higher ranking.

Cantrall: We were warrant officers, first class. That got us a liquor ration. We got one bottle of scotch or gin, without tariff, a month, which we had to pay for out of our measly little store. It was worth a hell of a lot to a really thirsty, sick *Havaldar* [rank equivalent to a sergeant in the British-Indian Army]. It's supposed to be absolutely clean, no alcohol ever, along with other things. But that's not the way the war worked.

DePue: One other question, here, before we get you up to the combat zone. Did you have any weapons? Did they issue any weapons to the drivers?

Cantrall: No. I would say, within a week—and that's in the book—I ask for, "Does anybody have a bayonet to dig the trench with?" Nobody did. I put it in the book. In a week, somebody would. (both laugh)

DePue: Some of these things are absolutely essential, if you're expected to survive there, like a bayonet or an entrenching tool or something like that.

Cantrall: In no time, I had—not a blitz gun—I had a German, automatic pistol, burp gun, burp gun. That's it. [I] Couldn't hit a telephone pole from fifteen feet away, with a full clip. (laughs) But actually, I was a terrific shot, with my glasses on, when I was a kid. I owned a gun. I bought it on my eleventh birthday, myself, with my mother's permission, with strict orders. I've got to have a swallow (takes a drink).

DePue: I think, while you're doing that, I'm going to read another passage. This is right when you first got to Naples, and this will lay out some of the other specifics, here, that's going to be important for the rest of the story. You don't mind if I read this passage?

Cantrall: Please.

DePue: "We arrived at Naples about the first of November, 1944, technically there to serve with the British Eighth Army. Our being loaned by the United States, along with lend-lease ambulances, as an American authorized 'civilian volunteer aid society'"—and you've got that in quotes—meant, strangely enough, that we could hop oceans, skip basic training and jump into action." That's expecting a lot, isn't it? (laughs)

"Distributed among eight AFS platoons, we would shortly be placed with frontline units of a dozen armies to evacuate the sick and wounded. In Naples, Rome and Florence, we found ourselves part of the visibly most cosmopolitan force since Alexander the Great, staring at insignias of armies we hadn't known were fighting in Italy or on our side, Brazilian, Italian, Moroccan, French, Jewish Brigade, Greek Brigade, Arab Legion and Senegalese soldiers could be seen on the streets, amid hordes of Poles, Gurkhas, Indians from all over, Americans, Canadians, South Africans, Britains, New Zealanders and more. We came to know them all."

And so much of the rest of your book talks about experiences with an awful lot of these troops. I don't even know if I saw…Okay, there's the Poles. I know you spent quite a bit of time with them, as well, quite a cosmopolitan group that you were with.

Cantrall: Yes. At that exact moment, General Alexander was our commander.

DePue: Was he the commander of the British Eighth Army?

Cantrall: He was British. He was the Allied commander, I think, yeah, of the two armies, but he wasn't there very long. These things kept marching along, and there were great changes. That's very good, to get that out of the way, because that's terribly hard to explain without it. And that is the truth. That's not what we had been told; that was the truth.

Part of our training was really being driven in trucks to a general who would welcome us. But finally we got the guy that was in charge of us, who passed out the Geneva Convention and told us that we were responsible to the international world. If we were captured, we were under German orders, immediately, to carry their wounded, our American prisoners, whatever, in that ambulance. Some people were captured. Usually they were sent back, sometimes immediately, but some were in prison camps at the end of the war, a couple of guys. (pause)

I don't know. Some of the chapters are meant to be amusing. I thought my twenty-year-old self was vastly amusing, by fifty years later, or I couldn't have written a word, especially not the chapter where I climb Monte Grande. I'd better stop talking about it. There were dozens of wounded on top of Monte Grande, which was accessible by vehicle, only *to a general with a map,* not to anybody who had seen it. Writing that chapter, I had started writing about the Poles and about the New Zealanders, the Kiwis, who had risked their freedom **not** to arrest us. This is the part where I am driving with my buddy, Walt, in a blizzard, with a Polish pass, totally in Polish, except for HQ, which I had advised our doctor to put in. Of course, I had conned him into my idea of what this pass should be like. His idea was, I was traveling four miles to my platoon. My idea was to go to Florence, crossing four mountain ranges in a blizzard on a slick road all the way that was confined to someone with four-wheel drive and chains on all wheels. I said, "Well, I'll pull up here, where it's flatter and put them on."

I kept going, because I looked around and saw they had no vehicle there that could catch us. I kept going, and there were shots fired. What I didn't know was that, a little later, after a lot of do-si-doing over this extremely slick road, and slipping and sliding, we were stopped by a full platoon at the next place, with **real** logs in front of us. The corporal in charge looks at the door and says, "American Field Service, I can't arrest American Field Service. You saved my life in North Africa." (weeping)

I talked him out of it. I talked the whole platoon out of it. I said, "We're not German. You're told to stop an ambulance driven by Germans, pretending to be...We're American Field Service." He said, "But my officer will be after me anyway." I said, "Don't worry about it. Just tell him 'nothing like that came up here, nobody with German soldiers driving in it.' They'll believe it. Why haven't we fallen off of this mountain already?" (laughs) Everybody else has. The trucks couldn't work. They lost several, never to be found until the snow melted. And they all did it. If you haven't read this far—

DePue: I just did read that chapter. Wouldn't a Jeep have been able to get up there? And a Jeep would have a lot lower center of gravity than your ambulance would, too I would think.

Cantrall: Oh, yeah. That's what the guy was driving, when he went up there. These guys tried to take an anti-tank gun up there. **We** scraped. We scraped, and we had to go like this and like this, and we made it. Writing that chapter took a lot out of me.

After I had written the part, with the guys letting us go, after some time in 2002, when we had been invited to the German embassy for lunch, I guess. We had Rhine wine at the German embassy. We were invited to the New Zealand embassy for tea, and we had Kool-Aid. (both laugh) They had already spent everything. But also, I discovered, in the middle of things, the ambassador is reading out of a cheat book of standard speech for Americans. I'm listening to this, and it suddenly dawns on me, nobody knows what the hell we're doing here. There are about thirty of us and our families, so a lot of wives, a lot of young sons and daughters around, minding us. We're already pretty old. I'm there to respond to the ambassador's speech and to present him with a copy of the picture from *Life* showing AFS drivers, and I'm rescuing a Kiwi in the desert, maybe a legitimate picture. I'm not sure.

DePue: You probably need to explain what a Kiwi is.

Cantrall: That's a New Zealander, comes from the Kiwi bird.

DePue: Since you have been talking about Monte Grande…When this incident occurred, you'd been there, in the combat zone, for quite a few months when this happened. I guess, listening to you, I'm surprised that that was the incident that stuck with you. I want to read just a short passage here, maybe—

Cantrall: The business about the Kiwis, that was when I was still with the Poles, within the first three—

DePue: So, that happens quite a bit earlier than Monte Grande. But I did want to read a short passage about Monte Grande, because that obviously is an incident that stuck with you, where you felt like you were sticking your neck out a lot farther than you ever had before.

Cantrall: I heard a speech. This is a lot later than…On our way to Florence, hopefully, to see some real girls, approved girls, to eat some ice cream, to have a beer. That was on our minds, and we had a leave. Why not? We needed those leaves, especially after some months with the Poles. That was a hard bunch, and we had been doing hard work in the mountains.

At this later time, they were out of the line for four days, which meant getting drunk and staying drunk and trying to pour beer down our throats, under force. Their notion of how to spend four days, where they see no civilians, as far as I 'm concerned, staying as drunk as they can.

They consider us heroes, not so much that we have been good drivers and so on, but that we have defied the colonel's orders. (laughs) That made us heroes and got me into a lot of trouble. That's all I did, was get in trouble with colonels. We would be surrounded by a mob and given one drink after another. If there hadn't been an air raid by the Germans, who knew exactly where these guys were having their leave, exactly what building it was in, because they had been there a few months before, very few. This was newly-captured territory that these Poles…Without the air raid, we couldn't have escaped. We ran to our ambulance and locked ourselves in and cowered in there.

The next day, we cornered the doctor and said, "These guys are going to kill us, if you don't give us a pass to get us out of here." Whatever their notion, we couldn't drink like that. We didn't have that staying power. That's why I conned him, and that's why I got this great thought and took off for a nice place like Florence, which actually was pretty and so on.

DePue: Give me a chance here to read this passage. Again, it goes back to what we had started a few minutes ago, when you were talking about Monte Grande. I'm going to kind of jump into the middle of this. (reading) "This man" (the officer in charge of this medical collection center)—It's somebody you're talking to, I guess. “This man tells me there are more than fifty casualties up in Monte Grande. Can we go after them?”

'Sir, I was up here last month with the Americans. No vehicle has ever gone up there, and I was specifically told it could not be done.”

Here’s another quotation. “I realize that, and I cannot order you to go, but there is no other way to get them down. This is a good man.” I assume he’s talking about you?

Cantrall: No, no, he’s talking about the Indian that has brought this word down and has talked to him in Urdu.

DePue: (continues reading) “This is a good man, and he thinks it can be done. He has volunteered to show you the way.”

I think this is your words now. “This was what I had been waiting for. This is what I had come for. I don’t mean I leaped at the chance to break my neck, but I needed to know, would I do it? And I would. All the better that it couldn’t be done. Don’t mistake what happened. This was out-and-out hubris.” I think that was the phrase that caught my attention. “This was out-and-out hubris, youth at its worst. It was the guide who was brave, and I shook his hand. I wish I knew his name.”

The rest of that chapter talks about how incredibly perilous it was, going up there in the sliding rock and the wet and slippery and—

Cantrall: Now, this is dry. There are two seasons in the Mediterranean, Apennines in the Alps. There is cold, rainy and snowy in the mountains, and there is dry, dusty and terribly allergic in the Po Plain, where we were headed.

DePue: The Po River Valley?

Cantrall: Po River Valley, which is a huge thing. Life went fast. I left the Poles at New Years, I think, very close to New Years. It’s April already, possibly still March, but I think it’s April. There are fifty wounded up there, because they had been ordered to attack, as a diversion. This is Indian troops, with Scottish officers, and very few of them. They are ordered to go downhill and then attack uphill, against machine gun fire and mortars, and they were creamed.

I have no idea how many died. Nobody ever heard about this battle, and that’s a good reason I wrote the book and tried to figure out who they were, as well as showing myself at that age, youth at its worst. That’s why wars involve eighteen-year-olds and less. It’s because they’re not wised up enough not to do something so silly. Pretty soon, you’re too old, unless you’re a professional soldier.

DePue: Were you one of those—and it certainly sounds like it—that figured you were indestructible?

Cantrall: No, I didn't think I was going to live beyond twenty-one, from an early age, for other reasons. But also, I was highly motivated. I had this to do. I wrote about it. I wrote about both trips. I wrote about the difference. I did not think I could write about myself in that situation. Most people my age, veterans, can't possibly do it. They can't think about it. I went through hell, writing down this book, because I have a full memory. If it hadn't been for the fact that…Can I jump back or keep going?

DePue: Go on, go.

Cantrall: I understood a lot of things better, after this. I understood a lot of things after the other one, too. Evaluating myself as somebody whose story is going to sound heroic was harder than thinking of myself as vastly amusing. This is not a really amusing chapter. This is a commitment that I made to try to explain why all of us were there. (weeping) A lot of other people [are] like that. When you get involved, in the middle of things, it was a lot harder, but we were motivated. I've got a paragraph that I can read much later about us.

DePue: This might be a decent spot to stop for today, and then when we get back again the next time, we can talk about some of those other incidents that you did so well to explain in the book, some of the humorous ones and certainly talk about things with the Poles and the Kiwis and some of the other groups that you talk about. Does that plan work for you today, Bill?

Cantrall: Pretty well. But, could I go for ten or fifteen minutes?

DePue: Sure, go ahead.

Cantrall: Back to when we were still with the Poles, and these guys decided to let us go. At that time, I was trying to talk about how I got started writing the book at all. I'm in the embassy of New Zealand.

DePue: When would this be?

Cantrall: This would be like 2002.

DePue: Were you in the United States in the New Zealand embassy?

Cantrall: That is right, in Washington. (blows his nose) You'll have to cut that one out. (laughs) We went to the German embassy already, and we're in the New Zealand embassy, and I realized that nobody there, in the New Zealand embassy, knows what the hell we were there for, no idea. I'm only there because I'm in a fragile state emotionally, and my wife had made me swear to go.

When I respond to the ambassador's speech, and I'm ready to hand him this valuable copy from *Life,* about the desert, I tell the story about the New Zealanders who let us go. (weeping) I said, "I've got to tell you about the real bond between us." I told them about the AFS guys, with the New Zealand Army, who had raced from Syria to Mersa Matruh to stop the panic of the Eighth Army when Rommel [German Field Marshal, Erwin Rommel, the "Desert Fox"] was chasing them and Tobruk [the Siege of Tobruk, Libya] was gone.

Mersa Matruh was a box in the sand that had some kind of sand dunes built up or something. We were supposed to block Rommel's force, and we got surrounded. General [Bernard] Freyberg [New Zealand Lt. General] was wounded, put into an AFS ambulance. (weeping) He passed the command on to the next guy. They were ordered to break out to the east. Everybody was ordered to stop for nothing. The ambulances and the trucks were in the middle, and they broke out. The AFS ambulances, the drivers stopped to rescue people from tanks, and they broke out, in general, and made it to El Alamein [northwestern Egypt] and managed to stop the rest of the army there and protect them and change generals, for one thing.

Then I told them about these guys. Anyway, I told about them rescuing me from this plight and letting me go. As I said to Walt, "We can't tell anybody about this. We'd be in the shit, but they'd be in the shithouse." Those guys would be in jail for disobeying a direct order. We'd just be in trouble. We never told. Until that moment, when I stopped talking, about fifteen minutes. I mean, I really let loose.

(weeping) There were cheers everywhere in this embassy. All of the daughters of AFS drivers ran up and hugged me. Everyone in the group that was security for the New Zealand embassy ran up, one at a time—I figured out later, they were getting relieved—ran up and hugged me. Nobody said a word. I'm looking at faces of other drivers, and everybody, when I spoke about the sign that was erected in Cairo, and ever since, that said, "For New Zealand troops and AFS personnel only," they all got tears in their eyes.

They told me, "I never had that experience before." Everybody was trying not to think of the war, but for the rest of our stay in Baltimore, all I heard was, "Bill, you've got to write it down." The ambassador gave me a one-armed hug. There's a picture of that in www.justlikeataxi.com. The commander, the military attaché, drew me aside and said, "We have a little place downstairs where we serve beer on Fridays. You have a standing invitation." (weeping)

DePue: Wow.

Cantrall: Not only that, in the book—and I won't get to all of them—the Kiwis saved my ass four more times, I think. I had the privilege of crossing the Po with them and riding toward Trieste [Italy]. I'm in that race with them. I'm in with the first, armored car platoon that's in the lead, and I get to do that. I'm stuck along with them for more months. One of the chapters says, "By sheer accident, I celebrate V-E Day with Kiwis that pulled my vehicle off of a bridge that is threatened with attack by the Yugoslav Partisan Army, in ten minutes. They see the AFS, and they stopped and pulled me off." I celebrate—that's just one of the things that happened.

But we're stuck there, because the New Zealanders…It's pretty much a tie between us and, you know, the American Army on one side, and the Partisan Army on the other. Okay, I'm done for a while. But go ahead.

DePue: Well, that's a marvelous way to finish for today. I do want to give you an opportunity to talk more about some of the other experiences you had and experiences with the Poles and the cultural exchanges and the food and things like that, because I think that's important, as well. But, what a way to finish for today. Holy cow.

Cantrall: Yeah. I had some sense of how to do it, ahead of time. Yes, and there's a lot more to come.

DePue: Thank you very much. This has been an important experience, to hear this. I understand now why it's so important for you to be telling these stories, too. And I appreciate, this is not easy for you to do, and I thank you very much for that.

(End of interview session #2)

Interview with William Cantrall

# VR2-A-L-2012-039.03

Interview # 3: November 20, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Tuesday, November 20, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, and I'm the director of oral history at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I'm with Bill Cantrall again. How are you this afternoon?

Cantrall: I'm in pretty good shape, considering all of the leaves that I've been raking this week.

DePue: You've got a ton of trees out here, and you must have a mountain of work to do every year.

Cantrall: Absolutely.

DePue: Ninety-year-old guys aren't supposed to be doing that.

Cantrall: That's what people keep telling me, but it keeps me in better shape than if I sat on my butt. (laughs)

DePue: Well, it strikes me, in talking to you previously, that you don't necessarily always pay attention to what people tell you that you ought to do anyway.

Cantrall: (laughs) That's the story of my war, anyway.

DePue: Absolutely. Before we started here, you reminded me that two days from now is Thanksgiving. I wonder if you've got any memories of what Thanksgiving was like for you, when you were growing up.

Cantrall: Yes, it was a big family in central Illinois. We lived in little towns around Springfield, Athens, Sherman…really, three hundred population in Sherman, I think, and that included out of town. But, no turkeys, we had chicken, chicken that we raised ourselves. My mother was a great cook and could make cakes that, in very ordinary circumstances, in Sherman, we would share a dinner with the Smith family.

They had six boys and no girls. That was my favorite hideout. I really learned a lot about farming there. Our parents were very close and stayed close forever. My mother and Mrs. Smith lived together in their late years and that sort of thing. They still had the *Tribune* picture of the autumn leaves and the Indians dancing. It sort of broke my heart when they killed that picture, because we saw it every Thanksgiving, until it got too late.

According to my father…He was one-eighth Indian. He had two great-grandmothers that were Native American, Indian women, who joined the family, because there were a heck of a lot of Cantralls, from the beginning, which was when Illinois was first a state.

DePue: Do you know what tribes they belonged to?

Cantrall: What?

DePue: Do you know what tribes those two women belonged to?

Cantrall: It's got to be Sac and Fox. That's who was here. They were farmers. They knew how to farm a part pasture, part prairie, part woodsy kind of circumstance. For a while, everybody forgot, on purpose, that they were in the family. But they certainly were. That made me one-sixteenth, and that would get me into Haskell Institute, if I could prove a tribal association. I'm just as blue-eyed as our new senator from Massachusetts [Senator Elizabeth Warren].

DePue: Who ran as a Native American, with one-thirty-second native blood, I think.

Cantrall: Yes. (laughs) You don't want to try to prove this with a blood sample and show that it's one-thirty-second. One-thirty-second, you couldn't get into Haskell.

DePue: Let's change gears here. We need to get to the Second World War. I wanted to start with just a comment here. You ended our last session with a very impassioned story about some things that happened long after the war, reunions and events that you'd gone to and talking about things that were occurring in North Africa and the honors that the American Field Service were garnering, because of things that were going on in North Africa. I just want to make sure readers and listeners will understand. Your story is exclusively about Italy, and this would have been some things happening before you got there?

Cantrall: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I wasn't there for the capture of Florence, *Firenze*. I was probably in the country. But that's where I started, north of Florence. This is where the British and the Americans had stopped dead, was just south of Monte Grande, which overlooked Bologna. That region was one that mostly the Poles were fighting in at that time. I, by good luck or bad luck, was with the Poles, while they were fighting to gain control of Forli and Faenza, going up the route that headed for Bologna, which was a long struggle and across many rivers and irrigation canals and well-defended. While I was in this region, near Forli and—

DePue: I've got a map here. In fact, I'm looking at the West Point Atlas of Military History. This is their map number 106, Operations in Italy. I saw Forli. Here's Forli right here. Obviously, Bologna, that's in German territory, when you started. The western part of the Italian boot was the American sector, and the eastern portion was the Brit sector. I think this map even shows a Polish unit, down south here, as they're moving up through this corridor.

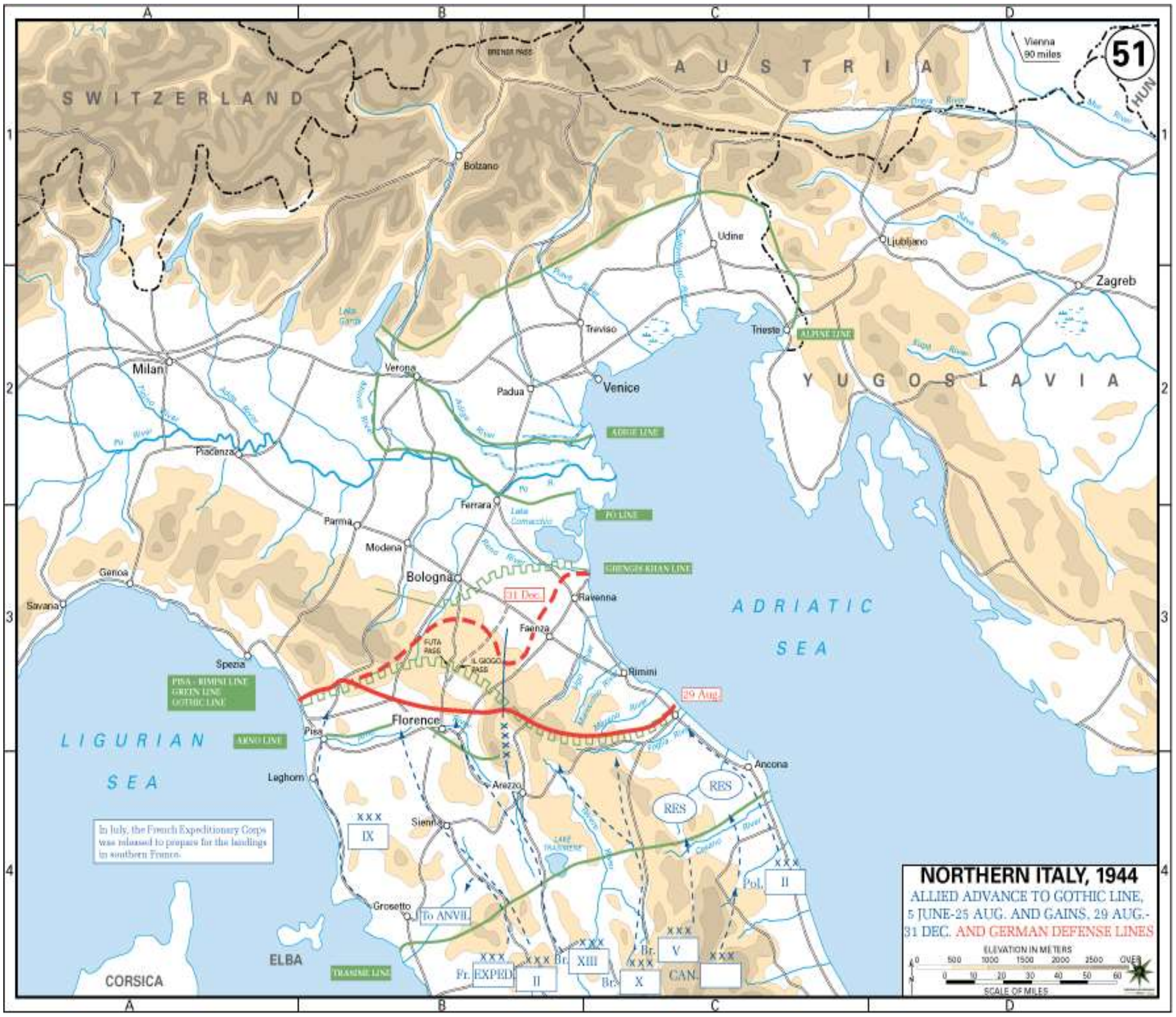
Cantrall: Yes. I was, some of the time, down here, but it depended on where our headquarters was. We were in this area here in my platoon. Another platoon was over here, with the Canadians, and—

DePue: They're right there, on the Adriatic Sea it looks like.

Cantrall: Yes, and they were still fighting to get Ravenna at the time that we were over here, attacking Forli and Brisighela and Faenza. But mostly, the whole idea is to keep going up here and try to get to Bologna, which they had given up on at the end of the 1943 fighting season, forty-three, forty-four. I'm there for '44 and '45.

DePue: Just looking at this map, it's pretty obvious, just by the map, and certainly obvious in the stories that you tell, you're going to be in some very rugged terrain. Once you get to Bologna, it looks like things flatten out, [when] you get to the plains north of there. Is that correct?

Cantrall: Yeah.


51
NORTHERN ITALY, 1944
ALLIED ADVANCE TO GOTHIC LINE, 5 JUNE-25 AUG. AND GAINS, 29 AUG.-31 DEC. AND GERMAN DEFENSE LINES
ELEVATION IN METERS
0 500 1000 1500 2000 2500 OVER
SCALE OF MILES
0 10 20 30 40 50 60
SWITZERLAND
AUSTRIA
YUGOSLAVIA
HUN
Vienna 90 miles
Bolzano
Udine
Ljubljana
Zagreb
Trieste
ALPINE LINE
Treviso
Verona
Padua
Venice
Milan
Piacenza
ADIGE LINE
Ferrara
PO LINE
Parma
Modena
Bologna
GENGHIS KHAN LINE
Ravenna
31 Dec.
Faenza
FUTA PASS
IL GIOGO PASS
Genoa
Savona
Spezia
Rimini
29 Aug.
PISA - RIMINI LINE
GREEN LINE
GOTHIC LINE
ARNO LINE
Pisa
Florence
Ancona
Leghorn
Arezzo
Siena
ADRIATIC SEA
LIGURIAN SEA
RES
RES
IX
Pol. II
Grosseto
To ANVIL
Fr. EXPED
II
XIII
X
V
CAN
Br.
TRASIMENE LINE
ELBA
CORSICA
A
B
C
D
1
2
3
4

In July, the French Expeditionary Corps was released to prepare for the landings in southern France.

DePue: Do you recall the first combat mission, or the first combat experience that you had?

Cantrall: (laughs) It was wild. We had two companies, and there had been a decision for the other people either to go and land in Yugoslavia or to go in on the landing in south France. So, suddenly, half of our force was gone. Our company, which was 485, and I was in D Platoon, was suddenly having to do twice as much as we had before. The minute we get there, we have a chance to get into action. Most people were waiting for better weather, but the Poles were attacking up this route, headed for Bologna, so they are doing the really scut work for almost everybody.

DePue: Is this the November of '44 timeframe?

Cantrall: Yes.

DePue: So, it's already getting cold.

Cantrall: It is **already** cold, which was the biggest surprise of my life, when I landed in Naples. This was cold and rainy. But I had good luck. I had made a good buddy in Walt Squire, and he and I ended up together, by accident.

In one case, it was sort of desperation. He had gone in as a co-driver with another guy and with the Poles. That was actually an active fighting post, and there were very few that were available. The guy that knew how to do anything, immediately got very, very sick, and he came back, driving the ambulance. The guy's in the hospital, and it's his ambulance all of a sudden. He doesn't know how to do anything. I'm in the background. I'm in with the platoon at headquarters, and I'm being taught by somebody else, who is pretty impatient of the whole idea of having to train an idiot like me.

By just desperate action on my part, and by chance, I had learned a lot about topography. I know how to find my way. I could read maps, topographical maps. My Scoutmaster had been a captain of artillery, and that's what he taught us, was how to understand things.

DePue: So, we're talking about the maps that have the contour lines, and being able to interpret the contour lines?

Cantrall: That's topographical, and I could understand that. I had a really strange feel for it, for somebody that grew up in—(laughs)

DePue: The flatlands?

Cantrall: Well, I grew up in the Sangamon bottoms. But I understood this. I had gotten what they call the Pathfinder Merit Badge. When I found out that Lincoln had surveyed Springfield, I had to survey my paper route and measure it exactly and draw a map and all of that stuff. I was a Scout. At any rate, I had a great memory, by chance. In one trip, I had managed to drive like my coach had done, who really didn't want to teach me at all. But I could do it, and I took my chances, and he took his chances. I came back, and I argued, and we argued. "There's nothing more to teach him. He's better than most guys already."

So, when Walt came in, he knows nothing. I'm only there by luck. They don't have somebody else to teach Walt, and I am made Walt's co-driver. That's the way it worked. I went back with him, and we were with the Poles. We just kept doing stuff. I was very much afraid that I had too much empathy. I hated to see sick people. I was queasy at the sight of blood. But we just did it, because we had to. (weeping)

DePue: I wonder if you can tell me what kind of guy Walt Squires was.

Cantrall: He was a very intelligent guy. He had been an inspector. We had both been inspectors in war plants. He had been an inspector on airplane engines for GE. That takes some real brains. I had been an inspector. He was a very quiet guy. He was there because, like me, he thought he ought to be.

All of us were like that. We just did it because we were there, and we were counted on, and they were bringing in injured guys, wounded guys. Some of them walked in. Some of them were carried on a blanket, by the Poles themselves. We had had minimal training. Minimal. And we still just dug in and did it. We were volunteers, and we did what had to be done, and then we were great after that.

DePue: You told us a story last time about going up on top of that mountaintop and negotiating that very narrow, slippery road in the middle of the wintertime, when it's wet as well. But what was the standard? How close were you guys supposed to be going to the front lines to retrieve these casualties?

Cantrall: We were under British control, and when the arrangement was made, originally, with the British Eighth Army directly, supposedly, but really all of the arranging was Churchill and Roosevelt. We wanted to be volunteers, and they expected very little from us. I'm using the "we" where I'm not really there, but it's the AFS guys that were and the whole idea of having a voluntary aid society. We said, "We want frontline work."

Frontline work, voluntary…They didn't have anybody with our spirit and our abilities, and certainly not our education. Generally, there was some college with everybody. There were some older guys that were there for their souls, I believe. There were pacifists and there were homosexuals, who happened to be important people in the musical world or the art world and knew they didn't have a chance to do anything worthwhile in the American army, and what would happen to them in those days. It wasn't "Don't Ask;

Don't Tell." It was a lot tougher than that. We were way ahead of history, I suppose.

DePue: It sounds like, also, you worked very close to the frontlines.

Cantrall: We were really lend-leased. We were the drivers that went with the ambulances, and the ambulances were four-wheel drive Dodges. At first they were half-tons, and later, mine was a three-quarter ton. You can't get through the desert, without big wheels and lots of drive. All of the armored divisions were very eager to get us.

In the mountains of Italy, as soon as it started raining in the fall, the British two-wheel drive bogged down. They couldn't get anywhere. That Italian mud is something. As soon as it got muddy enough, the British and the American armies finally came to terms. We had, as a group, supposedly, been lent until the two armies met, and they hadn't met. And so—

DePue: What two armies are you talking about?

Cantrall: The American and the British.

DePue: I don't quite understand when you say met, because they're both working their way north on either sides of the peninsula.

Cantrall: The Americans landed in North Africa, and they headed east—

DePue: So, you're talking about North Africa.

Cantrall: …and the British are coming from the other way, and they managed to squeeze the *Afrika Korps* [Africa Corps] out. Now, they're waiting to settle this dispute. It had to be settled at the top. They don't have any choice. They had to have the AFS drivers, who had the will and had the knowledge and would go anywhere, or nothing would happen. They didn't have anybody to put in those ambulances that was ready to go to the front, under any circumstance. (weeping) But the AFS, that reputation preceded us. When it got wet enough in the mountains, that settled it.

So, the Americans gave up the claim. It was a dumb idea anyway, because I would say 90% of us had already failed U.S. Army medical standards. There are guys that are really hard of hearing. There are guys that couldn't see well, or they were completely deaf in one ear. We had guys with one crippled arm and one good one, and they could drive a four-wheel drive ambulance, and they did it.

DePue: One question here that I'm not quite clear of, did the United States Army take care of its own casualty evacuation, or were there AFS platoons that were assigned to the Fifth U.S. Army as well?

Cantrall: There was nothing formal at all. We were told lies about this. We were told that nothing had changed. This was all decided by the secretary of the army and by the generals, and they came to this accommodation under the combined chiefs of staff.

DePue: Again, were there AFS platoons working with the Americans, as well?

Cantrall: No.

DePue: So, you're strictly working with Allies?

Cantrall: It's an impossible question to answer. More than one of us served with a group that was under American command. When I went up Monte Grande part way, there I am sitting with the American Army command post. There's no Indians in sight. They are up at the top, and I'm still in the woodsy part of the mountain.

DePue: When you say Indians, do you mean people from the Indian—

Cantrall: From India, yes.

DePue: Which would be, probably, a unit that was assigned to the Eighth British Army?

Cantrall: They were under Eighth Army command. The Eighth Army had darn few Brits in it. (DePue chuckles) There were three divisions from India, when it was still a single nation. They were there, hoping to get freedom. There was—

DePue: You're basically serving with all these countries that are part of the British Empire at the time?

Cantrall: That is right. I often didn't know who I was supposed to be with. I'm just going to a place, to a post. One week, I'm with the North Irish Horse Artillery, (DePue chuckles) and the next week, I'm with the Nabha Akal, which has Pathans, which is a tribe of Afghans, really. They were good guys, as far as I could see. At least I got along with them. They were there, and in the same regiment, there are Sikhs. I have to get along with both of them, and they have to get along together. It's been like that since the 1800s. (laughs)

DePue: That leads me to my next question. How were you able to communicate with all these different nationalities and all these different languages?

Cantrall: I hint at it in my book, *Just Like a Taxi*, which is a memoir of all of this, because I'm ready to drive. I can drive in this terrain. I could find my way anywhere, but I'm also a potential linguist. I became a linguist later in life. I knew dialects of English. I knew Italian from southern Italian, by accident.

This was not something that I fully recognized. I never spoke a word, because my Italian friends in Sherman told me not to. I could hear them talking to their parents in Italian. That was often spoken when I was around, because I wasn't supposed to understand it. There were people in town making illegal drinks. This was part of a big business, supplying liquor to Springfield, out here in the boonies. The old guys, of course, when they saw me coming around, switched to Italian, if they had been speaking English, and I just looked down. When_Rocco [Rocco Fischetti, the mobster] showed up from Chicago and all the kids chased after him, then later Rocco hit the headlines in the Chicago papers, I somehow, at eight or nine years old, figured out, this is a really dangerous place to know Italian. But, I could understand what the old guys were saying, and I could report it at home. I didn't say—

DePue: It sounds like you recognized, because you went to Italy and you heard so many different languages, that you had a real ear and a real flair for picking up languages.

Cantrall: Yes, I had a real flair. My parents were from different places. My father was a real local. He had had a high school education. The minute he finished high school, he started teaching. My mother had done the same. My mother spoke Kansas-Nebraska, spoke the language that all of the first radio announcers spoke. It was the one that most people could understand. She really knew what's called proper grammar.

My father, when I walked downtown with him—and downtown in Athens wasn't much—but he met people that he went to grade school with. He would immediately switch to their dialect and their manner of speaking. He knew as many dialects as Mark Twain did. This is all unconscious. I learned from both of them.

This is the way that most linguists get their start. There are Hungarians who are linguists, lots of them, because they speak German, and they speak Hungarian, which is a totally different kind of language. I had something of the same.

DePue: I'm going to keep moving here and get you back to Italy again. I'm going to be brutal in that sense, I'm afraid. I'm wondering if there is such a thing as a typical mission or a typical day and what you were supposed to be doing and what you did.

Cantrall: It was like everybody else's. It was boring as hell, like anybody's in the war. Nights were different, sometimes. When Walt and I got started, we had practically the only people at the front, at that time, feeding into us. Somehow, they would be put together, temporarily. They'd get sulfa powder; they'd get some morphine; they would get wrapped up, and we would put them in the ambulance and drive like hell to the next station behind us, get them out of there, and run back and wait for the next lot.

DePue: Where were you taking them to? Were you taking them to a hospital or just another—

Cantrall: Oh, no. Sometimes, in our case, there would be five trips, five stations, to get to an actual hospital, because there had to be a certain distance behind the lines. Hopefully, there was some heat. It was worse on the British side than it was on the American side.

DePue: It sounds, though, like where you're taking them is probably the first place they're actually going to encounter a doctor or physician?

Cantrall: What we would consider a doctor or physician. The Indians had doctors that were called doctors with two years of medical training. That was it. If they got through high school or whatever it might be. Most of the Indian doctors were either Parsees or Indians that had been abandoned at Christian missionaries in India. They had been brought up as Christians, some of them Catholic and some of them not. Mostly, they spoke English.

I have no memory of the first—whoever we picked up guys from—it was, practically speaking, the battlefield, in that it was just a car there and a tent. We spoke no Polish and vice versa, but we knew what had to be done, and we learned how to do it and discovered that we could do it, which is important. Not everybody was an instant hero. My worst fear was that I would somehow fail at this. I'm sure Walt's was similar. But we stood up to it. We had practically no training in first aid. I've got my Scout background to rely on, which isn't much. I start learning some things later.

DePue: How much did you practice being a medic or a doctor, or did you just try to get them back to someplace where they could be taken care of?

Cantrall: I had no trust in my capabilities in that way. Dealing with a wound myself would have been very hard. I wasn't the equivalent of a medic. I was something in between. I was willing to go wherever there were wounded. I went to some places where I had to volunteer to go. I did it, but not for particularly great reasons. My view is, anybody that was within the sound of gunfire was a hero.

DePue: From looking at the cover of your book, you guys obviously classified that, because the cover of the book has got, I think, your truck, your ambulance.

Cantrall: That's not my ambulance. I know whose ambulance it is.

DePue: Did yours take some bullet holes, like this one did?

Cantrall: A couple, but shrapnel, shrapnel. Usually the Germans would not shoot at an ambulance, if they saw it by itself. It's the only color picture, actually, of this ambulance that survived the war, or maybe got taken. Actually, that's a doctored photograph. There were more holes than that. It was anti-personnel shrapnel. It came in. Somebody was killed by those bullets, but nobody in the ambulance was. But, no expense spared, I was given access to everything in the AFS files, because of my role in getting some of us American honorable discharges. It was supposed to sell books, but so far, not too many. I know where all three of them came from. This one, this picture—

DePue: Bottom left.

Cantrall: This is in the Salerno River, which I had to ford repeatedly. It's gotten washed down the line. This one is actually…I think it's a U.S. Army ambulance, but you really can't tell the difference, because that's what they are, except they've been painted over with…They have the U.S. Army numbers on them, on the back, but the caduceus has been painted over with either an eagle, which was described by the other company as the something chicken—. (laughs)

DePue: Ruptured chicken?

Cantrall: Yes, something like that. The other one, mine, was a griffin, which is from, actually, British history or literature, which is half lion and half something else, a bird of some kind or, you know, a familiar design.

This will help you, and possibly other people, understand what goes on. My company commander, during the war, was Ward Chamberlin. Ward Chamberlin was one of the presenters of *The War* [TV series]. He is still a part of the AFS. He's part of the direction of it. He was the head of public television in New York, WNET, I believe it is. Ward Chamberlin is the one-eyed guy that talks about war in Italy, because his group was one of the people that backed up putting the whole *The War* together. He was also very familiar with this. He was probably the first guy to read my book, *Just Like a Taxi*. For what it's worth, I think we're together in some kind of online group.

Ward was somebody that I went over with. He was going back to become company commander, after a break. He was the guy that talked about the landing at Anzio. There were British and Americans both at Anzio. I don't think he was there, but he was familiar with all of us. I really studied a lot about the war, in order to actually get some of those honorable discharges. Ward, similarly, read up about it. He was not somebody that I saw much of in Italy, because I didn't see much of anybody. I was almost always off by myself, instead of with other people in my platoon.

DePue: It sounds like you were seeing plenty of Poles and Indians and New Zealanders and Irish and every other nationality, just not the people in your own hierarchy.

Cantrall: That's right. At one time, we're supposed to be waiting for orders from him [Chamberlin], and he's supposed to be coming to meet us in the north. I manage to persuade my lieutenant, finally, he's not going to make it. I had got there, with my group, because of this unusual flair for, you know, not dis**regarding** orders—and never say dis**obeying** orders—but working my way around, just talking people into letting me get through and knowing the roads, because I'd been everywhere, up to a certain point. After that, it was by guess and by gosh.

This is Dave Becker. That was my lieutenant. He had a lot of faith in my ability to find my own way and by my own methods. He sent me off with a bunch of guys, with other ambulances, and we made it to the headquarters of the Second New Zealanders, which had graduated from being a division to being a corps, because they had, not just their own guys, Maoris, but they've got Indians, and they've got Gurkhas, who are not Indians. They were actually Nepalese, but they're professionals, serving in the Indian army. And they've got me; they've got us.

Now, when we get that far, whatever way, whatever method of reasoning, me and Jim are sent to the Twelfth Royal Lancers, which is the armored cars. They actually were using Staghounds, which I think were British in origin, but they had what they called Greyhounds, which were American M8s, with six wheels.

When we finally get to the Po [River], we're kept pretty busy, crossing other rivers and so on with this group, which is the armored cars or the World War II version of cavalry. We're looking for bridges. We're looking for ways to get across rivers. At this time, I'm with people from Oxfordshire, England. Quite a few of them are aristocrats. The officers certainly were. A lot of them were teachers at Oxford. That's who we were with. Jim went with a different group. He was with a New Zealand troop, but I was with the Twelfth Royal Lancers. We had different status. There were people in that troop and guiding that troop that knew the king, personally, that knew Churchill. We were an important factor in what happened.

My car, I'm following a doctor's car, which was armored, which carried several people inside and four armored cars ahead of that. When our pontoon bridge came together, I was driving the sixth car to cross. I was with those guys for mile after mile, just driving, until we ran into trouble. This went on all the way, almost, to Trieste. I didn't quite make it, but—

DePue: So this bridge crossing you're talking about is over the Po River?

Cantrall: Over the Po.

DePue: After you finally got out of the mountains, this is what, April timeframe?

Cantrall: This is getting out of the mountains. The big problem in Italy is that the equipment that they have, that the Americans had, definitely, is for the desert, and the generals haven't got the slightest idea. I'm not leaving anybody out here, especially Mark Clark.

DePue: I was waiting for you to say that name.

Cantrall: I hope you're not named after him. (laughs) [Mark Clark] Had no idea of what to do in the mountains. There are mountains all over the blooming way, up the middle of the…until we get out on the plains. I've got to get this in here. I talked about this a little bit last time. When the bridge gets put together, I have found out that that's the New Zealand general. Of course, he's a British general, and it is Freyberg, [Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard C. Freyberg] and there he is, pissing in the Po, as we come down this bulldozed track, getting down to the river, from the high side—this is where the river bends—and getting across. As I go past him, he's bouncing up and down, and we're bouncing up and down, because those armored cars weigh ten times what an ambulance does.

DePue: This is on a pontoon bridge?

Cantrall: Pontoon bridge. There's Freyberg in the middle, and he turns around, with a big smile, and slaps the door and says, "Let's go, AFS!" I give him a toast in return. "*Andiamo*," which is Italian for "let's go." If you've ever seen an Italian opera, which involves horsemen of any kind in the camp, and somebody says, "*Andiamo,*" they all get up and go. (laughs)

DePue: That's a great story. I want to take you back, though, a little bit and ask you… 1944, you get there in November. Do you remember anything special about either Thanksgiving or Christmas and what you were doing on either of those days?

Cantrall: Yes. (laughs) You know damn well, I think. Yes, most of us are in reserve at that time, and the platoon was together. We have a washtub, and everybody pours anything alcoholic that he has into that washtub, and we drink from that. It was terrible (laughs). But we somehow had an American turkey. It was American Army turkey. Somehow we had gotten it, possibly even legally.

I know, at the time that we were in possession of the provost general's Jeep and using it for the platoon, but the provost general tracked it down, and we had to give it back. I wasn't the only one, but it was very common, in those days, to take the rotor out of the distributor, so nobody would drive it off. So, all you really needed was a rotor, and you could open up a Jeep and stick the rotor in and drive off. But that got pretty bad.

I'll tell you, driving on those roads…The Germans had been systematically destroying bridges and roads that had been carved out of the cliff and so on. They were great at this. This was what took forever. You couldn't go anywhere fast. What the following army was doing was having to put in Bailey Bridges, which were mostly…The structural strength part was up above the road, and they were everywhere. Driving on these roads, partially under fire at times, certainly, all the supplies had to go up those kinds of roads. The first time I found the *Stars and Stripes* [the U.S. Armed Forces newspaper] somewhere, there was a headline that said, "More casualties from the roads than from enemy action." That's how bad the roads were. Lots of people just went over the side. Certainly, you had to look out for shell holes almost everywhere. So, it was engineers that were needed to get through to the open plains.

DePue: Do you remember any really bad accidents you had with your ambulance? I know you got close plenty of times.

Cantrall: (Laughs) When we were there, there were more Poles in the Eighth Army than anybody else. There were more Poles, and they were growing. Not many of them had ever learned how to drive before. The shortage of trained drivers among Indians, but—among Britons. Poor people didn't have cars at the beginning of World War II.

DePue: Let's face it, the only country that really had an awful lot of cars was the United States at that time.

Cantrall: Yes, and we had a lot of drivers. I didn't have a driving license, but I sort of knew how to drive, and I had ridden a bicycle in dangerous circumstances for a good many years. I was a wild man on a bicycle, and I was a wild man in an ambulance, to other people's thinking.

DePue: Is all of that to say you didn't have any really serious accidents with your ambulance?

Cantrall: We have a battle for the right of way with the Poles. This is a running battle. When you get to a Bailey bridge, suddenly it is just wide enough for one vehicle. When you meet them on the road, at the side of a mountain, they tend to drive down the middle of the road, because they were in bigger vehicles. They were in trucks. They expected everybody else to get out of their way. By that time, there were hot rods, somewhat, in America. It wasn't common, but there were things like that. There was the game known as chicken, which was driving straight at somebody else on the highway and see who turned off to the side first. There's old movies with that stuff in it. There were a lot of those ended up with head-on crashes, of course.

So, we taught the Poles how to play chicken. We would drive straight at them, and they would get out of the way, maybe, because they were more afraid of us. We'd put it into a lower gear and drive on, then, head-on, and we had a General Motors truck transmission, which made a hell of a racket. We'd only turn aside at the last minute and clip them with our American solid fenders, and pass on by. You know, they gradually got to respect us. We wanted to get to a bridge first with the wounded.

DePue: So this is more than a game. This is the imperative of getting the wounded someplace where they—

Cantrall: Yes. That's why we start out doing that. At least that was a good excuse. (Laughs) Anyway. Walt and I were in different cars, having taken a lot of wounded back, or sick guys somewhere, and are on the way back. Walt got there ahead of me, and he bumped over the bridge, which was supposed to be slow going, but he went pretty speedily. I'm behind him, and I come up the bridge, and there is a Polish truck coming up the ramp on his side. I am 80 percent of the way across the bridge, and it's a narrow bridge. We had waged war on them, and they didn't like it, and this was his chance to back me up all the way across the bridge if he could. I shifted into four-wheel drive, which was a no-no unless you got slippery material under you, like snow or mud. I push him, gradually, backwards off of the bridge, because if he pushes me in the other direction, or I back up, I can go off the bridge with no problem at all. And it's a long way. So I'm doing this, and Walt sees the situation I'm in. Excuse me a minute, or I will stop all together. I'm getting excited, so... Got to keep my throat lubricated and calm it down a little bit. But this is exciting stuff.

Walt sees what's happening, and he comes back. When I've got the guy off the bridge, but not out of the way, Walt comes at the truck and pushes it sideways so I can get off the bridge. When he pushes it sideways, its back wheels twist around, and we can proceed. But something's wrong with my running gear, and pretty soon I have to disengage. I have to stop trying to run at all, because I've damaged the mechanism to the back wheels, and there's a different drive shift to the front wheels than there is to the back wheels. That's how you got four-wheel drive. So Walt has to tow me. When you're going up and down, this is dangerous as hell. We have to call for help. We make it back to where we are staying, but we're in an Italian town, supposedly on rest. We're not in the lines at this time. Still with Poles. The Yorkshire fitters have to come and take charge of this problem. That's it. As I say in the book, I hadn't been a child for nothing. (laughs) I knew that you can always rely on a good, honest lie.

DePue: I wanted to ask you about one of the things that you wrote up in the book, and I thought you did a really good job of visualizing this for us. I think this is in the winter, so we're back in probably December or January timeframe. I believe you're with the Poles. This is an incident with the latrine. I think maybe you're going to latrine, and you got somebody taking some potshots at you.

Cantrall: Oh, yes. Okay.

DePue: There's a portion of this I want you to read. Maybe I'll let you—

Cantrall: That's probably good, too.

DePue: I'll let you set this up, and then this portion right here is the portion I'd like you to read.

Cantrall: We were sent to a particular high spot, which had a commanding view, but not perfectly commanding, of the Germans. This is often very mutual. They could see us, and we could see them. They [our side] had bulldozed a new route to get up to the top without appearing in sight so that supply trucks and ambulances could get up there. So it's all Poles. We're taken inside, and there's some real young guys, who seem to be attracted to us like flies. We're young, too. We're twenty. We're taken to a sergeant who gives us a long talk in German. We had some idea of what was going on, but the kids can't let us alone. They are just immersed in us. It turns out, this is all that they've got. They are so young, they are made stretcher bearers and stuff like that. They are not into action. They find us absolutely—not just amusing, but they are in love with us, watching every move.

When I show up, I actually knew a couple of words of Polish already, but not polite ones, because we'd been hollering at Poles before. Okay. I wave a roll of toilet paper around in the morning, like this. They figure out this universal language. I say, "*latrina*," which is Italian for latrine, at least. So, they are going to show me around this very long building, some kind of council building, a public building that had a lot of people in it. They were going to show me, escort me, there. It snowed a lot more. We go around the side, and we had this escort, and we kept picking up more people. Then they get to the corner of the building and point and say something in German, which I might even have understood. I went over in that direction, and there's a little pine tree there, and there's boards across the latrine. It was recognizable, in a sense. I have to kick the snow off of the boards, because it snowed a lot during the night. I hang onto the tree. I figured that's what it was designed for.

DePue: So, this is an open-air latrine?

Cantrall: This is an open-air latrine, and the view is tremendous in all directions. So, I'm squatted down and trying to maintain my balance.

Now, [reading] "I finally spotted the latrine for myself, quite out in the open, though almost buried from the six inches of untracked snow, fallen during the night. I plowed my way through a foot of snow, then had to kick snow off the boards over the trench, in order to use it. The boards were treacherously slick, but perhaps by design, there was a small pine I could grasp to keep my balance, while hunkered down.

While I was admiring the sweep of the mountains to right and left, there was a crack. The tree shivered in my hand and snow cascaded over me. I looked up to see the top tipping over from where it had been broken, just above my hand. But, I was already diving backwards and to my left, into the deep snow, where I belly-crawled along frantically, while trying to hold my pants on. It was more of a side stroke, actually, but effective.

I hadn't heard a shot, and the shooter had missed a sitting duck, so he had to be some distance away, and I wasn't making it easy for him, which gave me a strange kind of satisfaction. There was no doubt that this was the funniest sight my audience of a dozen had ever hoped to see in this life."

DePue: (laughing) I'm sure you didn't find it humorous at all at the time, but they sure must have.

Cantrall: Oh, man, I was cussing them in every language I could think of, and they were so happy. I told Walt about it, fortunately. This led to more trouble. We had already caught them trying to walk…We had brought in our stretchers, so we wouldn't be sleeping on the floor, like they were. It's a little warmer if you're wrapped around. So, we talked to them in Italian and in whatever we could, in sign language. They knew more Italian than they were letting on.

We moved back into the ambulance. We moved our stretchers back. We shunned them, and we shook our fingers at them, and we gave them all the Italian sign language we knew. (both laugh) It was colder than hell out there in the ambulance, at night. This is high. It must have been close to zero. But, we had a lot of ambulances, and we had a lot of blankets. I had a Boy Scout sleeping bag with me, for goodness sake, which was far too little for this job.

We managed through the night, and in the morning, they had started calling us Valter and Villiam. [It] Sounds like a "V" to us, but it's a bilabial, in Polish. Anyway, they says, "*Obudzić się*. Wake up." They kept pounding on the back door. So, you know, there wasn't any hope for this. I got some boots on, and I had quite a few clothes on. I tried going out the right-hand door.

Just outside the door, the minute I had opened the door, I can see there is a dead German soldier, frozen in position, holding—I think it's a rifle—on me. Whatever I said in there, I remembered better than now. It's a Mauser. [German made firearm] He's got a hole in the middle of his forehead. (laughing) In a brutal sort of way, you have to have a Polish sense of humor to get this.

DePue: Had the Poles actually moved him over there to kind of spook you?

Cantrall: They had propped him up there. There's a guy with a Luger on Walt's side, and I'm telling him, "You can get out, Walt, but don't be surprised." He's got a Luger out there, or a P-38, one or the other, and they've got three of these guys, frozen stiff, in these positions.

Anyway, we don't eat if we don't go inside, but we're trying to explain. We are there under the Geneva Convention. This is a terrible thing to do, and definitely against the Geneva Convention. We spend hours trying to get this into their heads. They could not grasp the principle. How could you offend a dead German? (both laugh)

DePue: I guess I'm not totally surprised that the Poles had a different idea of how war should be fought than Americans, because they were the first country that was overrun by the Germans. Even before then, their circumstances were much tougher than Americans probably had.

Cantrall: There was a lot more in here [referring to his book] that I'll skip.

DePue: What I did want to ask you about—and we've got about a half hour to go here—but I wanted to give you a chance to talk about all the different kinds of food that you had to eat, because you were with all these different nationalities.

Cantrall: What the Poles did was trade anything for more fat. They were devoted to a fat diet. In fact, they'd get jaundice, trying to eat an American diet. We weren't that much in sympathy. We were getting sick, trying to eat this fatty diet. They would boil cans of American potatoes, which were really, pretty good—a big can—until they could be poured like soup. We couldn't really stomach this. It was pretty similar, all the way around.

Almost all of the British soldiers, who were attached to us—we're attached to the Eighth Army, and there are real British soldiers from Yorkshire and Glasgow and so on, and from Ireland—their favorite breakfast was bread, sopped in hot, heated fat, cooking fat. Not as bad as the Poles, but something we couldn't do. We couldn't manage it. We were desperate for sugar, and sugar made them sick. Also, there was no sweetening. There was no sweetening. The British, sometimes there would be a treat like plum duff, which just drove me wild, for the lack of sugar, which I was well used to.

Since I was making a lot of money carrying papers, I was eating triple-dip ice cream cones and coconut crème pie, while I'm on my trips and going home and eating supper, with a dessert. I was a sugar baby, I guess. But I was burning it up, riding a bike. I was riding a bike somewhere between fifteen and twenty-five miles a day, and I needed that kind of stuff, as a kid. Plus, my mother was devoted to keeping me plump, because chubby babies were healthy babies, back in those days.

DePue: You mentioned plum duff? What is plum duff?

Cantrall: It is terrible. (laughs) It is very much a manner of dough of some kind. It's really prunes, dried fruit, that's been swelled up again. It was a special treat. It was soggy. It was almost indigestible to us and probably was to me. But, for the Brits to get one of these, that was heaven.

DePue: How about the Sikhs, the Indians?

Cantrall: In the front lines, there was nobody that cooked European food. This is the staple of food for the poor people in India and Pakistan. They're doing better now, but it was chapatis and rice. It's a pancake, with no leavening and certainly nothing sweet to it. It's unleavened bread, essentially. It's just a chunk, and it is rice. It is something that you can cook over an open fire. You've got to have water of some kind and iron utensils. They all ate the same stuff, because you had these mixed regiments, with the Muslims, like the Pathans and the Sikhs, who, like many Hindus—and of course there were plenty of Hindus—and this—

DePue: The Indians can't eat any beef products, and the Muslims can't eat any pork products.

Cantrall: That's right. So, there wasn't any. But, you had hot sauce, some kind of Hindustani. You probably can't get it in a real Indian restaurant in this country. It is just so hot, you can't believe it. Supposedly, there might have been some mutton somewhere, but I never saw it, because we couldn't handle something that spicy.

DePue: Who would you say had the worst food, the worst cuisine of all the different nationalities that you were with?

Cantrall: The most intolerable is that stuff [hot sauce], because, for me, I couldn't take that kind of sauce. As far as we were concerned, if you didn't eat it, you couldn't go, because all of this grain in the chapati and the rice would stay stuck, not to your ribs, to your intestines. Either you couldn't go, or, if you took the sauce, then you had diarrhea, and you couldn't stop going.

DePue: The other things I would think that Americans would always prize, would always want, would be coffee and cigarettes. Did you have access to those two things?

Cantrall: Rarely. We had Indian matches, made in India, very thin and very hard to strike, in a little box. We had tins of cigarettes. They had advertising, like we did.

DePue: But these are not American cigarettes?

Cantrall: Oh, no. I'm not sure where they came from, but it might have been from the Middle East somewhere. It certainly didn't have any Latakia in it[4]. It was probably Virginia. It probably came, specially made and sent, as lend-lease, in a sealed tin, nothing that an American could tolerate, pure Virginia tobacco, I think. I'm just guessing right now. I think there were fifty in the tin, and they were hard to come by. I think we had to pay for them, anybody did. I smoked them. I smoked anything.

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[4] **Latakia tobacco** is a specially prepared tobacco, originally produced in Syria and named after the port city of Latakia. Now the tobacco is mainly produced in Cyprus. It is initially sun-cured, like other Turkish tobaccos, and then further cured over a pine or oak wood fire, which gives it an intense smokey-peppery taste and smell. Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latakia_(tobacco) (accessed February 26, 2016)

About the other stuff, because there wasn't any sugar, I would drink almost anything, because the chemical distance between alcohol and sugar is very small. Actually, one of the many things that I studied was organic chemistry, for goodness sake. But anyway, I was going by the proof of the pudding, too, because it kept me going, when I could manage it. I had to have something to—

DePue: You say, kept you going, energy-wise or going to the bathroom-wise?

Cantrall: No, that kept me going energy-wise, and kept me able to digest ordinary British food, which was also very un-sweet.

DePue: We're getting at the point where we need to, probably, bring you home. You talked quite a bit about this experience of crossing the Po River on the pontoon bridge. That's in April, so you're only a month away from the end of the war by that time, too.

I wonder if you could spend just a few minutes talking about the end of the war and then coming back to the United States. Then we're going to have to wrap it up.

Cantrall: As far as we were concerned, we had got to Friuli, the part of Italy that the Italians had earned by coming in on the British side at the last minute, so to speak. That's Gorizia, Udine and Trieste. It wasn't exactly a dead heat, but it was pretty close. When we got to the bridge, on the way to Monfalcone, the bridge had been mined, and we had to wait for a sniper. I don't know whether he was a New Zealander or in the Twelfth Lancers, but he disarmed the mine that had been set to go off. We drove across the bridge. While we're doing that, there are Tito's Partisans [Yugoslavia's Marshall Josip Broz Tito] trying to run onto the bridge, just a handful of them.

When we got to Monfalcone, which had been a German naval base—it's at the head of the Adriatic—they are painting the streets with "*Viva Tito*" and "*Zivela Tito*." And there they are. It's the very front guys, and they have raced there, across the mountains, or however. They've done something similar in Trieste. *The Race for Trieste*, which is a great book, and *The Road for Trieste*, by the same guy, Geoffrey Cox, is partly about this, but he was a lot further back in the bunch than we were.

Anyway, for the next three months, I think it is, we're attached to the New Zealanders. They're stuck there. Truman has decided that we're going to draw the line here. So, that's what we did. One of the later chapters [of Cantrall's book] is called "Victory in Europe and Full Alert in Friuli." All of the people that had been racing behind us are being brought into Gorizia and

Trieste, and Tito's men are trying to get there early. Actually, quite a lot of them are from the northern part, that is—

DePue: You're talking about Yugoslavia?

Cantrall: This is when Yugoslavia came apart. I happened to be there, on a Fulbright. It's Slovenia. Many of these guys were Slovenes, and many of the people in the countryside, on this side of the border, were Slovenes. They were cousins in many cases.

DePue: I'm ashamed to say that I know that the race was for Trieste and, at the time of the war, that was part of Italy. Where did it end up after the war? Was it still part of Italy or was it part of Yugoslavia?

Cantrall: It went through changes. When I was there, in '90 and '91, in the midst of another war, there's…I'm not sure I can come up with a Slovene. Gorizia and Monfalcone and Trieste finally ended up in Italy. They went through stages. But there is sort of a sister city, just on the other side of the boundary. They drew this line, wherever it went.

When I first get to Gorizia, there are two sets of people, patrolling the streets. I think there's a British outfit that is going like hell, all by itself, to get there, and there is a similar outfit that has come crazily to the same place. They are both asserting their superiority as the real people in charge. It was a very dangerous place.

DePue: Was it some of Tito's Partisans there, as well as the Brits?

Cantrall: Yes, that's who it was. It's the Fourth Partisan Army, which is mostly northerners.

DePue: May eighth is the date that's normally recognized as V-E Day in Europe. Do you remember that day?

Cantrall: Absolutely. It was the fourth time that Kiwis had saved my ass. (weeping) This is me in my worn-out ambulance. It's the only ambulance in the platoon that didn't get a new engine. I am racing across the—I think it's the Isonzo, and it's a *fiumi*. Oh, not a *fiumi*. It's a *torrente*, very wide. When these are in flood, they are like a mile wide, or pretty close to it. The bridge, there was a machinegun there, and there was a tiny cannon, which had been rolled by hand from Yugoslavia. This—

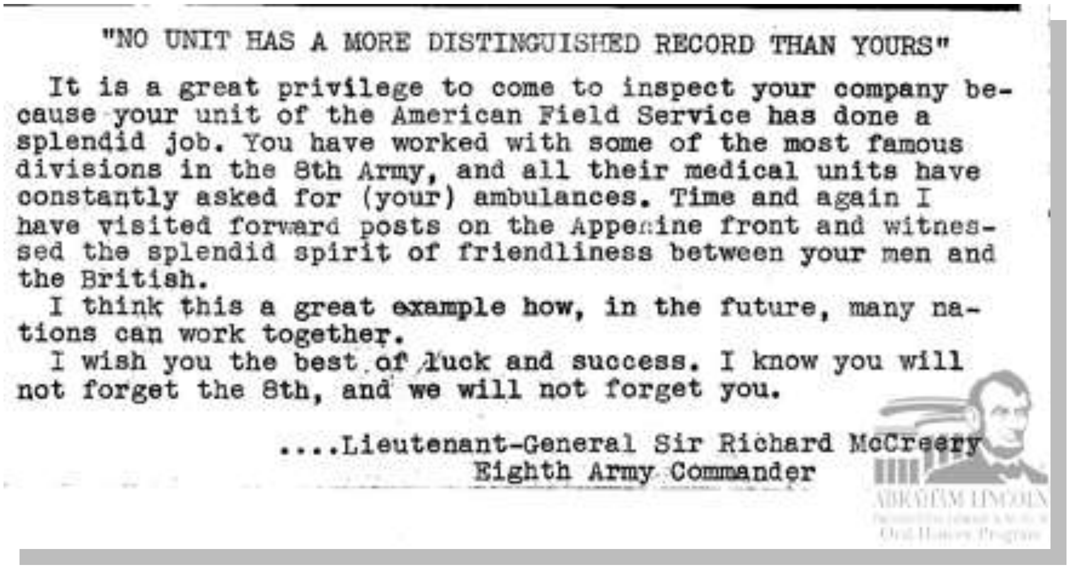
DePue: Here's Trieste.

Cantrall: Yes, I'm right. It's Isonzo. It's a bridge across there. The British, Seventy-Eighth Division, I believe it is, is going to cross that bridge at noon. And the Partisan Army is there to stop them. I'm trying to get to my guys. The platoon headquarters is quite a ways behind us, and they're trying to get everybody together, for a change, to celebrate. I'm crossing this bridge.

I can't tell you exactly why, but it's like twenty minutes to twelve, to high noon, and I'm about halfway across, and I hit a terrible bump on the bridge. The engine jumps up, and the fan chews the radiator into bits, and the water comes out of the radiator, and there I am. I'm stuck. What do I do? I'm in the way of an armored division. What are they going to do, if the ambulance is there, and what am I going to do?

By the way, I can see over the side that there's a guy down in the *torrente* with a flame thrower. This is for effect for the guys defending the bridge to the death. He's out

General Sir Richard McCreery held a farewell review for American Field Service volunteers near Rome on July 3, 1945. Captain Ward Chamberlin, the AFS Company Commander, stands behind the General. McCreery held the volunteers in very high regard, a universal sentiment among the many nationalities that made up the 8th Army.



"NO UNIT HAS A MORE DISTINGUISHED RECORD THAN YOURS"

It is a great privilege to come to inspect your company because your unit of the American Field Service has done a splendid job. You have worked with some of the most famous divisions in the 8th Army, and all their medical units have constantly asked for (your) ambulances. Time and again I have visited forward posts on the Appenine front and witnessed the splendid spirit of friendliness between your men and the British.

I think this a great example how, in the future, many nations can work together.

I wish you the best of luck and success. I know you will not forget the 8th, and we will not forget you.

....Lieutenant-General Sir Richard McCreery
Eighth Army Commander

This is part of the message that Lieutenant General Sir Richard McCreery delivered to AFS volunteers at their farewell review in July, 1945 outside of Rome, Italy.

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there with a flame thrower, and he's going, "*fwoom*." Everything burns in front of him. It's all of the vegetation that's down there. They're getting a treat, and hopefully a lesson, but there I am.

And by god, here comes a REME truck, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. But it's New Zealanders. It's Kiwis. They sail past me, with a big screech of brakes, and a guy jumps out, opens up the back and says, "AFS, right?" (weeping) And they put a chain on me and pulled me off of the bridge. Just like that. They said, "We'll fix this for you, but we can't do it today. We're celebrating."

So, they took me down on bankside somewhere. That's where I celebrated V-E Day and learned how to do the *haka*, because one of their friends showed up, and we had something to drink, something really, dreadfully sweet.

DePue: The *haka*, was that a dance?

Cantrall: That is the Māori war dance. If you are a soccer fan and you see a New Zealand team anywhere, they do the *haka* before. I can't jump up here. This is very big grimaces, and there are words to do this. It's the threat that's important. It might even have been invective. Since we didn't have a victory dance, we did that one. We chanted, and we made faces, and we stomped in a circle. (laughs)

DePue: Bill, I'm afraid we've only got a couple minutes left on the recording here. We got to the end of the war. That was an amazing story for a memory for the V-E Day. That wasn't quite what I was expecting, but that's incredible.

I wonder if you can reflect very briefly on your experiences and how being in the American Field Service has affected your life afterwards.

Cantrall: Sometimes a lot afterwards. I remembered when I was with an American outfit, and these guys were talking about what they were going to do at the end of the war. "The second thing I'm going to do is take off these goddamn skis." (laughs) I came up with, "You can

Bill Cantrall in his AFS uniform after he arrived back home in Illinois in mid-1945.

drop me bare-ass in a snow drift, and I'll be fine, once I'm back in the States." (weeping) But the greatest thing that ever happened, my first motive for being there, was a brother that went through the entire war. I got word, while I was in New York trying to do stuff, that he was coming home. So, I quit spending everything I could, going to plays and so on, and started home. Got to Chicago, went to see a friend there, the author, and then I got on the train. In those days…I don't know whether it was the Ann Rutledge or the Abraham Lincoln, but it had a special car for Springfield. So, they could open up certain doors, and everybody would get off. They didn't open up the whole train. I got in one end of the Springfield coach, on this train, and my brother gets on the other end. (weeping) My brother missed two battles in the whole Pacific naval war, two. He was in a destroyer, and he was the real hero in the family. It was still small potatoes that I had.

DePue: We're up against it, I'm afraid, but that's quite a wonderful way to finish it off, that the two brothers get home at the same time. Bill, it's been incredible to hear your stories. I thank you so much for taking the time to share them with us. I think most people don't know a thing about the American Field Service, so this is an important addition to our collection. Thank you very much.

Cantrall: I salute them all.

(End of interview session #3)