Interview with Fred Stockmeier

VR2-A-L-2007-012.01

Interview # 1: July 24, 2007

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Tuesday, July 24, 2007. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here with Fred Stockmeier in his living room. And Fred, now it escapes me: you live in Elk Grove Village?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: Elk Grove Village, which is a suburb of Chicago. And you're being very gracious here taking care of me, and making sure that I'm comfortable while we do this. Fred, what I'd like to do is to start with just a little bit about your background: where you were born, and when you were born.

Stockmeier: I was born in northwestern Ohio on February 26 of 1924. I come from a rural, agricultural environment. I'm not familiar with big cities and their ways, or military organizations, either.

DePue: So you were a farm boy?

Stockmeier: Not exactly farm, but I worked on farms. My father was a professional man, and we lived three miles from the closest village.

DePue: Which was—?

Stockmeier: In Henry County, Ohio, the village of Holgate. Also famous as the birthplace for Joe E. Brown. [a famous vaudeville comedian]

DePue: Oh, okay. I recognize that name. And you grew up there, then?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: Let's see. You were born in '24, you say? So—

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: —you were a young man growing up in the Depression. And your father did what?

Stockmeier: He was a professional man. Yeah. We were dependent upon his livelihood during the Depression, and like many, many others, the large garden served as our breadbasket during those times.

DePue: So you were no stranger to tough times growing up.

Stockmeier: No.

DePue: You lived in the country. Did you do a fair amount of hunting and fishing?

Stockmeier: Fishing. Not much hunting. After I was a teenager, I did a little hunting. But we were limited pretty much to pheasants and rabbits. The deer population had long ago been decimated, and it's only in the last thirty years that deer have returned to that area.

DePue: Did you have any interest in the military as you were growing up?

Stockmeier: None at all. I had no reason to be interested.

DePue: Okay. And let's see. How old were youwhen Pearl Harbor happened?

Stockmeier: Pearl Harbor happened when I was a senior in high school, and that was just before I turned 18. You caught me off guard here. (laughter)

DePue: Oh! I'm not supposed to do that, either.

Stockmeier: Just, I think I was 17. Yes.

DePue: Do you remember it?

Stockmeier: Oh, yes. Very much so.

DePue: What do you remember most clearly about that particular day?

Stockmeier: Well, a typical Sunday, when rural people seem to spend their time at home, and families get together. And for some reason or another, I had taken the family car and gone into town, and I was in a juke joint having a milkshake when they interrupted the radio broadcast to announce that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. So I immediately returned home to tell my parents.

DePue: What was your first thought when you heard the news?

Stockmeier: Well, unbelief really. And I think this was quite common among people in the area.

DePue: Did you decide at that point in time that you needed to do something about it personally, or—?

Stockmeier: No. I mentioned something to my father, and he said, "You're to stay in school, finish your high school education, and then we'll see what's going on."

DePue: Was he a veteran of World War I, by chance?

Stockmeier: No.

DePue: Okay. A couple of years before, you were old enough in high school to be paying attention to the news, in Europe especially. Anything that sticks in your mind about listening to the outbreak of war in Europe?

Stockmeier: Yes. The school had made arrangements to have a large radio brought into the assembly room, and whenever there was a broadcast by the President or something that had been publicized as for a broadcast, the radio was brought in and turned on, and all of the students were assembled to hear.

DePue: Now, I know at that time, the general consensus of most Americans was that they wanted nothing to do with that war in Europe. Would that be a fair assessment for your family as well?

Stockmeier: Well, my family came from Germany in 1848. My mother's family also came from Germany. We were living in an area that was predominantly German in background. So we were not exposed to a lot of national origins other than German. But within the area, there wasn't much done in terms of negative approach about the Germans and their attack on countries in Europe. The people there still had ties to the old country, all of which leads to an increase in tension and stress.

DePue: So concern, certainly, what was going on in Germany with Hitler and with the Nazis, but certainly not — I don't want to put words in your mouth –but not a strong desire to rush off to war, then?

Stockmeier: No. There were enough veterans of World War I around the area that probably were torn as much as anybody else, because some of them still had relatives in Germany.

DePue: Okay. I assume you got drafted; you can correct me if I'm wrong. But when did you go into the service?

Stockmeier: I made periodic trips to the induction center in Toledo, and was not able to pass the physical. I tried to enlist separately, and always was rejected for health reasons. So it got to be a bit of a comedy for me to get on the bus, make the trip

down to Toledo, go through all of the examinations, and then be told, "Get dressed—you're going home."

DePue: This was after you graduated from high school, then?

Stockmeier: Yes. It was in the following year.

DePue: Forty-two?

Stockmeier: In 1943, I had one of these invitations; went down to Toledo, and got through the process, and was asked whether I wanted the Army, or the Navy, or the Marines. And it seems that either the standards had been lowered, or I had improved enough that they would take me. And I was inducted into the service. This was in August of 1943.

DePue: Okay. Now, you said there was health reasons that they rejected you before. What specifically were those?

Stockmeier: Well, "health" is probably the wrong word to use. It was a physical condition not related to any illness or disease, but just something that I was born with.

DePue: Oh—the glasses?

Stockmeier: Yes. I had poor vision.

DePue: Okay. Well, you're right: in times of war it's supply and demand, and you have to change the rules sometimes to accommodate. And I went into the service with glasses myself. Were you working at the time, then, when you were…

Stockmeier: Yes. I was the Assistant Manager of a variety store about twenty-five miles from home, and commuting back and forth on weekends.

DePue: Were you married, or were you dating at the time?

Stockmeier: No. I was single, and I remained single until after I was out of college, after the war.

DePue: Okay. Why the Army, then?

Stockmeier: That I don't know.

DePue: (laughter)

Stockmeier: Probably because I had had an uncle in the Army. And that probably was the reason. You know, I wasn't much for the water anyhow.

DePue: Well, being from Ohio, you're not around a whole lot of it unless you're close to the lake. Do you recall your induction and the basic training?

Stockmeier: Well, I was inducted at Toledo at that time, sent home to get affairs in order, and then I reported to—oh, Indianapolis; to Ft. Ben Harrison in Indianapolis. And from there, was assigned to Camp Van Dorn in Mississippi, to the 63rd Infantry Division, which had not yet been fully manned.

DePue: And what was your duty position? What was your training in?

Stockmeier: I was assigned to the field artillery, 105mm howitzer, and assigned to headquarters battery, and to the communications unit, and primarily trained in wire communications. Not only in the field, but while in garrison, I was one of the few people who manned the battalion switchboard at battalion headquarters. So wire communications were the prime thing.

DePue: Do you have any strong memories about basic training? Was it growing up somewhat in the country that helped you with the rigors of basic training?

Stockmeier: Yes, to some extent. When they decided to teach some of us how to maneuver a vehicle with the trailer on, I mean, that was just up my alley, because in farm work, that's (laughter) a prime activity at times. So that was just a dream job.

DePue: The 63rd Infantry Division did their training down in Mississippi, you said?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: Well, that was a little bit different change of environment for you.

Stockmeier: Very much so.

DePue: A lot hotter and wetter down there, or—?

Stockmeier: Definitely.

DePue: What kind of training did you do while you were down with the 63rd?

Stockmeier: Well, it was unit basic. The greater percent of personnel were draftees like myself, with the cadre coming from other units, and they were the ones that actually conducted our field training. The difference in the environment, as you mentioned, was kind of interesting at times.

One of the things that wiremen were supposed to do was strap on spikes and climb utility poles. Well, this was a little bit beyond me, but one night I had to string a telephone line over a road, and there was no way that I could go up that tree, that pine tree, with spurs. So instead, I shinnied up the old-fashioned way, and was tying in the line when somebody decided to throw a tear gas grenade. So I'm up the tree, and my gas mask is down on the ground.

DePue: (laughter)

Stockmeier: But I came down that tree in a hurry! (laughter) Got my gas mask on, went back up the tree, and finished the job.

DePue: How would you describe the quality of the training that you got while you were with the 63rd?

Stockmeier: In general, very good. Occasionally, we'd have an instructor who should've been retired, but it was good, and we had basically a cooperative bunch of trainees that worked together. In fact, there were times when we'd have competition tests with other units, and our unit always seemed to come out on top.

DePue: Was it primarily focused on individual skills?

Stockmeier: It was focused on the job that the artillery needed to do, not so much the individual. But we had to be able to provide telephone communications—that is, our section—telephone communications for the battalion

DePue: The battalion then had plenty of opportunities to go out and actually fire the weapons, and that's what—? So you did what you were supposed to do in wartime, then?

Stockmeier: Yes. Personal weapons: we of course went through the usual training and firing. And as far as howitzers go, we were not in a gun battery, so we didn't actually have to learn the "cannoneers' hop" and so on. But we were close enough during training to observe.

DePue: But the battalion did have opportunities to go to the field as a battalion and fire the howitzers?

Stockmeier: Oh, yes. In fact, we spent a lot of time in the field because the pressure was on to have the unit ready to be sent overseas. Now, this was from the word "go." We were told only one thing: remember, this is training; you're getting ready for what you're going to see overseas.

DePue: Well, you have to forgive. These are questions of a guy who spent his career in the military in the field artillery, so plenty of time on the hill, and plenty of time on the line. Okay. But you didn't stay with the 63rd Division. What happened to the division?

Stockmeier: The 63rd Division was used to supply replacements. Our people were pulled out and assigned to various other units, either going overseas, or were sent overseas as replacements to both the Far East Command and Europe. The number of people that were drawn out reduced us to the point that we were now in dire need of personnel, and a number of us were called to a meeting and told that replacements were going to be coming in, and we would be used to train these replacements, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. The replacements did come in, and some of these people had been in Air Corps training programs which had suddenly been cut, and they weren't too happy about being on the ground. But

they pitched in, I'll say this for them. They moaned and they groaned, but they did their job.

DePue: This would have been late 1943, you think?

Stockmeier: This would have been mid-'43.

DePue: Okay. So that happened not just once, but several times, where the Army would come in and strip a unit down to a smaller percentage?

Stockmeier: Yes. Yes.

DePue: And eventually, they got your number as well, did they not?

Stockmeier: Yes! For some reason or another, I was one of a group of twenty men who had received stripes, and all of a sudden I became aware that these people were disappearing. And eventually, my name came up, and it came up in an unusual manner. Our Division Commander had strong feelings about the field artillery knowing the infantry: what they had to do, and what support the artillery could provide. So a number of people from artillery were assigned to the infantry, issued M1s instead of carbines, and we did some field training with the infantry.

I was in such a group when the infantry's Charge of Quarters came into the barracks and called us, and said, "You people are to pack up and go back to your unit." Well, we got up to the unit, and it had already been stripped and refilled from the time that I had left it, and I knew only a handful of people in the entire communications unit. And a fellow came in and said, "Hey!" He says, "You're on KP tomorrow." And I said, "What?"

DePue: (laughter)

Stockmeier: And he said…

DePue: Were you a corporal at this time, or—?

Stockmeier: A two-stripe tech. And I said, "I haven't received any orders." "Well," he said, "it's on the bulletin board that you are supposed to report for KP." Well, I didn't even go out and look, because I figured it was a mistake.

The next morning our First Sergeant came in calling my name, and he said, "Why aren't you in the kitchen?" And I said, "Well, why should I be?" And he said, "Well, you've been put on KP." Now, I had never seen this man before. I didn't really know for sure that he was a first sergeant. But I said, "Well, Sergeant," I says, "first of all, what about my stripes? They don't mean anything?" He said, "What?" I said, "What about my stripes? Don't they mean anything?" And he said, "What stripes?" And I says, "Those!" And I pointed at my uniform; it was hanging on the rack. "Well," he says, "I don't know." I says,

"Isn't it customary when a man is promoted or reduced that he receive a copy of the orders?" "Didn't you get it?" I said, "No." And he said, "I'll be back."

And he took off, and he came back a little later, and he said, "You're right." He said, "Orders were not distributed." But he said, "Yes, you have been reduced." And I said, "Why?" He says, "Inefficiency." Now, "inefficiency" is about as definitive as "reasonable force."

DePue: (laughter) Right.

Stockmeier: So anyhow, I stripped off my stripes, and I went back to work. Ended up in the kitchen that day, and from then on, it was one turmoil after another. The new people didn't know what was going on. Those people had been in the unit for almost a year didn't feel comfortable because we didn't know what was going on, and morale was actually at the bottom. I found out later that I was the eighteenth man to be reduced out of the twenty that had received stripes at the same time.

DePue: Now, when you say "stripes," you mentioned you were a tech sergeant when you got the stripes, or—?

Stockmeier: No, no. I was a technician fifth.

DePue: Okay—a technician fifth class?

Stockmeier: Fifth grade, yeah.

DePue: Fifth grade. And so you went down to a private again, or—?

Stockmeier: Buck private!

DePue: Wow. Welcome to the Army, huh? And shortly thereafter, then, did you get transferred to the 100th Division?

Stockmeier: Yes. From the 63rd, I was reassigned to—oh, I can't remember the identification number anymore, but it was a 155 howitzer outfit, still in the 63rd. Apparently, they had to get us out of our unit: we were having a bad effect on the morale. (laughter)

DePue: All the guys that had been there for a while?

Stockmeier: So I spent some time with the 155, and then was sent to Ft. Meade, Maryland for reassignment. And from Ft. Meade, was sent to Ft. Bragg and joined the 100th, and assigned to the 375th Field Artillery Battalion, but not Headquarters Battery. This time I was in A Battery, a gun battery.

DePue: But still working as a wireman?

Stockmeier: Well, the orders had been published already for overseas movement, so there was very little training going on. But they called me out one day and said, "You're supposed to get radio training." So I and a couple of other fellows from other batteries ended up over at the training unit to be taught Morse code. I had no ear for Morse code, so I was a total loss there. And finally the man in charge said, "You go back to your unit." He said, "I can't teach you." (laughter) And that was pleasant news to hear, however. Then I discovered later I was now a radio operator.

DePue: A Radio Operator and a line Field Artillery Battery, which means—were you assigned to Forward Observer? To assist the Forward Observer, then?

Stockmeier: We got overseas, and I was assigned to be a member of the Forward Observer team. Fortunately, it was not a code requirement to be able to transmit your voice, so I did my job.

DePue: Were these FM radios that you were using then?

Stockmeier: Oh, yes. I can't remember the numbers. There were two identifications. Forward one was mounted in a vehicle, and the other was the one that was operated on the ground from a battery pack.

DePue: Did it have about a five- or six-mile range?

Stockmeier: Limit, yes. By the way, aboard ship, three days out of New York en route to Marseilles, my stripes were returned to me.

DePue: Well, that was nice. But not the back pay that went along with it?

Stockmeier: No. (laughter)

DePue: Well, I wanted to ask you, because I've always been curious about this: the Army had this tendency to build up units like the 63rd Division—and I suspect they did the same thing to the 100th—and then they'd strip them out for replacements someplace, or send them someplace else, and then they'd build the unit up again, and then they'd strip out personnel, the experienced people. What did you think about that?

Stockmeier: Well, the training of a group of men as a unit leads to forming a bond, or a kinship, a fellowship with the men that you've been going through some pretty tough times. To break up this up by taking individuals and farming them out to other units where they are the sole stranger in the group, it's very depressing, because you always feel like something's going on that you don't know anything about, or that they are not including you, they don't think you're part of the team. I do not like that kind of training. Men who went to the Infantry Training Center didn't build that kind of relationship with the other men that you build when you're in a unit, and especially when you're engaged in some rather tough times.

DePue: So would it be fair to say that you didn't see much logic in what the Army was doing?

Stockmeier: (laughter) Definitely not.

DePue: (laughter) Okay.

Stockmeier: And then to add insult to injury, when the 63rd did finally get to Europe, the 100th Division artillery had to support them because the 63rd's Artillery was still in the States.

DePue: Oh. How about that? And they only got to Europe a couple months after your unit did.

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: I think I read it was December of '44. Okay. Done with your training in the United States. You're on ship. Anything that you recall about being shipped overseas?

Stockmeier: Well, our battalion was the work detail aboard ship, which meant that we were the primary source of help in the ship's galley. We had three meals a day, where the other troops only had two. Of course, below deck kitchens tend to be hot and steamy. It was not all that ideal. But I soon found an infantryman that was so hungry, he was willing to do anything. So we smuggled him in and trained him to do our job. This wasn't only me that did this, but most of the field artillery boys, because these infantry boys were so hungry that they'd get in there and they'd work to fill their own stomach, and grab what they could when they went off duty, take back and give to their buddies.

DePue: You also mentioned that you had a little bit of stormy weather going over.

Stockmeier: Yes. We ran into the tail end of a hurricane, and we spent three and a half days locked below decks. It just happened we were quartered near the rear end of the ship, so as we went into the waves, which were quite strong, high, at times the propellers would come out of the water, and the vibration of them suddenly being able to spin fast would just shake the entire back end of the ship. But after three and a half days below deck, they finally opened up hatches so that we could get some fresh air.

Now, when we had gotten aboard ship in New York, you file in and you take each bunk in order you come to it. Our bunks were canvas on a frame, and usually five high. Well, I got in, and as my good luck continued, I got the bottom bunk right up against the hull of the ship, and against a bulkhead inside. And it was like being a mouse in a hole. But after we moved out away from the dock and got into the open sea, I didn't complain because I had a fresh air duct right aside of my head, and I had fresh air during the time I was in my bunk where the other people above me, especially those up near the top, were getting

all the benefit of the body heat and everything else. And I was quite comfortable and quiet.

DePue: Well, that doesn't sound like a pretty picture at all. Was this a troop transport?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: A Liberty ship?

Stockmeier: No. I'm not sure what class it was. It was called the *General William Gordon*, and I don't think general-class names were used on Liberties. I'm not sure.

DePue: Okay. So strictly for troop transport, so they crammed them onboard, I'm sure.

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: Where did you disembark, then?

Stockmeier: As far as I know, we were the first convoy from the States to make a landing at Marseilles. The harbor was quite full of sunken ships right up against the piers; so we disembarked, we went down to the deck of a sunken ship, went across it, and then back up to the pier. From the dock area, we were formed into our own units and marched out to a staging area just north of Le Havre. And this, then, is where we remained until we had secured all the gear, vehicles, our howitzers and so on. And we proceeded northward by highway. The infantry and other units that weren't equipped with vehicles made the trip by train.

DePue: So you had your own organic transportation, being a field artillery outfit?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: When did you arrive?

Stockmeier: Oh. It was in October. It's been so long since I looked at those dates, I can't remember.

DePue: Well, I think I've seen it someplace. It was October or November timeframe. I'll make sure that I get that when we do the editing of this later on.

Stockmeier: I think it was October fifteenth, but again, I can't be sure.

DePue: What was your initial impression of France and the French people?

Stockmeier: Well, we didn't have much opportunity to mix with the French citizens. The few that we saw were primarily agricultural types that went walking past our area, our staging area.

DePue: So no real direct contact with the French people, then?

Stockmeier: No, no. Just an occasional. It was primarily a relief to be off that ship.

DePue: Yeah, I'm sure. Did you do any real training then for those first few days? Or is it just—

Stockmeier: No.

DePue: —getting organized?

Stockmeier: No. It was checking everybody to make sure their shots were up to par, and this and that. But no training.

DePue: Okay. So from that staging area, it's directly to the front, then?

Stockmeier: Yes. I'd have to look, but let's see: I think we went through Dijon, and up to the area of Nancy. And then there, individuals were sent out to units on the line to get a little taste of what was coming. And again, my usual good luck: I got up to the unit just before a clip of screaming mimis came in. Now, the "screaming mimis" were a rocket fired in clips of six or ten at a time, and primarily concussion. Not much fragmentation, but a psychological weapon because of the horrible sound that they made as they traveled through the air. And then we returned to our unit, and then went back up forward to our own positions.

DePue: That was your first time under enemy fire?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: Does anything stick in your mind then? Your reaction to it, or—?

Stockmeier: No. I was more concerned about what was making that noise. (laughter) I had never heard of the darn things, and then all of a sudden, you get to meet them firsthand.

DePue: Yeah. And everybody pretty much had the same reaction, or—?

Stockmeier: I think so.

DePue: Kind of a rude awakening, though, isn't it?

Stockmeier: Well, at that point, you don't know what to expect. So if it's something strange, it's a surprise.

DePue: Okay. You're with the Seventh Army, the 100th Division?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: I'm trying to recall my geography. Marseilles is on the Mediterranean Sea?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: So this is part of Patch's Seventh Army working their way up from—

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: —the south, kind of skirting the border of Switzerland, and then taking a right turn into southern Germany?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: Okay. Do you recall the corps you were with at that time?

Stockmeier: No, I don't.

DePue: Okay. I think it was the Sixth Corps, and then eventually, in late November, it was the 15th Corps. What was your first combat, then? Besides the screaming mimis?

Stockmeier: Well, that's something that I can't recall right offhand. (laughter) It must have been fairly innocent. (laughter)

DePue: You were working with a Forward Observer. Was the Forward Observer a Sergeant?

Stockmeier: No. I had a Second Lieutenant, a fellow who had graduated from VMI [Virginia Military Institute] and was upper crust, elite. And our team also had a Regular Army Staff Sergeant, and myself, plus a man who doubled in driving and helping to carry equipment. The only vehicle we had was a Jeep.

DePue: Being on this forward observer team, you're not spending your time with the battery itself, are you?

Stockmeier: No. You join the infantry, and where they go, you go.

DePue: Which puts you right in the hot seat, then.

Stockmeier: And you get there by foot.

DePue: (laughter) Okay. What was I going to ask? Okay. So your first experience in combat, you got to the front lines in middle November, it sounds like. And you were in the southern part of the sector. You remember any particular combat incidents before December fourth, when you were captured?

Stockmeier: Well, yes. We had moved into a village, LeTrouche. Of course, we corrupted it to LeTouche because we came under pretty intense eighty-eight fire there. The infantry boys had taken shelter in a house, and we joined them there. And another company had gotten assigned to the same attack. That day, they got caught in an open field and couldn't move. Our people weren't able to do much moving, and we spent the first night there.

We were in a farmhouse. In the connecting unit from the house to the barn, there was the corpse of an elderly man, apparently who lived in the house, who died of heart problems just as we arrived. Upstairs was not occupied. We set up our radio on the second floor, and the infantry was wondering whether or not we could be able to give them support as they moved up a hill. The Lieutenant wanted to start in with HE: high explosive. We started sending down the routine for a fire mission, and about the second time I left up on the mic button, we heard "eins, zwei, drei, vier, eins, zwei, drei, vier—" [German for one, two, three, four] I reached over and turned off the radio, and the Lieutenant said, "What're you doing?" "Lieutenant," I said, "we're likely to get some unwelcome attention if we keep talking." And about that time, an eight-eight hit right outside the window. He beat me down to the first floor.

DePue: (laughter)

Stockmeier: But later on—in fact, I think it was the next day—the infantry got prepared to attack the hill, and we did put high explosive along the ridge line. And then we covered that with smoke. And the infantry boys told me later that they weren't feeling too comfortable about the closeness of some of the shells, but we did not have any casualty from friendly fire.

DePue: Were the rounds landing where they were supposed to?

Stockmeier: Oh, yes.

DePue: So it was just close enough, but not too close, huh?

Stockmeier: They had moved up the hill faster than I think the Lieutenant considered. And in the tree cover that you had in that part of France, you couldn't see what was moving on the ground.

DePue: Was this pine forest?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: And pretty thick pine forest, then?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: Did you guys change your frequencies every day, then?

Stockmeier: No. (laughter) This is the thing that bothered me.

DePue: That wasn't standard procedure? Because this—

Stockmeier: It was strange. We were called to a meeting once and told that we had a new type of artillery shell. It was a sensing type of shell that we were not to use unless a miss would land in water. It was almost like it had built-in radar. It

would approach, and at a certain sense, when it was at a certain distance, and then detonate. I never actually saw one in my hands; I don't know what the thing looked like, or whether we were being a fed a public relations man's nightmare. But anyhow, this was just one of the things that didn't go along with the training that I (laughter) had had.

DePue: So it would be an air burst when it exploded?

Stockmeier: Yeah. But if it worked liked they said it would, it would preclude the necessity of setting the time fuse manually before it was fired.

DePue: Yeah. I think we called those "VT rounds." And I'm trying to remember what "VT" stood for, but it sent out a little radio signal so it automatically exploded about twenty-five meters or twelve meters in height or something. Were there any other incidents, then, that you recall, combats you recall being in prior to the time you were captured?

Stockmeier: Well, yes. We had an OP [observation post] up in the hills the day the Jerries [slang for Germans] were burning St. Die. It was some distance away, but we could see the smoke.

DePue: St. Die is a community?

Stockmeier: Saint. "Saint Dye" is the way we'd pronounce it in English. And it was there. We moved into the area at night. Tried to dig in, and the soil was more sand than anything else, so if you succeeded in digging a hole, it usually caved in. And we gave up, and we moved down to the only building in the area: a sawmill. Well, my canteen ran dry, and I remembered we'd crossed a mountain stream not too far back. So I took my canteen and I went back to the stream, and I was kneeling down to fill my canteen when something said, You better look around. So I walked upstream a little bit, and what do you know? Found a dead horse laying in it.

DePue: (laughter)

Stockmeier: And it was not in the best state of preservation. So I filled my canteen up upstream from the dead horse.

We were in perfectly good order, nothing going on, except they decided we had to have telephone communication. So a couple of us—I think there were two of us—went back to meet a wire crew, and to guide them into our position. We were in a rather remote area, and we skirted kind of a dead-end gully. And we made it beyond that, found the wire crew, and as we started back and we came to this cul-de-sac, they ran out of wire. And they didn't have any more with them, so they gave me a spool of 130 of the real lightweight combat wire. It was too late to finish it that night, so I went back to position, and the next day, tied into the phone and then started laying this back. And I was alone.

I came to this area, and I could see something going on beyond it. I went over, and it turned out an infantryman had stepped on a shoe mine. Now, I had been in and out on this trail a couple times, getting batteries for the radio and so on. So anyhow, I'm not feeling too comfortable now. (laughter)

Anyhow, I finished stretching the wire, and it ran out about 100 feet short.

DePue: The shoe mine: is that something that just blows your foot off?

Stockmeier: Yes, it does. The thought came back to me that I had seen some German communication wire, and I was not about to walk back and try and get another spool of combat wire. So I went back to this German wire, and I had a branch. I got down behind a tree, hooked the branch over the wire, and gave it a tug, because Jerry was famous for booby traps. Nothing happened, so I pulled it in as much as I could from both directions, cut it off, and started splicing it into our regular wire. (laughter) The German wire was sealed in the hardest plastic that I had ever seen. Well, fortunately, I had a knife, but it took me about three times as long to make a splice as it should've. And lo and behold, it worked. So we had American wire, German wire, and American wire.

Well, while I'm there on my knees trying to make this splice, there's a noise down in the cul-de-sac. There's a farmhouse down there, and a barn with a dead horse laying in front of it. Anyhow, there was a noise down there, and this was the first sign of life I had heard. So I'm down behind a tree with my carbine, waiting, and waiting, and waiting. And all of a sudden, a chicken walks out of the barn. (laughter) So I put my heart back down where it belonged, (laughter) put the splices together, and went on back to the OP. [observation post] (laughter)

DePue: So you were never happier to see a chicken as that day, uh?

Stockmeier: (laughter)

DePue: Was it routine? Was it standard procedure that they would send wiremen out by themselves?

Stockmeier: Well, the wire crews, yes. Usually, they are. Now, if you're in a hot area, you may work something out with the infantry that they will provide a man or two.

DePue: But the theory is, you're running wire behind the lines?

Stockmeier: Yeah. Well, and combat wire is definitely a one-man job. It's so lightweight that one man can lay a half a mile and not even be aware it. So it's a matter of knowing your job, and knowing what to look for, and getting lucky.

DePue: It's kind of a dirty job to pick it up, though, isn't it?

Stockmeier: Well, combat wire you don't pick up.

DePue: Okay. This must be a smaller gauge wire than I recall, then.

Stockmeier: Very small.

DePue: Okay. Well, let's get then to the incident where you were captured.

Stockmeier: Well, we had had a number of little brushes with Jerry, and then (clock starts loudly chiming the hour) suddenly we were went back to our basic unit.

DePue: Should we pause that?

Stockmeier: Yes.

(short break in audio)

Stockmeier: Okay, it's done.

DePue: Okay, go ahead.

Stockmeier: Well, we were taken off the line and put in reserve, given an opportunity to get our gear in order, clean up, and this and that, and everything else.

DePue: Then this is your first time out of line, basically?

Stockmeier: Yes. Yes. The village we were in –we were fortunate –even though it's Alsace-Lorraine, which is highly German, the villagers—

DePue: But it's still part of France.

Stockmeier: Yes. The villagers were not antagonistic. I think there were five of us moved into a house, and we made sure that we minded our manners. We supplied some foodstuffs from our kitchen truck, and the lady of the house was kind enough to do some cooking for us, and wash our clothes, which badly needed it. And I still don't know how she could wash OD [olive drab colored woolens] trousers and not have them shrink.

DePue: But she might have preferred to have you around in clean clothes than the filthy clothes you were wearing at the time.

Stockmeier: (laughter) Anyhow, we spent several days there –but I think it was the first night –the five of us were sleeping upstairs in one room. In the middle of the night, you could hear feet running up those steps, pounding on the door, and somebody is yelling: "Es birnt! Es birnt! Es birnt!" And I think one of the fellows says, "What did he say?" I said, "Something's on fire." Well, I'm sleeping aside of a guy in a sleeping bag, and he thought the house was on fire, and he couldn't find that zipper, (laughter) and he about knocked me to the floor! But it turned out that our host was a member of the local fire department, and he couldn't go to a fire without his little cocked hat, which was in our room.

So he got his hat and went on his way, and the next morning we found out that one of the battery's kitchen trucks had caught on fire, and that's what they were working on.

As I said, this woman was quite generous with what she did for us, and one day when I am sitting in the kitchen—and I remember this as the end of November—one day when I am sitting in the kitchen and another couple came in and started talking, and then they saw me. And they looked at me, and they looked at the woman, and the woman said, "Yes, you may speak."

So they were telling: in the town where they lived or the neighborhood where they lived, a couple of Germans had decided to resist, and the Americans had come in and had came under fire, and they had thrown hand grenades in through the windows. And the hand grenades lit right aside of a woman resident, an older woman, and blew her leg off. And they're all excited about this, and the woman looked at me and she said, "Did you understand?" And I said, "Yes." And then these people who are beginning to wonder…. But it just turned out that they didn't know I spoke a fair amount of German. Not high technical stuff, but I mean day-to-day stuff. So I was understanding what they were saying..

DePue: So you had grown up with it?

Stockmeier: Well, to some extent, but I had briefly tried to learn German. The other aspect of this is, I had gone to the kitchen truck one noon for our mail, and afterwards I was walking back to this house, and on the street ahead of me there was a little girl—a real tomboy of a girl who was always out there—and a smaller girl with her. And as I approached, in German she said, "Here comes a damned American soldier!" And I stopped and I looked at her, and I said, "Come here." And I got the typical "Nicht versteh! Nicht versteh!" – "I don't understand." So in German, I said, "You don't understand me, but *I* understand *you*." You never saw a kid disappear so fast in your life! I mean she was *gone* right now.

DePue: When you said, "Come here," you said that in English?

Stockmeier: Yeah, and German: "Kommen sie hier," which is a very polite form of saying, "Come here." It's a—well, that's it: it's polite. Instead of "Kommst du!" I gave her the full chance. But from that time on, when she saw me on the street, she disappeared.

DePue: Well, I want to talk a little bit more about this. Alsace, of course, is an area of France that had been part of Germany until after the First World War, when it was returned to France. But it's primarily ethnically German.

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: And so was there a real split right down the middle between those who were happy to be liberated, and those who didn't look at being liberated at all?

Stockmeier: Well, these people of course accepted us. I say that; they had no choice, but—(laughter) but they accepted us. They weren't antagonistic. As I said, this woman did some cooking for us, took care of our clothing for us, all voluntarily, and she wasn't even asked. And of course, I had complained once about my clothes being so dirty. And I don't think anything gets dirtier that wool ODs. But she offered, and we accepted. Of course, like I said, we provided some foodstuffs, and I think most of the guys left a little supply of francs when we left.

DePue: So in most cases, the native population were happy to be liberated?

Stockmeier: It depends upon who you talk to, and how much you could understand of what they were saying.

DePue: So you didn't know who to trust?

Stockmeier: No.

DePue: Which makes you a little bit even more nervous than you otherwise would be.

Stockmeier: Well, yes. (laughter) But there comes a time… Well, I remember I got back to the unit one night, and I was miserable. They had just moved into the area, had just occupied their position. And I walked into this building, and see here's a daybed of some kind. And I says, "Who's sleeping on this?" "Nobody!" So I said, "What's the matter?" "They haven't had a chance to check it for booby traps." I said, "Well, let's find out." They said, "What do you mean?" I says, "Let's find out." I took my bag, and was going to throw it up on the bed, you know? And boy did they disappear out of the room. They'd been running into booby traps around their gun positions by accident. So anyhow, nothing happened. (laughter)

So I slept on that thing that night. And ended up, as usual, with a nice dose of the insects commonly called "cooties." But every time I slept in a building that had been used for that kind of purpose, I ended up—and everybody else did, too—ended up getting cooties.

DePue: What did you guys do for them, then, when you got them?

Stockmeier: Well, those guys back there had periodic showers. Up front, we didn't. So we'd do the old crack-them-between-your-nails routine, and just keep going, and put up with it.

DePue: Those are parts of combat that most people don't even begin to think about. Was it getting cold in this part of the—

Stockmeier: Oh, yes. Yes, it was the end of November. But one day, they told us, You're going back on the line tomorrow. So now the First Lieutenant that had been with the party had disappeared in the hospital.

DePue: That was the Forward Observer?

Stockmeier: Yeah. And a new Lieutenant was assigned to our forward observer unit. And our driver disappeared, and one of the cannoneers was used to replace him, helped me carry the radio, because we were going to be on foot, no roads for quite some time. The Lieutenant apparently had been wounded in Italy, and then instead of going back to his regular unit, had been reassigned to us. And nobody knew him.

So anyhow, we went out early in the morning. A Jeep took us up to where the infantry boys were. And we had another breakfast up there with the infantry, and then we started walking through the woods and the hills towards this village of Wingen-sur-Moder.

DePue: "Viggin-sur-Moder?"

Stockmeier: Wingen, W-i-n-g-e-n. It's on the Moder River there, which accounts for "sur"—"above the river."

DePue: Now, was this still in France?

Stockmeier: That is in France. During our March, we encountered no Jerries; we didn't come under any fire until in the afternoon. And suddenly, we came under mortar fire. We were on the last ridge line before we went down into the valley to the village itself. We could see the geographic formations ahead of us, and near as I could tell, these mortars were coming from behind a neck of land some distance across the valley.

But this Lieutenant had different ideas, so he called to fire a mission. And we sent some 105s into an area which I doubt actually held any enemies. But he threw about a half a dozen rounds out there, and then he said, "End of mission! Beaucoup direct hits!" So I'm supposed to send down exactly what he says, so I did.

DePue: And he can't even begin to see the impact, the effects of—

Stockmeier: No.

DePue: —the rounds?

Stockmeier: Anyhow, the relay unit—I mean, in the mountains, you very seldom have direct contact; you have a relay up someplace who can—anyhow—

DePue: The radio relay?

Stockmeier: —the relay unit said, "Repeat!"

DePue: Oops!

Stockmeier: And I told him, "Beaucoup direct hits!" "Repeat! What are you saying?" I said, "Very many direct hits." "Okay!" The Lieutenant didn't like it, that I hadn't gotten his approval to change.

DePue: But the folks on the other end obviously weren't understanding "beaucoup."

Stockmeier: No. (laughter)

DePue: So you're not off to a really wonderful start with this new Lieutenant, then?

Stockmeier: No. We proceeded down the hill, the last hill in towards town, and all of a sudden a burp gun, a German machine pistol, opened up, and hit the branches over our head. And we of course hit the dirt. Now, our radio, which is 96 pounds, I wonder if it's going to work next time or not. And it was on packboards, and the packboard had a cross rod at the top so that when you have this radio on that packboard and you try to raise your head, that rod across the top catches your helmet. So there I am laying downhill with this heavy radio on my back. I tried to raise my head to see where the fire is coming from, and my helmet comes down over my eyes, and I'm blind. Although I try about three times, getting more scared all the time because I don't know where the fire is coming from. I can't see it.

DePue: What kind of fire is this?

Stockmeier: Machine pistol. Anyhow, I finally twisted around and turned, and got up, raised my head enough to look back down the hill. And everybody else was doing the same thing, so we didn't come under any more fire. But this new man with our unit, this cannoneer, was not too sure he was in the right place to maintain his health.

But we were under mortar fire again periodically, and the infantry began to move into town. It was late in the day; it's getting dark. One platoon went in, and then a second. I don't know anything about what happened to them. During the course of the afternoon, a number of infantry boys had been wounded, several killed. But the rifle platoon moved in, and us four from the field artillery plus a weapons platoon from D Company, we were the last ones to get into town. And a runner took us into Wingen, and the runner who was leading us took us directly to the house. And in this basement of this house is where the officers and other infantry people were located.

Now, by this time, it is dark. On our way into town, we'd had to wade the river, so we were cold and wet, a happy situation to be in, and we hadn't much more than got into the building when Jerry opened up with 20mms.

(break in audio)

DePue: You have an amazing memory of this stuff. Shall we start?

Stockmeier: Yes. Now, we were in the basement of a house with 20mm fire coming in over our heads. However, we were not in any danger as long as we kept our heads down.

DePue: Is this 20mm, is that a direct fire weapon, or—?

Stockmeier: Yes. Yes.

DePue: So they can see that you're there?

Stockmeier: Jerry knows pretty much where we are. Now, it was my understanding that the infantry men had been spread out through three houses. And again, I can't verify it, because I only know what I actually witnessed and went through myself. But during this time that we were pinned down, somebody called for me, and said the Captain wanted to talk to me. Well, I went into the room where the officers were, and they asked me if I could use my radio to call out. And I said, "It's doubtful that it would work down here in the valley." I said, "When we used it up on the hill, we didn't have the best contact with the relay station to start with. Well, now that we're down here," I said, "it's not going to be any better. It's going to be worse, if anything." And I said, "If you'll remember what happened at LeTrouche when we brought in eighty-eight fire as soon as we used our radio," I said, "I would recommend not doing it." I said, "Jerry knows where we are now, but let's not reinforce it by giving them something to home in on." And everybody agreed.

So I walked back out to the room, and the infantry boys had moved out of that room for some reason or another. But the other Field Artillery man was there, and I said, "Chuck," I said, "grab my carbine, and bring yours, and we'll sleep out here tonight." And up against the skylight, a window in the basement, up against the lighter sky, I could see legs moving past. And I says, "Hey! Tell those guys to get inside!" And he came running out, and he says, "They're not Americans!" I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "They got square heads!" And about that time, one pair of legs stopped; I heard something metallic hit the floor. I jumped around the corner, and Chuck with me. And it was a grenade, detonated. They went to the next window, and that's the room I'm in now. Another grenade came in, and I'm back into the first room. So the only thing that happened to me is I got a loud concussion. No fragments. Later, I found out that they were concussion grenades rather than fragmentation grenades.

DePue: Did it affect your eardrums at all?

Stockmeier: Well, some of the infantry boys, that second one made them deaf for days at a time. And Cal Norman, one of the infantrymen who put together this booklet about "Whatever Happened to Company A," the grenade detonated when it was laying on his rump. And he has had loss of hearing. A couple of men were knocked unconscious by the concussion.

So anyhow, after this second grenade landed, somebody called out in German, "We give up! We give up!" And outside, they said, "Gut!" [good] And that was the end of our combat.

DePue: When you first moved into this village, was the Commander thinking this was a secure village?

Stockmeier: No. We knew it wasn't.

DePue: Then why move into the houses like you did?

Stockmeier: There's a lot that I don't know. Prior to moving off the hill for the last time, Company Commander had had a meeting with Infantry Battalion and Infantry Regimental Commanders, and he had been ordered to take the town regardless. He tried to tell them that his men were low on ammo, that they had been on the move since six in the morning, but he was told, You will take this town, now. So we went in. As a sidebar, the Colonel and Lieutenant Colonel were relieved of command when the Division Commander found out that he had lost an entire company.

DePue: The way you've described it, it sounds like A Company did not even put out a defensive perimeter.

Stockmeier: To the best of my knowledge, there was no defensive—there was no security of any kind. But—

DePue: Which is on the Company Commander. That's not on the Battalion Commander.

Stockmeier: True.

DePue: Were you even aware of all this at the time you moved in?

Stockmeier: No

DePue: But you became painfully aware of it afterwards, then.

Stockmeier: While we were in the basement, there had been a little commotion when an officer came out of the third room and called for his Sergeant, and told him to get his men out; that he said, "The old man doesn't have any security out." Now, I heard it distinctly, but some of the infantry boys say, No, that didn't happen. It did.

DePue: The one measure of whether or not you had security out is you were captured, and apparently without too much of a fight.

Stockmeier: No.

DePue: Now, what time of the night was this?

Stockmeier: Well, I think that the grenades came through the window about 3:00 in the morning.

DePue: How long had you been there at that time?

Stockmeier: Oh, not very long, because we had just come down the hill. I doubt that I was there more than twenty minutes.

DePue: So you guys hadn't even gotten bedded down for the night yet?

Stockmeier: No.

DePue: Okay. You said Company A is attached to which battalion?

Stockmeier: Well, Company A of the 398th Regiment was in the 1st Battalion, of course.

DePue: First Battalion of the 398th?

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: Okay. Which now ceases to exist, basically. Talk about those first moments of being a prisoner of war.

Stockmeier: Well, more a feeling of disbelief than anything else. I got a hold of the regular Army Sergeant who was part of our team, and I said, "What'd you do with the radio codes?" He says, "I threw them over in the corner." Meanwhile, I had pulled out some code words that I had on paper and torn them in half, and given them to Chuck, and we ate them. You know, textbook movie stuff. We ate ours, but what the Sergeant had was on a metal base that couldn't be eaten. So— (laughter)

DePue: It couldn't be destroyed?

Stockmeier: No. (laughter)

DePue: Did you know if the Germans found it, then?

Stockmeier: No. We had no way of knowing. We came out; Cal Norman, the man who put this book together, couldn't walk. They took a door off its hinges and put him on it as a stretcher, and they carried him on that door till we got away from the village.

DePue: There was Americans who were the stretcher-bearers?

Stockmeier: Yes. Company A, the infantrymen.

DePue: Yeah. This was the early morning of December 4?

Stockmeier: Yeah, about four o'clock in the morning, I would say.

DePue: Okay. And your first encounter with a German?

Stockmeier: Was there. I don't know if there was a need for an interpreter or what, but yeah, I spoke to one of the German troops.

DePue: What was your initial impression of the Germans who were taking you prisoner?

Stockmeier: Well, in the dark, you can't have much of an impression. Apparently, they were well-seasoned. But it's a strange experience.

DePue: So I imagine it's going to be a few more hours before you get some sleep and rest. Can you kind of go through that first couple of days?

Stockmeier: Well, the first thing that happened is, they formed us up, and we started walking out of town. And I don't know how far we walked, but I know that none of us had had any sleep for probably over thirty hours before they finally stopped at what appeared to be a German headquarters of some kind. And this was our first chance to sit down and get some rest, and try to take stock of the situation.

Here is where they also did some interrogating. The officers were not with us. In fact, I don't even know what happened to half of the men and the officers. But one by one, we were called in. Well, this is a long, drawn out process. And during this time, another German came in and spoke to the guard, and the guard said—in German, he asked, "Does anybody here speak German?" And I waited and waited, and nobody said anything. And finally, I said, "Yes." He says, "We have something for you to eat. Three men—form three men." What we had to eat was a hunk of oleo margarine. That was it. Nothing. No bread, no nothing!

DePue: Split up between how many people?

Stockmeier: Each three people got a hunk of this margarine. And that was it. Of course, this shakes you up. You wonder just what kind of war are we fighting, you know? (laughter) But that was it.

The interrogation continued, and finally I had to go in. And I'm in a room, and the German Sergeant sitting at the table, the Captain looking out the window. The Sergeant said, "If you're in A Company, put your name here; if you're with D Company, put your name on this sheet." I'm not from either one, so I grabbed the pencil and I wrote my name on one of the sheets. And the sergeant picked it up and looked at it; says, "Ah! Frederich Stockmeier!" I mean, he gave it a good old German pronunciation! And with that, that captain spun around, and he came running over to the table, and he started yelling. I knew what he was saying, but I told the sergeant that—I said, "I don't speak German."

DePue: He was yelling *at* you?

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: What was he saying?

Stockmeier: Just a bunch of questions about where I was from, and so on. And—

DePue: In an intimidating way? Or an interesting way?

Stockmeier: Very interesting! (laughter) But I told the sergeant, I said, "He'll have to speak English." "Well, he doesn't speak English." And he says, "I'm the interpreter." I says, "Well, what does he want to know?" "Well, he wants to know where you were born." I said, "I was born in the United States." And he repeated it in German. And we went through a whole series of questions. Where was your father born? And finally, I got him to accept the fact that I had been born in the United States, and my father was the first of the family to be born in the United States. And everything was getting calmed down.

And the Captain finally gave up, and he started walking back towards the window. And he stopped and turned around, and says, "Ask him when his family went to America." By this time, I'm pretty much dead on my feet, as you could guess, and I didn't wait for him to translate it. I answered the question. Woo! Did we go round and round again! Finally, I convinced him that I was not a traitor, and he wasn't going to get an Iron Cross [German medal] for catching a traitor. Finally, when he calmed down, I said to the sergeant, I said, "Why was he so interested in this?" He said, "Your family came from Detmold, is what you said?" And I said, "That's right." He said, "He comes from Detmold, and there are still people with your name living there." So—

DePue: And when did your relatives get to the United States?

Stockmeier: Eighteen forty-eight.

DePue: Eighteen forty-eight? Been here for a long time, then.

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: By now, you've had a chance to make a very distinct impression of these German captors. How would you describe them?

Stockmeier: It's difficult to say, because we were all just dead on our feet. You have to respect front line troops. You've been through it, they've been through it, and you know that each other's been through it. They were not the vicious type that you hear about. In fact, the meanest, the most unpredictable were the younger ones, but even there, when you were alone with them, you were going to find that they're human. But when there are officers around, they have to put on a show to protect themselves, so they do.

DePue: Were they generally well fed?

Stockmeier: Oh, considering that we had never had any contact with them, we have to say yes, they were average.

DePue: Yeah. And fairly well-disciplined?

Stockmeier: Yes. Yes. The down aspects came with the passage of time, and we had more experience of dealing with them We had one German Colonel who was trying to talk to us in English, and he wouldn't let the interpreter talk because he spoke English, but he was so hard to understand. And the officer Corps, they don't admit they can't do something. They do it.

I had German civilians that treated me so nice; I had German non-coms that treated me so nice. But, and again, you'd come up against somebody, and like the little kid standing looking at us one day, and he pulled on the guard's rifle butt; he says, "Schiesse alle! Schiesse alle!" This is a command form, or what we call the imperative verb: "Shoot them all! Shoot them all!" Now, this kid is maybe six years old.

DePue: So he'd grown up being indoctrinated by the Nazi regime?

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: Well, that's interesting. And troubling from where you're seeing it, I'm sure. How long did it take from the time you got where you were with the front line troops and they're doing this initial interrogation—well, let me back up. What was your personal interrogation like? It didn't amount to that much?

Stockmeier: No. No. By this time, they had talked to anybody who was going to talk.

DePue: Well, I imagine they worked over the officers a little bit more, anyway.

Stockmeier: Well, there again we really don't know, except for what Cal put in his book. It's strange: every once in a while, there would be some Germans would say, "Oh, just when did the 100th Division leave Ft. Bragg?" They knew. That's one thing you have to give them credit for. (laughter)

DePue: Trying to trick you into giving them some more information?

Stockmeier: As we moved backwards, eventually we got to a POW camp at Limburg. That's L-i-m-b-u-r-g. And this was the first time that we had any contact with what we'd call "rear-e": they were the rear echelon people. And it was not a joyful situation. Nobody briefed us. We were split up, distributed among a number of buildings which were already occupied by other men who had been captured earlier. And again, no food, and these people were as confused—I mean the ones who were there already were as confused as we were as to what was going on. That appears this was the newly-captured men were taken and given a quick run-through, and then distributed to prisoner of war camps.

We were called out and told we were going to get a shower. They took us to the area; we had to undress. We went into the shower, and when we came out, we came out the other side of the building—not the side where we had left our clothing, but the far side. And there's no clothes. And we were told, "Help yourself." They had a bunch of old clothing of some kind dumped there. And some of the fellows said it was old Polish Army uniforms, or something like that. But the stuff that I ended up with, it was like burlap. No shoes: they had taken our shoes, too. They gave us wooden shoes.

DePue: No underwear?

Stockmeier: Yeah, we got some underwear. That, we were permitted to have. And socks. But this is what we were blessed with from that time on.

Now, the twenty-third, the night of December twenty-third, the British came over to bomb the railroad yards, which were less than half a mile from the prison camp. We had 500-pounders dropping within the compound. And it was kind of interesting. (laughter) When all was said and done, in the morning you could see where the roof of our building had been lifted up and then settled back down. But the knee braces supporting the roofing elements had all become dislodged and had fallen on us as we were laying on the floor. And these were roughly four-inch four by fours, maybe four to five feet long. So they're not toothpicks.

But there had been a direct hit on one building, and I think it was the third building away from the one I was in. Sixty-some British were killed. The Krauts came in to our building and started pulling men out. "Go, go, go." And these fellows had to go over to that structure, what was left of it, and they were bringing out body parts and putting them together. And this was the way the night ended.

There were troops in boxcars down on the railroad tracks, and they of course got blessed with some of this fire, but the guards wouldn't leave them out. If you read Tom Brokaw's book *The Greatest Generation Speaks*, in there there's an account of one Chaplain who was down there in the railroad yard. He had succeeded in convincing the Germans to let him out, and he went down the line to the boxcars trying to give some moral support to the men that were there. When I read that, it said he was in—what was it?—Fort Lauderdale, Florida, or some place in Florida. I immediately went online, put in his name, and came up with a telephone number. And I called him. He was in the hospital with heart problems, but his wife said, "You know, you're the second person to call ever since that book came out." He had lived through it, and now here he was, like so many of us, having problems.

I never got back down to Florida in time to see him; I think he's passed away now. But anybody who went through that night deserves respect. And for a man to be out unprotected and those bombs are coming down, that was something.

DePue: He took his faith very seriously, then.

Stockmeier: Yeah. That happened the night of the twenty-third. A lot of the fellows say it was Christmas Eve, but no, it was the night of the twenty-third. Later, I was able to see a written report by the British man of confidence, and he listed all of the men by name and title who had been killed in that building.

A "man of confidence" is one individual who is used by the German as a source of communicating to prisoners. In our case, and later camps, there was no mixing of enlisted and commissioned personnel, so our man of confidence was actually a—I think he was a Master Sergeant. Each barracks had its own barracks chef, or chief, and these then would report to the man of confidence. And any information that he had to disperse he'd give to them at a regular meeting, and he would return to barracks and spread it to the men. But I had a chance to view a copy of that report.

DePue: Did you have a sense during any of this time, especially the first month or so, that your relatives back home knew what had happened to you?

Stockmeier: We had no way of knowing. Somebody had said, "Well, at least they won't hear about this before Christmas." I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "Well, when you're MIA, [missing in action] they wait thirty days before they report it." Well, that wasn't true. My parents received word—I think it was the twentieth, the twentieth of December.

DePue: So a pretty dark Christmas season for them?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: And a very dark Christmas season for you.

Stockmeier: Things were in such a turmoil after the bombing, and again, we're getting nothing in the line of food. And we don't have decent clothes because of the—they had taken them away from us, and—you know what happened to our clothing?

DePue: Yeah.

Stockmeier: And eventually –I think it was the night of the twenty-eighth, or the afternoon of the twenty-eighth –we were taken down to the railroad, locked in the boxcars, and we headed east. We had no heat, no water, no food, no blankets. We were just plain locked in a boxcar, and that happened to be one of their worst winters in—I don't know—twenty-some years.

As we were moving across country, we can't see enough to know where we're going. At one time, we ended up in another marshaling yard. I mean, you could see tracks, and you could hear engines puttering, yard donkeys [small switch engines] moving cars around. And all of a sudden, we heard fighter planes. And

through the cracks in the boxcar, we did see the Germans running for cover, and we figured then that they had to be American planes. So we were yelling for the guards to let us out. They just took off.

Well, the planes made a couple of passes over us, and then the last time out, all of sudden they opened up. I could hear the strafing. We didn't know for sure that it was those planes that were going out, or whether there were some coming in. A freight train had pulled out a few moments earlier, and they got it on the move. The idea is that you get a moving train, and you could disable it, and then it blocks off traffic. But anyhow, it got quiet, and gradually the guards began to come out. And all of a sudden, we saw a yard donkey, a yard engine, going out, and a little while later, it came back pulling that shot-up train, the one that had gone out earlier. And this kind of makes you wonder about your future.

Well, I think it was New Year's Eve, we finally arrived at the Mulder River—not Mulder: Oder River, at Furstenberg, a town which no longer exists. It has been absorbed by an adjoining city, Eisenhüttenstadt. And we were there during the month of January.

DePue: What part of Germany is this?

Stockmeier: Right on the Polish border. The—

DePue: So the current Polish border, or the Polish border at that time?

Stockmeier: The Polish border at that time: the Oder River. And it was there that Axis Sally came to pay a visit, and as word got out who she was, she'd walk into the building, and everybody would just evaporate. And—

DePue: Had you ever listened to her before?

Stockmeier: No. Here's Berlin, and it's not shown on there. It shows that—

DePue: Practically straight east. A little bit—

Stockmeier: It shows at IIIA—roman IIIA. It was there that a fellow came into the building where I was at one night and said, "Hey, guess who's next door? Max Schmelling!" Well, and, “Gee, the fighter?” [a famous boxer] "Yeah!" So, I don't know—what the heck? So I went over, and it was him. And I got my way up close enough to him to give him—I think it was a twenty-mark note –which I had acquired someplace, and I got his autograph. While I'm there, some little Sergeant came muscling his way up, and he says, "Geez! He's a big SOB, isn't he?" Schmelling says, "Yes, I am." (laughter) This guy didn't know Schmelling could understand English! (laughter) But he had a potato farm near there.

DePue: Oh, really?

Stockmeier: And some of the men on work detail –what they call arbeit commando –some of the men actually worked on his potato farm.

DePue: Well, he had spent a lot of time in the United States anyway, had he not?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: So I would imagine he had some more pleasant experiences in the United States, so... Well, that's fascinating. So tell me more about how the prison camp—this is the one where you think you're going to be there for a while – how was it organized?

Stockmeier: Well, the different nationalities were separated.

DePue: Any idea how many prisoners were in that one camp?

Stockmeier: No. I think they said something like 5,000.

DePue: Okay. So this is no small camp.

Stockmeier: No, no. The main camps were not; were not small camps. Within the structure of being a POW, in each unit, you have to have some control. So there would be one person designated as barracks chef, or barracks chief, or whatever you want. And then we had formed down into smaller units, very similar to military organization, but less formal, less rigid. And again, depending on the camp Commandant, what happened to you and anything else depended upon the Commandant and how he felt. And occasionally you'd find a guard who was really—there are some words that I can't use, but – (laughter) really the worst of the bunch. But usually the guards were older men, or disabled in some way that they couldn't be in line troops. I know I asked one guard who really looked old, I asked him how old he was, and he was eighty-two or something like that.

DePue: Oh my gosh!

Stockmeier: And I said, "Well, why are you in the army?" I said, "American old men stay at home." He says, "My family was killed by a bomb. I had no relatives, I had no home, no place to go." He says, "I joined the army. I ate."

DePue: That gives you an idea of how desperate they were at the time then, too.

Stockmeier: Yeah. Yeah.

DePue: Well, that kind of gets me to another question, and that's the morale of your fellow prisoners and yourself.

Stockmeier: Varied. When you're first captured, you're bewildered, and you stay that way. This is a strange experience. You haven't been trained for it; there's no way to train for it. In the permanent camps, you would find men who had been

prisoners, oh, since North Africa. And at the time that they were brought to Germany, the situation was such that they were given food, they were given clothing, and they could actually accumulate a little wardrobe. The American military provided the clothing to the Red Cross; American Red Cross got it to the International Red Cross. The International Red Cross then got it into Germany.

The food parcels –which were scarce, eleven pounds of food –again came from Allied countries. You may have mainly American processed goods in a parcel, and there'd be a can of condensed—not condensed, dehydrated, milk. Milk powder. That came out of South Africa. The food parcels ostensibly were one eleven-pound package per man, per week. You were lucky if you ever got a package and did not have to split it with more than three other people. Usually, it was six, eight, and ten men to a box. Now, what are you going to do with eleven pounds of food? You had a pound tin of milk, you had a little can of Spam, maybe a chocolate bar, maybe biscuits, powdered coffee. It was enough if you had one that you could use this to live on in addition to the soup and the black bread that Jerry gave you. Now, a lot of times when we didn't have parcels, we didn't have any food from the Germans except maybe a sugar beet, or a red beet, or a rutabaga, or a turnip. It was a delight if they gave you potatoes! The bread was black, sour, heavy. It was actually thirty percent sawdust. It was called "wood flour."

DePue: I would think all of this would tear up your digestion.

Stockmeier: It didn't help. And sometimes, they'd have something that I never knew what the Germans called it. We called it "green death" for no other reason than that it was green and you didn't know what it was. Somebody tried to say it's vegetable greens. Somebody over at Berge, where the Jewish prisoners were held, there, it was called "grass soup." And that's actually what it looked like: somebody had cut grass, and now they boiled it and gave it to you as soup.

We lost weight—a lot of weight. One picture that made the cover of *Life* magazine showed a man, skin and bones, that was found at Stalag XIIA. I was in that stalag for a while when I was first captured. But it was starvation, at best starvation diet. So you—

DePue: Were the prison guards eating a lot of the Red Cross parcels themselves?

Stockmeier: Well, I never witnessed it. But there's stories that come out. There's a book called *Zemke's Stalag*. An Air Force Colonel wrote it about the prisoner of war camp for Air Force people up at Barth, up near the German coast. And at one point, the men were complaining that they didn't get their usual parcel of food every week. Well, when I read that and I think back to the time when I'm trying to split eleven pounds of food with seven other men, I didn't feel very sorry for them. And when I think about the weeks and weeks that would go by when you didn't have a parcel...

DePue: Even if the Germans had wanted to get you the parcels, their infrastructure, their railroad system was so torn up that it might have been very difficult for them, even.

Stockmeier: After we finished our month at IIIA over on the Polish border, and the Russian Army was getting close, that's when they decided that they had to move us. We fell out in the rain, and we started walking. And we walked all night, and all the next day. And as we went through one village, people were lined up on the sidewalk. (clock starts loudly chiming the hour)

(break in audio)

Stockmeier: Darn that clock.

DePue: That's all right. We're going to start here.

Stockmeier: But as we walked through one village, the people were lined up on the sidewalk, and they're moving directly opposite to what we are. And I'm on the outside edge of this group of prisoners as we're walking, and coming towards me on the edge of the sidewalk, there was a younger German woman had her hands folded over her stomach. And as she walked past me, her hand shot out and had a hunk of bread in it, which she gave me, and then pulled her hand back and kept on walking.

DePue: Wow. That's an incredible act of kindness.

Stockmeier: And the first time that us people from Company A got together and I mentioned this, one fellow said, "You know, I must've been right behind you, because the same thing happened to me."

But here again, you have that contrast. After we were captured and we were walking and walking and walking, we stopped out in the country at a railroad station. Now, these country railroad stations might serve four or five villages. But we stopped there to rest, and the kids came out from the one village. And I noticed this one boy was repeating behind his hand what we were saying in English. So I watched him for a while to be sure. And then I spoke to him in English. I said, "You speak English?" "Nicht versteh." So I went into German. And I said, "Where did you learn English?" "In school." "Why?" "To be an officer in the Wehrmacht, you must be able to speak a foreign language. And since Germany will be forever fighting England and America, I decided to learn English." You think German training wasn't successful? And mainly when you stop to think about it, this teenager was later going to be a voter. (laughter)

DePue: Yeah. Well, it gives you pause on both sides, doesn't it? You could see both things. What timeframe were you moved from the prison camp on the Oder River?

Stockmeier: It was the end of January, and we walked for eight days until we got to Luckenwalde IIIB, and that's slightly southwest of Berlin.

DePue: Were you able to mail anything out at this time, or receive any mail?

Stockmeier: At Luckenwalde, I sent home something, but that was the only time. Now, I'm reading this from the site. If this is IIIB—IIIA?

DePue: That's Stalag Luft III. Okay—here's Luckenwalde. Okay.

Stockmeier: All right. Here's Berlin.

DePue: So directly south of that?

Stockmeier: From here, we walked eight days to get to this point.

DePue: That looks like it's approximately eighty to 100 miles.

Stockmeier: I don't know.

DePue: And in your condition at that time—

Stockmeier: It was interesting.

DePue: —walking ten or fifteen miles a day was an incredible task, I would think.

Stockmeier: Yeah. As we were on this joyful little tour, one night they put us up in a gasthaus—not a gasthaus: a bauerhouse, a community farm building, which is a dance hall and bar. And the strange thing is—of course the weather was obnoxious –but they actually put us into the dance hall. And we had a door that led out to a hallway, and from the hallway, it led across into the taproom. And now, remember, I don't have an American uniform. I'm still wearing burlap stuff. Anyhow, I grab my little bucket that the Germans had given us to eat with, and I went over to the door into the taproom, up to the bar. And the bartender kind of looked at me, and I laid out this mark note with Schmelling's autograph on it. And he looked at me oddly. He drew a bucketful of beer, gave it to me, picked up my money, and walked away. I went back into the dance hall—I was popular! (laughter)

DePue: (laughter) How much of the beer did you get to drink yourself, then?

Stockmeier: Well, more than I should've. But it was not what I'd call my kind of beer.

But it's strange, the things that can happen to you. I think it was at this same night when the call of nature got too strong to ignore, and I went to the door, and I finally got the attention of a Sergeant. He came over, and I told him that I had to go to the latrine. And by this time, my stomach is like this. I'm gassy and everything else. And he took me out to a two-holer, the traditional outhouse.

And he's standing outside, and my stomach is rumbling loud enough he heard it, and I started passing gas in large volume. And he said, "Did you walk here?" I says, "Yes." In German, he says, "You're very sick! Your stomach is very sick!" So I says, "Yes." He didn't say anything more.

The next morning, we fell out, we started forming up, and here came this Sergeant. Came directly to me, and he pulled me out of line. He said, "Come!" And everybody was looking, wondering what's going to happen, because we know some men had been pulled out and shot. But he took me down to a horse-drawn wagon. He says, "Today, you ride." Now, the contrast that you find, sometimes they're so unbelievable they wouldn't even make good fiction!

DePue: Well, I would think there's a disadvantage of riding, because it had to be terribly cold.

Stockmeier: It was.

DePue: But a relief not to have to walk that day?

Stockmeier: Well, another night we ended up in a small village, and they took a small group of us and put us into a barn. And I heard some chickens cackling. Well, to me, that meant something. I had stolen a horse blanket sometime along the way, and I had this rolled up, and that was about the only thing that I had. But I shinnied up the ladder and found a nice, comfortable spot where I could burrow into the hay. Then I went back down the ladder and went looking for the chickens. Well, I didn't find them, but I found the old farm wife. And she spoke to me, so I answered her in German, and the first thing you know, we're getting along real good.

After she went in the house, I couldn't find any eggs, but the next morning, I woke up, I could hear somebody was down below milking. I mean, if you've been on a farm, you know what it sounds like when milk goes into the bucket. So I went down the ladder, and there's the old lady and a daughter. And she says, "Oh! Good morning!" You know, the usual. And she told her daughter, "Here." She gave her a little bucket of milk. "Take him in the house. Heat the milk. Give him to drink."

(break in audio)

DePue: Go ahead.

Stockmeier: So anyhow, we went to the house, and she took me into the kitchen. The old man is sitting in there at the table, eating coffee cake and drinking coffee. And he just looked at me. Finally, he said, "Coffee," pushed a cup at me. Well, later he says, "Eat." And he pushed a hunk of coffee cake over to me. So I ate it. About that time, the milk is done, and I had a nice glass of hot milk.

Just about the time I finished it, there's a commotion outside. And the mother now is in the house, too. And she and the daughter start talking to each other. One daughter goes out this door, and we can hear her talking real loud, and a German soldier answering her, and the other daughter was taking me down the steps to a slide door, slips me out.

Now, the overriding factor here is their son-in-law was home from the Russian front, where he'd been wounded. He was home on recovery. And he didn't like us Americans being there. But he never said a word. Again, how do you explain it? Now, that family took a chance. They didn't bring the rest of the guys in. Of course, none of those spoke German. I spoke German, enough so that there was some kind of relationship there.

DePue: Well, I imagine you never had any better coffee cake or warm milk, but did you feel just a tinge of guilt when you rejoined the rest of the prisoners?

Stockmeier: I'll tell you, I was so happy. (laughter) I had burrowed into the hay at night and gotten warm for the first time, and I was living high on the hog.

DePue: Now, during this whole time you obviously know you're moving from one prison camp to another; you're moving west. Did you know you were moving west because of the Russians?

Stockmeier: No. We surmised the reason that we had to leave the camp on the river, on the Oder River, was because—the underground had gotten word to us that the Russians were getting close. And we knew something was happening. But anyhow, along the way, I think we lost probably close to 1,000 men on our walk. Mainly, they'd slip away, take off across cross country on their own. But we had no idea where we were in relationship to the Germans, or in relationship to the Russians.

DePue: So when you were in this camp on the Oder River, did you even really have a vague notion of exactly where you were?

Stockmeier: We knew we were on the Oder River, but that was about the extent of it.

DePue: How close are you now to—well, you're still several months away being liberated, aren't you?

Stockmeier: Oh, yes. Yes. And after that little road trip, I ran into a fellow… Well, when you get to a new camp, you sign in, and where you're from. This list was posted, and a fellow came to see me, and turned out to be the boyfriend of one of our neighbors. He lived about ten miles from us. I didn't know him. But through him, I got a GI shirt, GI pants, and some GI shoes about two sizes too large, but at least I had shoes instead of those wooden things.

DePue: You've been walking on these wooden shoes for two months now. Wow.

Stockmeier: If you can call it walking. (laughter) It was strange. I know in camp, there at Luckenwalde, slowly we formed into our little individual groups, and there was a fellow from North Dakota, one from Idaho, one from North Carolina, one from West Virginia, and myself. The five of us were more or less the nucleus that remained constant. You did this because as a loner, what food you got, that was just it. Whereas as a group, maybe you could forget about using that flour for something—or not flour, I mean the milk for something. Although it did good in stopping diarrhea. (laughter) And if you could give up the cigarettes, you could use your cigarettes to barter with the guards. American cigarettes were actually the medium of exchange. Sure, some of the guys had marks and francs and so on, but no place to spend them. Nobody wanted them. You couldn't eat them. You couldn't buy anything with them. So cigarettes, gold rings, watches with jewels: these were all trading items.

DePue: Now, during this time, especially in the dead of winter, you talked before, even when you were still on the American side of the lines, that you had problems with critters of certain sorts, cooties and all. I would think that you guys were just lousy with lice and with everything else.

Stockmeier: Yeah. Add to it four-legged little rodents, some of them not so little. (laughter) But fleas and lice (laughter) are—what should I say?—one of the crosses you carry when you're living in the environment that we did.

DePue: And there was no getting rid of the lice, was there?

Stockmeier: No. There had been many a time I laid awake at night wondering How did I live through it, how did I live through it? Occasionally, there'd be a man go completely berserk, and he disappeared. We'd never hear of him again.

DePue: Did you ever, during that entire time, have any contact with the outside world? Contact that you knew that your parents knew what had happened to you?

Stockmeier: No. No. As I said, I was able to write one letter home. And they got it, and responded, but I never got it.

DePue: When did they receive your letter?

Stockmeier: I don't have a date.

(break in audio)

DePue: Start again, or—?

Stockmeier: Yeah. Now, I can't say that I am aware of just when my parents responded to my letter, but I never received their response.

DePue: What did they tell you about their reaction of getting your letter?

Stockmeier: That's something that was never really mentioned.

DePue: Really?

Stockmeier: No.

DePue: I would just think there's a real mixture of joy and fear, but just knowing you're alive and knowing what's happened to you...

Stockmeier: My name had been mentioned on a propaganda broadcast of having become a prisoner of war. People monitored these broadcasts just for that purpose of hearing names and locations. There was a fellow down in Dayton, Ohio who heard the broadcast; he called my parents, and told them that he had heard my name mentioned. He said, "Now, this is not official." But he told them that he had heard my name mentioned as being a prisoner of war. And then he sent a telegram or a letter to follow up on that. Other people around the country, especially the eastern half of the United States, had written such things as "the family of"—of course, the name got all variations of spelling, and the name of the town, instead of Holgate, came out "Colgate". But the Post Office did a tremendous job in getting this stuff delivered, and my parents ended up, I think, with thirty-some pieces of postcards, letters, and so on from people across the country who had heard my name mentioned. The War Department never received official notification that I was a prisoner, and my—

DePue: Which is a violation of the Geneva Convention, is it not?

Stockmeier: Not the first one. (laughter) But my father took all this material, and he sent it to a man in Washington, D.C. Before I went over to Camp Meade, I had made the acquaintance of a young lady in Washington, and her father worked for the government, in another government agency. But he took all this stuff that my father had sent him, he went down to the War Department, and he spread it out down there. And they looked it over, and they said, "Well, if Alderman says he heard it, it must be true." So then they sent my parents a telegram saying that I was a prisoner of war. And this was at the end of hostilities. (laughter)

DePue: (laughter) Well, that's kind of where I wanted to go with this next. Because when you were captured, December of '44, you knew the United States Army was on the advance, that they were advancing rather quickly. They had moved through France very quickly, and had slowed down a little bit, but we were still obviously in advance. And I'm guessing that you thought, okay, it's just a matter of time before the United States and the Russians are successful here.

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: And the Brits.

Stockmeier: We were able somehow to get a news feed from England. And periodically, a man would come through the barracks, give a signal. And nothing was said, but

you got quiet. And then he'd read the latest news bulletin. So we knew pretty much what was going on. Now, we were captured December fourth, and it wasn't until—oh, gosh—January sometime that we heard about the Battle of the Bulge. First of all, let me say that while there was contact with the Underground, the individual prisoner didn't know who it was, where it was, or anything else. Because what you didn't know, you couldn't tell if they pulled you out for interrogation, the same as if you had an idea for escaping. You'd just drop word to several people, and eventually somebody'd come to see you, and they invite you to a meeting. And the escape committee would ask you how you intended to do it. And if they approved it, they'd give what limited help they could. If they didn't approve it, you got no help; you were on your own. And that's not wise, to be alone. But again, there was organization within our wild way of living so that you had some semblance of order at times.

DePue: And this was primarily when you were at Luckenwalde?

Stockmeier: Mainly at Luckenwalde, because at Furstenberg, we just hadn't had enough time to settle in, and... Again, the older men, the men who had been captured, who had been prisoners for a year or more, these were the people that gave you the guidance you needed to survive.

DePue: They'd figured out the basic facts of life, survival in a prison camp?

Stockmeier: Yes. But they had been led into it gradually. Ours was a sudden transition, where, when they were first captured, things were moving smoothly for the Germans, and they treated the prisoners cordially.

DePue: For each of these camps, were you exclusively with United States Army enlisted personnel?

Stockmeier: Yes. Any main camp, yes. Well, at Luckenwalde, the Russian compound was right aside of ours. We had our fence, they had their fence, and then in-between was no man's land. We could throw things over the fences, and that was one way of communicating. There is an old *Reader's Digest* magazine: a Russian soldier talks about the way he was helped by American prisoners. I've got that magazine someplace. But again, you're independent.

And now, the Russians were treated unbelievably harsh. When one of them died, usually the body was thrown into a lime pit. That was it. The crazy part about it is that those Russians were fantastic at what they could steal. They'd be out on a work detail, and it was fantastic what they could steal! And of course, what they're after is food.

DePue: Now, I'm looking at a picture of the Russian chapel at Stalag III in Luckenwalde. This looks like it's a pretty nice chapel, quite frankly.

Stockmeier: Yeah. Well, read on. Read...

DePue: Okay. "Usually, nationalities were kept separated at POW camps, and the Russian POWs fared much worse than the Americans. Spinelli… Spinelli was one of the people who contributed to this?

Stockmeier: He took the picture.

DePue: "Spinelli was rightfully astonished when he saw the beautiful paintings and the wood carvings in the Russian chapel." They had found the energy at least to make this chapel on their own, I would assume?

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: That's amazing.

Stockmeier: This Spinelli –I picked this thing up at Andersonville –Spinelli was captured in North Africa, and he and I were at both IIIB and IIIA at the same time. We didn't know each other. But anyhow, the pictures that he has in here, how did he get it? Well, he didn't smoke. He horded his cigarettes, traded them to a German for a camera. And film. And (laughter) that's why—

DePue: I've watched too many war movies about this kind of thing, you know? It conjures up these images.

Stockmeier: But the pictures that are in here are of better days, when they are clean, they have uniforms, they had clothes to wear... Here's an imitation television set.

DePue: Did the conditions improve the last couple months you were there? It went down?

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: Because everything was desperate in Germany at the time.

Stockmeier: Now, this guard was famous for trading. This fellow with him was out of the armored corps someplace; I forget. But this is what it looked on the out…

DePue: This is another one of the pictures Spinelli took?

Stockmeier: Yeah. Every pic…

DePue: And it's a picture of a German trading with an American, I guess. It—

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: —looks like a piece of canned goods there.

Stockmeier: Well, hard to say what it is. But all of these pictures were taken by Spinelli.

DePue: What timeframe would you think, roughly? This would be something like '43 or '44 that this picture was taken here?

Stockmeier: Actually, this would be probably '44-45, right towards the end. I can't tell from the picture because there's nothing there to identify it. But there is no rough trash and stuff accumulated.

DePue: Well, from what you've described, it sounds like your conditions you lived through were quite a bit worse than we saw in these two pictures.

Stockmeier: Yes. That's the only negative thing that I can say: you can't take a picture of dirt and have it show.

DePue: Yeah. You can't see the lice that are crawling all over you.

Stockmeier: No. No.

DePue: Can you go through the description of your liberation?

Stockmeier: Well, again, the underground had been able to get some word in. The word was out that Hitler had ordered all prisoners of war executed, and the underground got word in saying that—again, now, not to me, but to the organization—saying that they had weapons. And if any attempt was made to carry out Hitler's orders, that they'd immediately attack the camp. And they had weapons that they could give us so that we could help defend ourselves.

DePue: Well, I'm confused. The underground: these are German citizens who decided that they want to—

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: —risk everything and resist—

Stockmeier: German resistance.

DePue: —the Nazis?

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: That's a story you don't hear too often, either.

Stockmeier: No. But you see, the Nazi Party, like the Communist Party in Russia, numerically, they were small compared to the total. But the small group succeeded in terrorizing the people to the point that their image grew, even though their numbers didn't. But the underground—well, perhaps you've heard of "the White Rose" or the—

DePue: Yes, I have.

Stockmeier: I used to have a movie about it, a German movie. But I don't know how I lost it. But yes, the German underground actually had communication with us, not on a day-to-day basis, but periodically. Now, this sounds something like *Hogan's Heroes*. (laughter) It's not quite that good. But nevertheless, there was a means of communications.

DePue: So who was it that eventually liberated your camp?

Stockmeier: The Russians.

DePue: And describe that moment.

Stockmeier: Well, on Saturday, the Germans sent in word that, in the event any attempt was made to liberate the camp, we were to remain in the buildings and not be active, not try to signal anything or anybody outside the camp. And of course, our people, organization went along with it, so there was nothing done that night. There was a little turmoil, but far enough away that it didn't bother us. And then on Sunday morning, lo and behold, there wasn't a German to be seen. They had left. And here came the Russian tanks and trucks—Studebaker trucks. (laughter)

DePue: Wow. Lend-lease from the United States?

Stockmeier: And they had a great show, the Russian tank running into the Russian prisoner compound, flattening the fence, you know? They had, oh, a great big to-do about this. Now, we're fortunate: it's right aside of us, and we could see it. And while this was all going on, all of a sudden there is a shrill shriek: a woman is crying. She found her brother, who had been missing for three years in the Russian camp, a Russian prisoner.

DePue: So what is it?

Stockmeier: She was in one of the tanks.

DePue: A Russian female tank crew member, huh?

Stockmeier: Yeah. (laughter) Again, I can't explain it.

DePue: It must have been glorious pandemonium at that time.

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: Were you guys the next portion of the camp to be released?

Stockmeier: Well, we didn't have all the dramatics. Now that the Germans were gone, some fellows from our building hit the headquarters building, and they pulled all the files, and came back to us and handed out our prisoner of war records, our escape ID pictures and that. Not everybody got them, but I was lucky enough that I got mine.

DePue: Did you keep it?

Stockmeier: Yeah, it's around someplace. I know I made a photocopy for Colonel Renola who had been my commanding officer in the 100th. I don't know what he did with it, but I took it along to show him, and he latched on to it and said he wanted it, could he have it? I said yes.

Now, I happened to meet him because this Cal Norman notified somebody from the 100th, from the 375th field artillery, where I was. And they wrote me. They were having a reunion in Seattle. Well, Ruth and I had been in Hawaii on vacation. We got back to home in time to find Cal's book in the mail. So after we got reorganized at home, we got everything back in line, I had time to get out to Seattle to meet these fellows from my Field Artillery Battalion. I went early, and I went to Portland, and I met with Cal. And there is where I first found out that the Colonel and Lieutenant Colonel had been relieved of command.

DePue: And that's how many years after the fact?

Stockmeier: Forty-some. But you see, I wasn't able to establish contact. And when I tried to locate this fellow, I called Chuck in South Bend. Nobody had ever heard of him. Later on, I managed to locate him, only to learn that he had died. I spoke with his wife. But this first meeting out in Seattle was the first real contact that the field artillery people had with anybody who had been captured that night.

DePue: Forty-some years after the fact? That's a long time.

Stockmeier: Yeah. Renola came walking in. Of course, I recognized him. And he came walking in, and he told somebody he didn't know, and he came over and says, "Fred?" I said, "Yes." And the first thing he says: "What the hell happened that night?" (laughter) Boy, I had a busy time.

DePue: Yeah, I bet you did. Do you remember the first meal that you had after liberation? The first meal the Russians provided?

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: What was it?

Stockmeier: Boiled wheat.

DePue: That doesn't sound very appetizing.

Stockmeier: No. But it was better than nothing. Actually, there was no means of feeding us by the Russians. Of course, we'd become accustomed to not eating, so we managed to hold out. And then we began to get odds and ends, but nothing very nourishing or in any great quantity.

One day the Russians told us they wanted us to move out to the Adolf Hitler Lager, which was a German officers' rest camp. "There's too many of you here. We can't serve you here." So a bunch of us walked a few miles out to this camp. It was there that things began to happen. And we found a place to hole up for the night and so on, and guys began to go prospecting for food.

Pretty soon, a couple of guys came back with a cow. And to make a long story short, they hit the cow in the head with an axe, butchered it, cut off a bunch of steaks, cut them so thin you could almost see through them, spread them out on a big iron platter that they had gotten out of the mess hall. If you eat freshly killed meat with the body heat still in it, you're going to pay. But when the body heat was out, that stuff was on that fire, and we had steak. Maybe little shreds, but we had our first meat. Well, in prison camp, they'd had a horse killed; they might butcher the horse and put a hunk of horse meat in the kettle. But let's call it "civilized meat." (laughter)

And of course, we were all wondering, How'd you get the cow? How'd you get the cow? What'd you do—steal it? No. They found an old German down the road here who said he was afraid of the Russians—they were going to take his cow! So we said, "Well, we'll hide it for you." We started leading it away, and the German finally came to his senses and started yelling. So," he says, "we tossed him two packs of cigarettes and kept on going."

Now, out there, the Russians couldn't service us, either. So first thing, we head back in town to the stalag. And it was funny, but it was one of those coincidental things: we got back in there in the afternoon, and our barracks chef was throwing stuff together and tying them up, and somebody says, "Where are you going?" He says, "I'm not waiting any longer!" He says, "I'm headed for the American troops." So we decided, okay, if he's going to go, we're going to go. We had nothing much to carry.

So we started walking cross-country. And we knew the next town down the road was Jüterbog—"Jitterbug," we called it. But it's J-umlaut u-t-e-r... I'd have to look it up. I think it's b-o-g.

DePue: Well, we'll figure that out later.

Stockmeier: But we started down the road, and all of a sudden we met some guys that we knew coming back. And, "What's wrong? Where are you going?" "We're going back to camp." "Why?" He says, "There's a Russian machine gun next up the road here a piece, and they opened up on us." "What?" So a couple of other guys that we didn't know came over and clustered around, and we were trying to decide what to do. "Well," I said, "the last report we had was that the American troops were fifteen miles away." I said, "We're almost halfway there. I'm for going on." Well, everybody else decided they'd go on, too.

So instead of going down the road in a column of bunches, we formed up into two files and walked down the side of the road so that if anything happened, we could hit the ditch. We walked right past that machine gun nest. Two Russians there: "Americanski!" And, "Ruski!" I mean, we walked right through without any problem.

DePue: And kept walking?

Stockmeier: And kept walking. We finally started finding American gear. Well, we must be close. And we finally got to a town where we knew they were supposed to be, and found out they'd withdrawn something like twenty miles.

DePue: Because they had gone past the line where the Americans were supposed to occupy after the war was over?

Stockmeier: Mmm-hmm.

DePue: Wow!

Stockmeier: So anyhow, we had to hole up along the road. And we found a house; a couple of women and a small child. And the political prisoners were all around you. These people were experts on stealing, too. We got into the basement of a house, and I found a can like the old orange juice and grapefruit juice can, used to be kind of tall, and I found one of these on a shelf. Written on it, a piece of tape, it says "enten" something or another. Well, I wasn't sure, but to me, "enten" meant duck. So I latched on to the can.

Well, we didn't find anything else, and we got back out. We walked and we came to this house where we stayed overnight. And finally, I took this can and I walked out to the kitchen, to the older woman, grandmother, and I showed her this label, and I asked her what it was. "Oh!" And she started rattling off faster than I could understand. And finally, I said, "Just a minute." And in English, I says, "'Enten'—isn't that duck?" "Ja!"

So we had duck. They heated it for us. That was all we had, (laughter) but at least we had that.

DePue: How many were in your group?

Stockmeier: I think there were five of us left.

DePue: Some had gone their own way, then?

Stockmeier: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Everybody was looking for food, and you'd do better by yourself than...

DePue: Yeah. So that would suggest that the next day is the day you finally make the American lines?

Stockmeier: No. The next day, we are still on our feet, walking. I forget just how it happened. Two Russians in a farm wagon pulled by a farm tractor, and there were a couple of Englishmen sitting on the wagon. They came down the road, and the Englishman yelled at us, "Get on!" So we grabbed a hold, and it turned out there was a big generator in the bottom of this deep-box farm wagon.

We're going down the road; we came up over a hill, and as we started down the other side, lo and behold we had caught up with the shooting war! There was a (laughter) Russian tank down at the bottom of the hill having a little trouble with some Germans.

DePue: What did you call it? A "shooting moan?"

Stockmeier: A shooting war.

DePue: Oh, a shooting war! Okay.

Stockmeier: (laughter) Anyhow, the Russian on the tractor cut the fuel, and the wagon went bouncing forward, and the pin holding it to the tractor popped out. And there we are going down the road like this, (laughter) and headed right for a tree. I was getting ready to grab a branch of a tree and swing out when I saw we were going to hit the tree, so I rode it out.

But one of our men, this Parker from North Carolina, he got caught between the box and the tree, and broke his leg. So he's laying down here in the ditch, and everybody is looking at me. (laughter) And, I mean, "What's the matter?" "Well, what are we going to do?" I could just remember some of the first aid lessons that we'd had, and I says, "Well, start breaking off branches so that we can make a splint." And here came those two Russians back. And they looked, and I made a motion: a broken leg. They walked away. Well, that's fine. Well, they went over to the wagon, pulled out a board, came over, pushed us out of the way. Laid the board down alongside A.D.'s leg, scratched it with a fingernail, went over to a tree, snapped it, came back, splinted the leg like they did it every day. Then they stopped a Russian truck, made it turn around, put us on it. That took us back to the village, where there was a little hospital. Fortunately, there were a doctor and a couple nurses there, and I made them understand that this was our friend, he had a broken leg, and that we would be back in two days to pick him up, and to treat him right. And the doctor says, "Oh, yes."

The Russians who were on the truck were now getting unhappy. We had to go out, get back on the truck. They took us back out to where the accident had happened, made us get off, and then they took off. By that time, the shooting down at the bottom of the hill had cleared away. No more problem.

We kept going, and we got into town where there were Russians. A fellow said, "You know," he said, "the way these Russians shoot," he says, "I'd rather that they knew we were here and where we were going to be sleeping that

night." Okay. So I found a Russian, and somehow or another we ended up in the kitchen of a house. There was one officer there, and he was half intoxicated, and kept getting worse. But finally, one of the boys said, "I wonder if we could get anything to eat here." This Russian major, "Was sagt er?" "What did he say?" And I said he was saying he was hungry. "Oh!" Then he started yelling in Russian. One of the guys got up, went out; a little later, he came back, he had a great big china bowl that had dumplings and vegetables in a heavy broth.

DePue: This is a feast!Stockmeier: And we're looking at it, and he comes back again, and he hands each one of us a spoon. And we all ate out the one bowl. And we were feeling pretty good. And then this one guy, he says, "Gee!" He says, "You know, I got a stick of German coffee. Maybe we ought to make some coffee for them." The major understood "coffee," and he started yelling at his people. And one of them went out, came back; he had a little glass he sat down in front of each of us, and went back out. And he came back with a big pot of tea, poured each one of us.And of course, one of our guys can't keep quiet. He says, "I wonder if he got any sugar?" "What did he say?" I told him. "Oh!" And he yelled at the guy. He went out; he came back, and he had a nice sized bowl of sugar. And I put a spoonful in my glass and stirred it up. The Russian officer says, "Eh! Ein"—"One is for children! Two is for men!" So I put in another spoonful. I stirred it and started to drink, and it was salt instead of sugar. And I spit it out, and he wanted to know what's wrong. And I told him: "Salt!" (laughter) Whoo! And then he started yelling at the guy who'd brought it in. And this guy took so long, and then he started yelling back. And this officer finally got up, went out himself, and came back with sugar. The stories you hear about the Russians, you can't believe some of the things that actually happened.

We told them that we wanted to stay over all night. "Take any house you want." Well, we took the house next door; the reason was, as the officer said, “Foreign troops and Russian troops may not sleep in the same building.” So anyhow, we took the house next door, and the only thing we found was up on the top floor; we found one bedroom where there was still a bed frame, but no mattress, no springs, no nothing else. Well, we gathered enough boards together to fit between the rails, and then five of us were sleeping on that thing that night. And sure enough, two o'clock in the morning the machine gun opened up right under the window. And it was about ten minutes before we breathed. But that was it.

DePue: Could you tell it was a Russian machine gun, or a German?

Stockmeier: No, I couldn't tell. They had their own, they had American, and they had German. But then the next day, we finally made it to the river.

DePue: To which river, then?

Stockmeier: The Mulde.

DePue: Okay. And all of this is happening before the end of the war itself, then?

Stockmeier: Well, before we knew it was over. Along the way, right after we had gotten into what was supposed to be American territory, we had to cross a river. The Germans had blown the highway bridge over the river. So the only thing that was there was a railroad bridge. Well, they had blown the center span of it so that it hung down to actually—

DePue: And both sides?

Stockmeier: In the middle. On the sides, it hung down towards the middle. And the only way we had to get across was to climb down this wreckage, walk across maybe ten feet of platform that consistently sank below water with every step, then up the other side. And then we were across the river.

DePue: And then you were in American territory?

Stockmeier: No. Again—

DePue: I'm trying to reach the end.

Stockmeier: —this is the craziest thing. But anyhow, along the way, we had liberated bicycles. The Russians had invited us to, and we took our bicycles with us. And we were riding now instead of walking. But we got to the Mulde River at Bitterfeld, and the Russians were on one side, and the Americans on the other. And there were a whole bunch of bicycles. It seemed everybody had stolen a bicycle to ride to get to freedom. Anyhow, for some reason or another, I yelled across the river. I said, "Do we need bicycles over there?" A fellow said, "It wouldn't hurt!" So we started out with our bicycles across this pontoon bridge, and a Russian was yelling at us—they wanted us to leave the bicycles behind. But we just ignored him, and got to the other side. Now we're in American hands.

DePue: What were those first couple of minutes in American hands like? Can you describe that scene?

Stockmeier: Well, not really, because we were just completely tuckered out.

DePue: What time of day was this?

Stockmeier: Well, it was well into the afternoon. They told us that there'd be a truck come for us. There were a couple GIs on sentry duty there. And a truck did come, and they took us to Halle, which is near Leipzig, and we went into a military installation there. I don't know what the Germans used it for, but it had barracks, the complete works. And that's where we spent the night. (laughter) And actually, I think we stayed there a couple days before they took us to an airfield and they flew us out to Le Havre. We were at Camp Lucky Strike, which is

familiar to other servicemen returning after their duty in Europe. It was a transportation center, you might say.

DePue: This was in Le Havre?

Stockmeier: Outside of Le Havre.

DePue: Yeah. I think we've been at this for two hours and forty-five minutes, so I think it's probably time that we call it a day, and know that we've got a chapter two to this. It's been a fascinating story. It's hard for me to comprehend, and especially those last couple of months in Germany with the chaotic situation that everybody was living through at that time. I want to thank you very much for the opportunity, and we'll pick this up here in a couple of weeks.

Stockmeier: Okay!

(end of interview)

Interview with Fred Stockmeier

VR2-A-L-2007-012.02

Interview # 2: September 26, 2007
Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Wednesday, 26 September, 2007. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and I'm here with Fred Stockmeier. This is our second interview. Fred, you told us the first time all about your experiences in World War II, and especially the harrowing experiences as a POW. Today we want to focus primarily on your experiences in the Korean War, and how it is that somebody who has to go through the hell that you went through in World War II ends up in Korea as well. If you remember, Fred, when we left off the story last time –it was a great interview; I think it was one of the better interviews I've ever had –we had you right at the point where you were being liberated as a POW. One of the things you told us about was that you and your very small band of fellow POWs who were making your way west to find the American lines had left an injured comrade, I think somebody who had a broken leg. We left that poor soldier in Eastern Germany and hadn't explained what had happened to him. So I wanted to start with an explanation of that.

Stockmeier: All right. The man suffered a broken leg as a result of a highway accident. Now, this may sound strange, but it was a German tractor and a deep-box type wagon that came down the road, and we were allowed to get on and ride instead of having to walk. We broke over the crest of the hill, and we found out we had caught up to the shooting war, and the operator, the Russian soldier operating the tractor, reduced power in some manner. The pin holding the tongue to the tractor popped out, and we went down the road and crashed into a tree. A. D.,

the man who was injured, got his leg caught between the wagon box and the tree, and the leg was broken. We started gathering small branches to fashion a splint when the two Russian soldiers that were on the tractor came back, and we made them understand by sign language that this man had a broken leg. They nodded their heads and walked away, and came back from the—apparently the wagon box –with a board, and they pushed us out of the way and laid the board down alongside A. D.'s leg, drew a mark on it, went over to a tree, snapped it, came back, and proceeded to splint the leg just like they had done it every day. They then stopped a truck, made a turn around, loaded us on it, and it took us back to the last village, and to a small hospital. We made the staff of the hospital understand that our man could not speak German. They nodded, and they felt they could communicate with him, and I told them that we'd be back in a day or two to pick up our man. The Russian who was driving the truck began to get a little unhappy, insisted we come outside, and made us get on the truck again.He took us right back to the scene of the accident, dumped us off, and went on his way. Meanwhile the shooting war down at the bottom of the hill had stopped, and we proceeded then by foot. But it was years before I found out that A. D. had been found and had been returned to American control, and had returned to his home in North Carolina. I've never been able to reach him, because by the time we got to North Carolina, he had relocated to Maryland. And that's the end of the story, as far as A. D. is concerned.

DePue: Now, when you got to American lines, obviously you told somebody that you had left A. D., hoping that they'd be able to track him down?

Stockmeier: Oh, yes. We came to a point—now, I'm not sure I can put this in chronological order –but we came to a point where the American troops had withdrawn. Their garbage was laying around, but they were gone. And the railroad bridge and the highway bridge over the river, the direction that we were going, had both been blown. However, the railroad bridge held together: the rails and ties held together, sagged down to the water's level, but we managed to get down through the rubbish, and get up the other side. There was absolutely no way we could have gotten across the highway bridge; there just wasn't anything there.

DePue: What river was this?

Stockmeier: Well, I'd have to look at a map, but—

DePue: But it was the river that was dividing where the Americans and the Russian troops were?

Stockmeier: No. No, it was—

DePue: Short of that yet?

Stockmeier: Yeah, it was before that.

DePue: Okay.

Stockmeier: We did continue on our way, and—oh, boy. The river—I don't know if it was the Elbe or what –but we got to the river, and the bridge there had been blown, but jerry-rigged, a thing had been created that permitted us to get across the river and finally get back into American-held territory.

DePue: What was it like, that first moment when you finally linked up with American troops after all of this?

Stockmeier: Relief. (laughter) That's about the only way to describe it. Relief. We found ourselves taken a little bit further away from the river, and we were at some kind of a training facility, German training facility, and there were a lot of ex-POWs there. We finally received some American food.

DePue: What was the first thing that you ate? Do you recall?

Stockmeier: Well, it seemed to me that we had a most delicious one-half of a wiener and sauerkraut that were given to us as our first meal. Unfortunately, we didn't approve of this; we set up a hunting party, and we came back with some steaks. There was an officers' mess that didn't have enough steaks that night, but we did. (laughter)

DePue: Well, maybe you were more deserving of steaks than they were, huh?

Stockmeier: But anyhow, we continued scouting around, and about a half a dozen of us found a large building; we were trained to make our way into it, and it was completely secured. And all of a sudden, we had rifle shot, and a slug hit the building above our heads, and we gave up hunting.

DePue: So that was an American who was firing a warning shot at you? Or you don't know?

Stockmeier: We don't know. We didn't worry about it, because it was high enough that it wasn't going to any damage. We weren't at this location very long before they took us to an airfield and put us on some DC-2s and -3s and flew us out to Lucky Strike.

DePue: Lucky Strike was an American military base in Germany?

Stockmeier: No, it was on the coast of France. It was Camp Lucky Strike for recovered allied military personnel, or RAMPs, as we were called. It had been an area where incoming troops had been billeted until they were assigned to individual outfits. So once we got to Lucky Strike, we were on our first big step to getting out of France. I don't know how many days we were there, but the main thing that we remembered is that coffee was hard to get. We had plenty of English tea, but we couldn't get coffee. And of course, our little raiding parties always managed to come up with something. I don't know how the quartermaster explained it, but we managed to get ourselves cleaned up, even got some clothing, and eventually we were taken to a dock. Everybody ahead of us had been taken

below decks; our group remained on deck, took us forward to the bow of the ship, and left us there. We were wondering what was going on. And finally we noticed there were additional troops coming aboard, and they were taken below decks. We finally pulled enough heartstrings that somebody told us that the ship had a load and a half, and we were the half load. We would spend one night on deck and then a second night we would be below decks. It was to be a one-man-for-one-man exchange. Except nobody below deck was going to make an exchange, give up a bunk to sleep on the deck. We made it over to Southampton, and then started back to the States. Our port was Boston. We never slept in a bunk the entire trip back.

DePue: So this is how they treat POWs. They said, "Well, you guys don't get as good a berth as the folks who weren't POWs."

Stockmeier: There was a story about Eisenhower coming in, and of course everybody surrounded him. He said, "You men are entitled to get home as soon as possible;" so he said, "we're going to do what we can to get you home." He said, "It will take longer, but at least you'll be able to travel in comfort." One little sergeant kind of elbowed his way up, and he says, "General," he says, "I've been in this Army three years, and I've never traveled in comfort, and don't expect to. If you've got a boat, put me on it and get me home." Of course, everybody laughed, but that was the reason we ended up with a load and a half aboard the ship.

DePue: Now, were you at this incident with Eisenhower, or you just heard about it?

Stockmeier: No, I was close enough to know what was going on, but I wasn't much in the mood for going over and kissing him by his boots. (laughter)

DePue: So he was on your ship?

Stockmeier: Pardon?

DePue: Was this on your ship?

Stockmeier: No, this was just a day or so before we got on the ship.

DePue: Okay. One of the things I did want to ask you before I get you out of France: did you get a medical evaluation, a medical checkup?

Stockmeier: Well, we had something that passed for it. But in all honesty, there were so many of us and so few doctors that literally, if you could move around on your own, you passed.

DePue: So if they figured out that you were raiding other people's food stores, then you must have been relatively healthy.

Stockmeier: Well, I don't know if they knew about it, but they knew some food was disappearing. But aboard ship, as I said, we were above deck from the time we left Southampton until we got to Boston. That's officially. Unofficially, the Chief Steward had taken pity on us and had taken quite a large group of us down to his lockers, and he pulled out mattresses. We were below waterline, but he pulled mattresses out so at night we could sleep. Third night we were down there; all of the sudden, here came the MPs, [Military Police] and it seems that the troop commander was not happy with the fact that we were sleeping the way we were. So the place was put off-limits, and we ended up, as much as we could, sleeping on the deck or the mess hall. Again, the mess hall aboard that ship was "stand up and eat," so the tables were on pipe frameworks that could be raised and secured in place so that the floor was open. And that was the way that we got back to Boston.

DePue: Was this a troop ship, a liberty ship?

Stockmeier: Converted cargo.

DePue: So luxury was not what it was all about.

Stockmeier: No. (laughter)

DePue: What was your attitude, though, being treated like you were? What was your attitude being a released POW, heading back to the States?

Stockmeier: Well, the night we were kicked out of the steward's lockers, I found my way to the troop office; it was just a cut-out in the bulkhead separating you from whoever was in the office. The only person in there was a major, and I kind of expressed myself about the treatment that we were getting, and was quickly invited for my name, rank, and serial number. With that, I disappeared. I never saw him again

DePue: But you felt a little bit better having told him off, at least?

Stockmeier: Well, I didn't tell him off. But I expressed my unhappiness, and I think he got the message.

DePue: What happened once you got to Boston?

Stockmeier: Well, on the way to Boston –I think it was the third day out of Southampton – our engines failed, and we drifted. The ship's crew told us that there was no way that they could be sure that all of the U-Boats [German submarines] had received word of the surrender. So they cautioned us about not having life preservers or something. And then another day later –I think we drifted for about six hours that day –and then the next day or so, the engines conked out again, and we had another two-hour drift before we started moving. When we got to Boston, there was bans on all of the Hollywood-type receptions, but we got to Myles Standish, and had the traditional steak meal. From there, we were

moved quickly out by train, and we ended up at Atterbury, south of Indianapolis. And there we went through the usual processing, until we were given furloughs, and we headed home. There were two other fellows from my general area; the three of us made up our own individual packet, and we had an Air Force Lieutenant who was made our leader. He was not a command officer, he was a pilot. (laughter) And he was a little bit buffaloed as to what to do, but anyhow, we made it. I had, I think it was sixty-eight days' temporary duty at home.

DePue: Was this in the summer of '45?

Stockmeier: Yes. I got home on June the eleventh, and then the other two fellows' orders were identical. So we had our sixty-eight days at home, and then went to Florida, Miami Beach, Florida, to the recreation center. The sixty-eight days at home proved to be a little hellish. When we'd get together at night, we'd end up some public place. We couldn't understand; these people didn't seem to know just how serious this thing was. They were complaining about not having this or not having that, bragging about how much money they had made, and done a little work. And that just turned the three of us off. We didn't want to associate with these people who were so damned selfish. So it was kind of a relief, actually, at the end of the sixty-eight days, to get together and jump on the train and get down to Florida.

DePue: What was that first moment like when you arrived home? Where was home again?

Stockmeier: Well, this was a small town in northwestern Ohio by the name of Holgate, H-o-l-g-a-t-e. It was about, oh, forty miles southwest of Toledo.

DePue: That was where your parents lived?

Stockmeier: Mm-hmm.

DePue: And refresh my memory, you weren't married at this time.

Stockmeier: No.

DePue: So what was the first moment when you walked through that door, or when you saw your parents?

Stockmeier: Well, they were outside, and there was a little girl there that I had never seen before; it turned out to be a niece, my sister's daughter that my folks were taking care of. But it was different. Our family is not wildly emotional at times; it's more bottled up than anything else. But it took a little while before we calmed down. I started looking for some civilian clothes to wear, and nothing fit. (laughter) But I didn't worry about it, because we were in uniform, even though we were on leave.

DePue: Now, what were your parents telling you then about what they knew and maybe what they didn't know during that time when you had been captured?

Stockmeier: Well, it was quite a mixed up mess. My name had been broadcast by propaganda broadcasts as a prisoner of war. However, the military never received any notification; the International Red Cross never notified them. But my folks received thirty-five postcards, brief letters, saying that my name had been broadcast as being a prisoner of war. And one man, E.E. Alderman, in Dayton, Ohio, had actually called. He called them and told them what he had heard, and that he would send confirmation. But Alderman apparently had a good reputation with everybody, because eventually, even though I was home, eventually, my father took all of these postcards and letters, sent them to a man I knew in Washington who worked for the Department of Agriculture. This man took them to the War Department and explained that there was never any official word, other than that I was missing in action, word that they had gotten, I think it was the twentieth of December. The War Department people finally said, "Well, if Alderman heard it, it must be true." So then they sent notice that I was a prisoner of war. (laughter)

DePue: And by that time, your parents had heard from several different sources.

Stockmeier: By that time, I was on the way home.

DePue: Were your parents greatly concerned, or were they somewhat relieved to know that you were a prisoner of war, and maybe out of action then?

Stockmeier: Well, that's hard to say. My father wrote one letter. I don't know if you've seen them; Kriegsgefaneinenpost, which was a German form that prisoners could use to write letters. He had sent one letter, and the censor returned it, because he had mentioned in there the broadcasts that had been reported to them. The censor returned the letter because we shouldn't acknowledge listening to propaganda broadcast from an enemy country or something like that.

DePue: Somewhat ironic, since your own government and the Red Cross weren't telling what was happening with you.

Stockmeier: It's a different ball game when you're dealing with military people who have never been shot at. (laughter) But...

DePue: No better bureaucrats.

Stockmeier: Yeah. Eventually, though, we got down to Florida, and there we were interviewed for placement. Meanwhile, I had been actually in Washington and gone to the War Department to find out if there was any chance that I was going to be sent to the Far East. And was given the good news, yes, if they need you, you'll be sent. So we got down to Florida, and I was interviewed for a job at Edgewood Arsenal, Maryland. Chemical warfare. And this was of great interest

to me, because there was an attractive young blonde lady in Washington, DC that I'd be able to see quite often.

DePue: Well, you didn't waste too much time in DC then.

Stockmeier: Well, I had met her on the way over, when I got to Washington once on the way over. And she was a very nice young lady, very attractive. But anyhow, this job at Edgewood Arsenal turned out to be kind of guinea pigs. As the chemicals were being tested, we were considered volunteers who would go through the gas chambers or whatever. And before that happened, I found out that they wanted somebody to work in the dining room. So, buck sergeants don't usually work as KPs, but this was a chance. Another young fellow who lived in Baltimore, just had gotten married, and between the two of us, we covered the dining room three days at a time. And I had three days in Washington, and in between times, playing penny-ante poker, and making enough money to afford Washington.

DePue: Well, you've kind of mentioned this a couple of times already, but did you find it hard then to readjust to civilian life, and then military life where you're not even close to combat?

Stockmeier: You know, that's so long ago, I really don't remember. One thing you learn as a POW is to survive, and you adapt. You don't entirely give up the past, but you use it to modify the present, so that you do continue to live. Well, for instance, after I got home for awhile, jumped on a train, went up to Wisconsin to see my father's relatives. Came back to Chicago, got on another train, went out to Iowa to visit my mother's relatives. Got home, jumped on a train, went to Washington, DC. So it was a matter of keeping busy enough that you didn't have time to start sweating the details. The main thing is, to us, collectively, I say this, we were disappointed with the American people and their attitude. They didn't realize how serious this situation had been that brought on the war. And how self-centered. Even after I finally got my discharge from the chemical warfare center, first Sunday I was home, I didn't have any civilian clothes that fit. I got home Saturday, what was it, Saturday morning. I didn't have any civilian clothes that fit, so I went to church in uniform. The next week, I got over to Fort Wayne, Indiana, got the navy blue pinstripe. And so the second Sunday, I went to church in civilian clothes. And as I was leaving after services, a woman stopped me, and she says, "Oh, my. You were so fortunate that you were never called into service." Now, our community was plainly rural, and you knew everybody for miles around. And you couldn't help but know who was in service and who wasn't. But this lady just thought it was wonderful that I had not been in the military. And then she went on to tell me how her dear nephew had to fly those big airplanes around the Pacific Ocean picking up people out of the water, and how horrible it was. I never said a word to her. You've heard that expression about hair standing up on the back of your neck?

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Stockmeier: It does. I could just feel it. But I controlled myself; I never said a word. Soon as she was done talking, I said goodbye and left. (laughter) Never told her.

DePue: And don't know that she ever found out that you'd seen the hard side of war. Where were you when you found out about the A-bomb being dropped on Japan?

Stockmeier: I think it was...

DePue: Florida, or back in DC area?

Stockmeier: No, I was home. I mean, I was on that sixty-eight days. I think I had gone into Toledo to see some people that I'd gone to school with. And I think we got the word that night that the bomb had been dropped.

DePue: What did you think when you heard that news?

Stockmeier: Well, it's a mixed reaction.

DePue: Did you even understand what it was they were trying to tell you?

Stockmeier: Well, we had a pretty good idea that there had been something being developed, but we didn't know the nature of it. And so when they said *atomic*, this didn't really give us enough to go on yet to really know. But, well, it was done. And we can enjoy the benefits of it, if there were any. But I'm glad that they didn't have it in Europe.

DePue: Well, one of the benefits was that the war ended just a few days after that, and there had to be incredible relief at that moment.

Stockmeier: Yeah. Well, there was relief, yes, but at the same time, the local people with their hands out can now see the end of their jobs. They weren't going to be riding the gravy train anymore.

DePue: And they all remembered what the American economy was like before the war came along.

Stockmeier: I hate to be bitter, but I am. Those of us who have been in Europe, at least in our camp, we knew that Hitler had ordered us executed. And again, these marches that we made, from here to there. When the Russians got too close to us over there at the Oder river, they started walking us for about eight days before we got over there south of Berlin. And eight days, the first eight days of February, is not good climate in Germany. And again, one of the lifesavers for me was the fact that I could speak enough German to get along. I don't know—did I mention the family that took me into their house?

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Stockmeier: The contrasts. You have the worst and you have the better. The better helps you tolerate the worst. You know it's not completely hopeless.

DePue: But you were obviously a little bit surprised, and you've already said disappointed, by a lot of the Americans you encountered when you got back home.

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: They didn't comprehend the sacrifice that you folks were making, or the seriousness of the enemy?

Stockmeier: I don't like to call it a sacrifice. It was a necessity. The thing that came home to me more these later years than ever before is the fact that I got out of high school, got into college, got pulled out on the draft. And my growing up days were over. You went from carefree days to days that were anything but. My grandchildren, at least, have gone through a transition at an easier pace than I did. They didn't have decisions to make when they really weren't mature enough to make them.

DePue: Well, after the—

Stockmeier: Do I sound selfish? (laughter)

DePue: No, not at all. Tell me a little bit about what the celebration was like, the day you found out the Japanese surrendered.

Stockmeier: We were just a small group, and we stayed that way. Of course radio was full of all kinds of on-the-spot reports.

DePue: Something's beeping here. I'm going to pause it here. (pause in recording) Okay, we're on.

Stockmeier: Well, again, we didn't go out and make a big to-do about it. When you look at your life, during actual combat, if you came out of it –and so many fellows didn't –there was a feeling of thankfulness, a feeling of relief. And yet there were sad overtones to it. I'm not a word merchant; I can't put my feelings into good thoughts.

DePue: But you weren't feeling like it was time to celebrate then?

Stockmeier: No. Not really. Our celebration was when the Russians came in that Sunday morning, in Germany.

DePue: And liberated the camp. Was time then—we've got all kinds of background noise here. I assume at that moment in time, though, it's time to decide: okay, I'm going to move on with my life and turn in a different direction. How long after that were you actually discharged from the military?

Stockmeier: I received my discharge on Thanksgiving Day in '45 at Indiantown Gap. We had arrived, and were told that we'd have a day or so before anything much could be done because of Thanksgiving. But enough people were unhappy that all of a sudden, they decided to process us. So we worked all night, going through processing. And I got my discharge on Thanksgiving Day morning. Stayed on for another meal, and then got into town to catch a train home. The barracks where we lived, a newsboy came through every afternoon trying to sell newspapers; The first day, didn't sell any, I guess, and the second day he wasn't selling any. He got down to the far end of the barracks, he turned around and came walking back, "Sinatra loses his voice! Sinatra loses his voice!" About a half a dozen guys bought the newspaper just to see. There was a little squib in there, Sinatra had a sore throat.

DePue: What did you have in mind to do then? You probably had a lot of time in prison camp to be thinking about what you wanted to do with the rest of your life when you got out of there. So what were your intentions at that time?

Stockmeier: Well, as I said, I was discharged on Thanksgiving Day, and when I got home, I had to do something. So I went into town and got a job selling in a department store for the Christmas rush. And when that was over, I got to two other fellows my age who were home now, and we went over to Bowling Green to the state university, and we all three enrolled in the university. And we started classes in February. So I didn't have a long time in which to stagnate and get wild ideas.

DePue: Did they already have the GI bill at that time?

Stockmeier: Mm-hmm.

DePue: So they were picking up most of the bills to go to school.

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: What were you majoring in?

Stockmeier: Business administration. Specifically personnel. And when I got out in June of '49, the personnel rainbow had disappeared. I was offered one job at a subsidiary of General Motors, and the man under whom I was to work told me quite bluntly that he didn't think a college degree was necessary. He had come up through the ranks and everybody else could too. So I listened, and he offered a job, and I turned it down. I figured that this was going to be a sure loser. So that was that. I got another job, and it was investigative in nature, and it was digging up too much dirt, you might say. So I said goodbye, and I became a deputy sheriff.

DePue: Now, you were also in the reserves during this time?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: Was this the active reserves?

Stockmeier: No. The inactive.

DePue: So your name was just on a roster someplace.

Stockmeier: Things had gotten a little sticky over in the Far East, and those of us who were at Indiantown Gap got started talking to one of the regular Army boys. I don't know if it was him or somebody that he called in; he explained to us that we could be recalled to active duty, even though we were discharged for a period of years –what was it, seven years or something –during which time you could be recalled to duty. And we all—well, I shouldn't say we all –but 20 percent of our group signed up in the reserves, simply on the basis of protecting ourselves from having to start at the bottom and do it all over again.

DePue: Okay. So this particular incident you're talking about was '45, '46?

Stockmeier: Forty-five.

DePue: Okay. So about the time that you were being discharged then.

Stockmeier: Yeah. In fact, we got most of the news about it at Indiantown Gap. It occurred during our transition from Edgewood Arsenal to Indiantown Gap. And the feeling was, Well, here we go again.

DePue: When you say the news, you're talking about the news of Korea?

Stockmeier: No, the news of this problem that China was creating.

DePue: Okay. Okay, so this probably during the height of the Chinese civil war?

Stockmeier: Well, I don't know anymore what it was. Anyhow, we knew it could have an impact on us.

DePue: Somewhere along here, you got married as well.

Stockmeier: Yeah, I got married while I was in college. And—

DePue: Is that where you met your wife?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: And her name?

Stockmeier: Her name, Estella. Middle initial R. for Ruth. And her maiden name was McClure.

DePue: Okay.

Stockmeier: Her brother was rooming in the same building that I was, and he told me that his sister was coming for homecoming, and that's when I met her. And eventually, we started dating. She was teaching school in a city up on Lake Erie. So I didn't see much of her during the school year. But, well, it'll soon be sixty years – come December it'll be sixty years we've been married. She taught school in my home area. I'm trying to remember, I don't think she—see, I went back on active duty in August of 1950, graduated college in June of '49. And she had given up teaching, and she went down to Dayton to live with my sister and her husband. She worked at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base during the time that I was in Korea.

DePue: Did you have any children those first couple of years?

Stockmeier: No.

DePue: Okay. Had some children later on?

Stockmeier: Yes. We had—

DePue: Looking around for pictures here.

Stockmeier: No, they're all in the family room. Yes, we had a son and three daughters. And in fact, the first three were born in Ohio, and the third daughter was born after we were in Michigan.

DePue: So let's bring you up to June of 1950. Where were you working at that time?

Stockmeier: Deputy Sheriff.

DePue: And that was in what community?

Stockmeier: Near, well, Henry County, Ohio.

DePue: Henry County?

Stockmeier: Yes.

DePue: And do you recall the moment that you heard about the North Koreans invading the South?

Stockmeier: Yeah. Again, it was one of these, "Where's Korea?"—you know. We had a general idea, but really we had to look at a map to find its location. I wasn't happy with this business of being Deputy Sheriff, and the fact that businesses had cut out all of the frill program now that the government wasn't paying them cost plus ten. I actually went back over to the college to see about getting enough courses to qualify as a teacher. They were eager to have me come back, but finances were a little bit of a problem. So eventually, I got the notice from

the military that they were accepting voluntary recalls to active duty. And I told my wife, I said, "Well, this is the first step towards being recalled."

DePue: So you saw it as somewhat inevitable at that time?

Stockmeier: Well, already there had been some select people, special skills, had been called back for active duty. But I just thought, well, what the heck? I'll go put in my twenty years, still be young enough when I retire to do something.

DePue: But at this moment in time, the United States Army is not doing well at all in Korea when you're debating this.

Stockmeier: Well, that we hadn't heard yet.

DePue: Okay. The news about the Pusan Perimeter and what a disaster that was?

Stockmeier: No, that came later in the year. In fact—

DePue: So what you're talking about now occurred in June?.

Stockmeier: The invasion was—I mean, the North Koreans started at the end of June –

DePue: Right. June 25.

Stockmeier: Yeah. And by the end of July, I felt my time was coming anyhow, so might as well volunteer and have a little choice.

DePue: Well, what was Estella telling you?

Stockmeier: Nothing.

DePue: She was okay with it, or she was resigned to it?

Stockmeier: Resigned, I imagine. I know our family doctor here once asked me, he said, "How did you get back into the military?" I said, "I asked for it." He said, "I knew it!" But it didn't take long for me to decide that the modern Army was not for me. During World War II, everybody had a job to do and they did it, and you know you were going to go East or West. So now, a modern Army man who goes to FECOM, [Far East Command] "My buddy went to Germany and I had to go here!" Oh, well. Of course when those people were complaining and moaning and groaning, those of us who were being recalled weren't exactly impressed.

DePue: Yeah. So you went to basic training at Fort Knox? Or you didn't go to basic, but you—

Stockmeier: No. Went to Fort Knox for processing. Oh, that word, *processing*. The mess hall at Fort Knox was one of the worst I've ever seen. You could go in, get in line, you'd grab a tray, and it would go scooting out of your hands, it's so greasy. And

the attitude of the people! First of all, they were trying to serve about three times as many people as they were equipped to do. They just weren't accustomed, because the draft, you know, was bringing them in, and then they'd get these retreads. Now, the draftees, most of them were very unhappy, at least in our part of the country. Down in the southeast part of the country, in the hill country, these kids were happy with all of the glamor of the military, until they got in. Oh, those days. But we had a lot of—I shouldn't say a lot –but there were more than a few of the retreads that had been prisoners. The older retreads, of course, had seen combat. The younger men who had served a year active, and then were in reserves, they'd never seen combat. They were just putting in their time until their four years of reserve time were up, and then that was it. But those of us who had been in combat, I think our attitude—now I don't know how to describe it –I shouldn't say we were contemptuous of these kids, but we just thought, "Oh, my God, if they have to go through what we went through, they're going to smarten up in a hurry." We finally finished processing, had a furlough on the way home to take care of business. Got to Chicago, and walking through the station, and a fellow comes up to me, and he said, "Sergeant," he said, "how would you like a ticket to the World Series?" I says, "Well, that's in New York, and my orders are Seattle." I says, "What's the story?" He was a sports writer from the West Coast on his way to the World Series; he had tickets that he could pass out. So he went and I went. I got out to Seattle, and most of the fellows I ended up with had been at Knox at the same time. So it was a little bit of homecoming for us to get together again.

DePue: Now, I know that when you were at Knox, you had offers to stay at Knox and work in positions there.

Stockmeier: Yeah. No, they wanted to put me in the MPs, and I said no. "Sergeant, if you don't take a job here, you're going to go overseas. " And I said, "Well, it's not going to last that long."

DePue: Is that what you just said, or is that what you believed?

Stockmeier: Well, I halfway believed it. But anyhow, after we got out to Seattle, they took us out to, where was it? Fort Lewis?

DePue: Yes.

Stockmeier: And we had to have a hundred hours of refresher training before we could be sent overseas. Now, the day we had gotten there, we had seen some GI trucks go by, and some guys yelling, and we looked, and they were other people who had been at Knox. They were on the way to McCord Field, and they flew to Japan. But before we got that far, orders had come from Washington for refresher training. So here I am, the lone field artillery man with all of these infantry people. So we go out on a field, and the instructor turned around, and he says, "Sergeant,"—me—"take some men and show them how to take this building." So, I went back through my days in Mississippi, and I got six men,

and we set up and went forward and got it all done. The instructor said, "Well, that was fine, Sergeant, but you were smoking a cigarette." And without thinking, I said, "My God, how did we ever win in Germany?" And I regret saying that, but you know, they go by the book."

DePue: Yeah. Well, I was waiting for you to say that you sat down and called in a fire mission on the building. That's what a good artillery man should do.

Stockmeier: Well, we went through our training, and then again instead of flying over, we were put aboard the ship. And we went to Yokohama, oh, what the heck was the name of the military base there? I can't even remember. It was one of those Japanese military bases where everything was tinderwood. If you dropped a lit cigarette on the floor, you had a chance that the whole building was going to burn. But we were there, went through the usual process. My God, they gave me a smallpox vaccination at Fort Knox; before they could read it, I'm on my way to Seattle. Got out to Seattle, they gave me a smallpox vaccination. Before they could read it, I was on my way to Japan. So I got to Japan, they gave me another one. Anyhow, I finally got my shot record, and I kept it updated. But they gave me another one in Korea. We weren't in Yokohama that long before we were given our assignments, and we got aboard the ship. A senior non-com's put in the provost office, and we had to run little details on the way over. One night, one of the officers came in and saw the cribbage board. "Well, who's the champion?" Everybody pointed to me. It was one of those nights when you wish you were playing for money. Couldn't do anything wrong. Well, he says, "Come on, I'll show you how to play this game." So I kind of turned around in my chair to see who was to the side of me, and I didn't know this fellow, so as I pulled my cards, I'd hold them so that he could read them. And every once in awhile, I'd look at him, and he was just shaking his head. I could pull two fives, two fours, get a six on the flip. I couldn't do anything wrong. This officer started to steam; I never saw it happen before. Anyhow, when he finally quit, and I went out to check the men that I had posted around the ship, and next time I came back, one of the fellows said, "Well, you missed it." I said, "What do you mean?" "Well," he said, "that officer came back with a bottle of booze, asked if you were around, said you were out doing your job, and he says, 'Okay, you owe him a bottle of booze.'" They all had booze, and he took the bottle with him when he left. (laughter)

DePue: So you missed a free drink that night. (laughter)

Stockmeier: Well, it didn't really bother me.

DePue: Yeah, that's not what the Sergeant of the Guard is supposed to be doing.

Stockmeier: But we got to Korea, and we offloaded at Inchon, waded ashore; they had pretty high tides there, and we got there at low tide, and so we grounded some distance, and they dropped the gate and we waded ashore. And there were some galvanized cans there, fire under them. C-rations in the cans. [canned food

rations] So we each got some lukewarm C-rations, and walked down, got aboard railroad cars. And then we sat there all night. You're wet to your knees; it's cold, the seventh of December. And you had these lukewarm C-rations. And then finally, the next morning, we moved; we couldn't have gone more than five miles. We stopped, unloaded, they started forming us up, and some Patton-type [General Patton, famous from WWII] was giving us a Patton-type speech, all the valor and patriotism and this and that. A corporal came driving up in a Jeep, and went to one officer; that officer immediately went over to the colonel who was speaking, and he interrupted him and said, "The following men fall out immediately," called out six names, and mine was one of them. Pulled us off to the side with this Corporal. And we said, "What's going on?" "Well, we need you right now." I says, "Well," I said, "I was assigned to 1st Cav."[Cavalry Division] "No. Those orders have been changed. You're now assigned to the 2nd Infantry Division."

DePue: Do you know what position you were supposed to go to in the 1st Cav? Infantry or artillery or—?

Stockmeier: No. Never saw the orders. But anyhow, this fellow told us, he said, "You have critical MOS; [military occupation specialty] we need you now." And we started asking each other, "What's your MOS?" Well, I had two: Field Communications Chief, and Personnel,Personnel simply because I had graduated from college. So anyhow, they had transport there for us; they loaded us up, and we ended up in the 9th Infantry Regiment. Oh, boy, does that do things for a red leg. (laughter) But things were kind of topsy-turvy, because the 2nd had been wasted up at Kunu-ri. We didn't know it at the time, but they had lost 75 percent of their materiel and 25 percent of their manpower.

DePue: Well, I don't think the 1st Cav fared much better though, did they?

Stockmeier: No. The two regiments in the 2nd Division got the worst. But anyhow, gradually now we get into the outfit; the first thing you know, we're packing up and moving back. You set up, before you can do anything, you're packing up again and moving, because the Chinese were coming that fast. Well, eventually I ended up in Personnel. First thing I had to do was write casualty reports. It was at six copies, no beautiful computer to do it for you. Six copies the hard way.

DePue: Typewriter.

Stockmeier: Typewriter. And I don't know how long I did that. I think it was from the time you could see in the morning until you couldn't see at night.

DePue: What kind of information was included on the casualty report? Are these individual soldiers that you're reporting on?

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: How they had been injured and where and why?

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: Well, where were you getting that information? I would think it'd be—

Stockmeier: We had a flunky who got the list from morning reports. He'd get the list of casualties, go pull their 201 files, bring them to us, and then we get the information that we needed out of the 201 or whatever was available.

DePue: Had they consolidated all of the 201 files at the division level?

Stockmeier: Well, we were at regimental.

DePue: Regimental level, okay.

Stockmeier: Yeah. Everything was there. But eventually then we began to get on top of it. I think my peak day, I wrote fifty-eight casualty reports.

DePue: Injured, missing in action, or killed in action?

Stockmeier: MIA, KIA, self-inflicted gunshot wound. Whatever the category was, we had it.

DePue: Shell-shock?

Stockmeier: Not so much that.

DePue: This is the middle of winter. How about—

Stockmeier: Frostbite?

DePue: Frostbite.

Stockmeier: That's the reason the men were shooting themselves. One of the fellows I went over with –I had known him in Washington –he ended up in the regiment, and it got so cold one night he shot himself in the leg.

DePue: Well, you'd been—

Stockmeier: You weren't aware of these things?

DePue: Oh, yeah. I was aware. You'd been in some pretty dire straits in Germany, and it was certainly cold in the winter you'd spent in POW camp. Was it colder in Korea?

Stockmeier: Yes. The thing about Korea, it was so primitive. When you get into the village, if there's a solidly built building, it's probably the school, or the Japanese had had an office there during their occupation. Otherwise, it was the old bamboo thatchwork with mud plastered on both sides. One room, thatch roof. A fire came through a long duct under the floor into the chimney and out.

DePue: Yeah. *ondol* heating is what they called it when I was there, which is great if it's working.

Stockmeier: Yeah. (laughter) Well, I never slept in one of those, but one of the guys did, and he says, "You burn your butt and freeze your face," because the heat is coming up from below. But you don't have a sensation of overall warmth, because your top side is exposed.

DePue: And there's plenty of ventilation in these rooms, I would suspect.

Stockmeier: Yes. (laughter)

DePue: You went to Seoul when you first got there, and then you—

Stockmeier: Seoul, yeah.

DePue: And this was a town that had already been fought through twice?

Stockmeier: But actually we landed at the port city.

DePue: In Inchon.

Stockmeier: Yeah. And we didn't get into Seoul at all.

DePue: Okay.

Stockmeier: And we no more than got there than we were moving south again.

DePue: So by that time, the 2nd Division had withdrawn all the way from the Yalu River past the thirty-eighth parallel and were heading their way south of Seoul. And that's when you married up with the Regimental Headquarters.

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: How far back, typically, was the Regimental Headquarters from the rest of the regiment, from the fighting?

Stockmeier: I can't tell you. Oh, yes, we could hear gunfire. Off and on, you'd be—I mean, it wasn't a consistent thing –one day you'd be ten miles back, and another day you might be three miles back. Fluid situation, it was about the only way to describe it. Well, one of our mistakes is we went over there expecting to fight a European-type war, and it didn't fit. Now, the bug-out from Kunu-ri: one time when we began to get caught up on all of the records and reporting, and we were far enough back we had movies, and I told the guys, I said, "Look, we've worked enough. You guys go to the movie if you want to; I'm going to write a letter to my wife." And while I'm writing to her, the flap opens on the tent, a head comes through, and it's got a gold something on it.

DePue: An oak leaf, maybe?

Stockmeier: It was a major's leaf. And I, of course –a field grade officer –gave him the courtesy of a salute, and I snapped to to report, and he said, "Take it easy. You can get hurt like that. What have I got here?" Well, it turned out to be the Executive Officer of the 2nd Battalion, and he was coming in to check on what had happened to some of his men. While I'm checking the records of him, my guys are coming back from the movie, and they come in—ooh, brass! (laughter) They immediately calmed down, but he was real cool, calm, collected. Anyhow, finally he said, "Well, I think I'd better find a place to sleep." I says, "Well, Major, you go over to officers' country," I said, "you're going to be sleeping on the ground." I said, "We've got one man here who's away for a few days." I says, "That's his bunker in the corner, got a mosquito bar." I says, "Feel free to use it if you wish." By golly, he did. Well, anyhow, that night, the boys are making coffee, and he says, "You got anything to drink?" I says, "Just Navy coffee, and don't ask us where we got it." (laughter) "Well, gee, we had a liquor ration." And I said, "Well, you're on a different schedule than we are," I said, "we haven't had one." Anyhow, in the morning, he thanked us and he left.The first fellow up in the morning fires up the stove, the Coleman, and heats his water for washing, and refills the helmet for the next guy, and everybody has their chance; well, he had a chance to have hot water for shaving, and he seemed to enjoy it. But anyhow, he went up to the old man [his senior officer] – we didn't know it at the time –but he went up to the old man and told him that we had accommodated him overnight and so on. So when he left, the old man came back, and he wasn't happy. It wasn't right for a field grade officer to sleep with enlisted men. One of the boys started to come up, and he got the message; he didn't say anything. The old man chewed us out, and then when he left, when he was out of earshot, the boys really let loose. To make the story real interesting, a little later, the old man came back, and he said, "The major sent you guys a little gift. If I think you can handle it, I'll give it to you." Three bottles of booze.

DePue: (laughter) Whiskey?

Stockmeier: Whiskey. The old man brought back—was it that night or the next night? Anyhow, he brought back one bottle, and we just set it down, weren't opening it. Finally, one of the boys said, "Well," he said, "I think maybe we ought to try this stuff." That's all the old man was waiting for. He was going to get his out of that bottle. (laughter)

DePue: Do you remember the Regimental Commander's name?

Stockmeier: The Regimental Commander, oh, gosh.

DePue: Was that who you were talking about? Or were you talking about Company Commander?

Stockmeier: No, the personnel officer.

DePue: Oh, okay. The S-1.

Stockmeier: Captain—well, we had Captain Hillman, Captain Horseman, and I don't remember which one it was. One of them was West Point, and he was a man that you had to respect. When he took over, he came back to me one day, and he had one of my reports; he said, "How come you wrote this report like this?" I said, "Well, those were the instructions from EUSAK, Eighth Army, Eighth US Army in Korea." I said, "We had a directive from EUSAK." He said, "Could I see it?" And I said, "Well, I don't have it." I said, "I'll have to pull it from the files." He said, "Okay. Bring it out." So I went over to find the directive, and I took it up, and I pointed out to him what he was looking for, and he says, "That's all right, just lay it down." He said, "I'll look at it in a little while." So I went back, it wasn't a half an hour, and he's there with another report. "Why did you report this report like this?" And again, it's an Eighth Army directive. Well, I had to go get that, take it up to him, show it to him. And a little while later he came back with the directives so that they could be re-filed. Meanwhile, my brain is going like this, so I started going around and doing a little checking and doing a little listening, and I found out that he was going to everybody in some kind of a capacity who was responsible for something, and seeing if they knew what they were doing and why. He asked me twice; all I had to do was show him something that he had missed, or deliberately missed, I don't know which, and he was satisfied. But the guys who tried to bluff?

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Stockmeier: Now, they found what a West Pointer was like. (laughter) I saw him take a drunken sergeant one day away from us –we could see him, but he must have been about seventy-five feet away –and this sergeant is kind of weaving on his feet, and the old man is talking to him, and, boy, perceptibly, that sergeant began to straighten up. He was a changed man. Never again did you see him in that condition.

DePue: So you respected this officer.

Stockmeier: Oh, I sure did.

DePue: How about some of the other officers and the NCOs that you worked with?

Stockmeier: Well, it seemed to me that some of the upper-level NCOs, the Regular Army, the boys who'd been in it since World War II, it seemed to me that they resented anybody like myself as staff, and being put into a work program along with these Regular Army people. They were Regular Army; they've earned their way. They've got permanent rank and all of that, and for a reservist to come in on them –instead of coming up, to come in on them –there were a few that I think resented us.

DePue: They didn't figure that you'd earned the right to have that rank, considering what you'd gone through in World War II?

Stockmeier: I never let it get me.

DePue: You had more important things to worry about.

Stockmeier: Well, again, when you've been a prisoner, there are some things you learn to keep to yourself.

DePue: And some things you decided that's worth worrying about or it's not worth worrying about, huh?

Stockmeier: Yeah. I remember one time, I was walking between the old man's tent and—I mean, the headquarters tent to my own tent –and a whole bunch of guys came out of a tent like the place was on fire, and I said, "What's going on?" "Well, so-and-so is in there, and pulled a pin on a hand grenade." Well, so-and-so was one of our bad boys, regimental bad boy. And, whoops! So I waited, and nothing happened. So I went in, and he's sitting there, and I said, "Whatcha got?" "A grenade." I said, "Gee, those things are dangerous. You got the pin for that thing?" "Yeah." "Think you could put it back in?" "Oh, sure." "Put it in." He didn't have it any longer. And I went up to the Sergeant Major and told him what had happened, and he just—well, let's say the man never saw another hand grenade. (laughter) But these guys—"What in the hell are you doing?" The Sergeant Major, he had reached a point where, when he had a prisoner that had to be taken care of, he'd yell, "Sheriff!"—that was me.

DePue: He knew you had seen some time back in the States, huh?

Stockmeier: Yeah. I'd end up escorting these people. Incidentally, we retired our Sergeant Major on thirty years. He'd been in the 9th Regiment just about all of his career.

DePue: You retired him when he was over there? Well, that means he was there during the First World War as well.

Stockmeier: Well, I don't know where he was in World War I, but he had been up at Kunu-ri, and the boys who were with him, when they were bugging out—Mugs Doherty, Bernard Doherty was his name—Mugs was yelling, "The colors! You're not leaving without the colors!" And of course, there was very little transport, and everybody was just saving ass. But Mugs went over, and he sat on the box, and he pulled out his .45, and he said, "Go ahead. I'm staying here. If the colors don't go, I don't go." The colors went.

DePue: See, that's one of the stories you don't hear about the second ID's [Infantry Division] retreat.

Stockmeier: Mm-mm.

DePue: And there's no other word for what they went through, other than they were retreating.

Stockmeier: Yeah, well, when you consider losing 75 percent of your materiel, what have you got left to work with? M-1s? Carbines? Howitzers? No.

DePue: Heavy machine guns, mortars? I assume they left most of that stuff back.

Stockmeier: Mortars, we didn't have. Well, I mean, the 9th Infantry had—

DePue: But you were also processing scores and scores of replacements at the time.

Stockmeier: Fortunately, I missed that.

DePue: They came in before you did?

Stockmeier: No. I missed having to hand to them.

DePue: Oh. Somebody else had that job.

Stockmeier: We had them. One of the old-timers came walking by one day laughing, and I says, "What's the matter now?" He says, "That kid over there!" He says, "He just got off the train. He's looking for the barracks!" (laughter)

DePue: I would assume these people now who were getting there, the 2nd ID starts with a lot of regulars, and what they're getting now is anything but regulars.

Stockmeier: Draftees. Some Regulars. Reservists. Draftees, and a few National Guard. Sixty-five percent of the 2nd, at least our regiment, were draftees, and—let's call them miscellaneous. And we started getting the boys in from Puerto Rico, and when you come up with a file, and a man's name is Pedro Q. Mackadangdang—huh? (laughter) You can't believe it. But at one time, 65 percent of our regiment was not Regular.

DePue: Were you getting some experienced NCOs and officers in that group of replacements?

Stockmeier: No. Officers, if you got to be a tech sergeant, and you wanted to be an officer, all you had to do was say the word, because we were so short that we made a lot of officers of enlisted men.

DePue: And again, the time you got there—for some reason, I've got Christmas Eve written down –if that was a significant day for you, or something happened to that day.

Stockmeier: Christmas Eve, we were back at—was it Seoul?

DePue: I believe that's what I've read.

Stockmeier: Christmas Eve was one miserable night.I pulled guard duty that night. I don't know if it's in there or not.

DePue: Well, that's where I would have seen it. Go ahead.

Stockmeier: Seoul? No, not Seoul. What was it?

DePue: Christmas Eve, we were in Seoul, trying to establish—

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: —perimeter security, getting settled down.

Stockmeier: Yeah. Yeah, that was a miserable cold night. In fact, one sentry shot himself simply because he wanted to get out of the cold. We had no heated accommodations whatsoever. Most of us were sleeping in what had been a college building, a college dormitory. And they had those unique built-up bunks, and that's where you sat, slept, and everything else. But it was one of the most miserable nights I've ever spent in my life.

DePue: And I would assume part of that was just because there was nothing that was certain because the Army was still in full retreat by that time.

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: Do you recall when General Ridgway came in and replaced MacArthur? I don't think that was too much later.

Stockmeier: Yeah, I recall it. First of all, it was kind of a feeling of disbelief that it had happened. But then of course we had to accept it. Again, Ridgway was a strange name to me. I never knew of a general by that name until I got over there. Mark Clark, his son was part of the 2nd Division, so his name was bandied around every once in awhile. I think at one time we had the sons of three different generals that were someplace—

DePue: But you knew who MacArthur was.

Stockmeier: Oh, yes.

DePue: And did he have a larger-than-life persona among the troops?

Stockmeier: Um...

DePue: Or a bad reputation by that time?

Stockmeier: I wouldn't say that he was very favorably received by the older men, those who had been around in World War II.

DePue: Yeah. They didn't think much of MacArthur.

Stockmeier: No. No, even my brother, who served in the Philippines with the 32nd Division, even he said that MacArthur's actions at times were turning the troops against

him. His personal needs and wants had to be satisfied. But I missed all that by being in Europe.

DePue: Well, Ridgway, based on what I've read that historians have written about him, is credited with turning the morale of the 8th Army around. Do you recall that?

Stockmeier: Yes. I think he was the Division General who got tired of not being able to identify his troops. So he put out orders. Ninth Infantry Regiment had to grow beards; another regiment had to grow a mustache, and the 3rd Regiment had to have sideburns. This order stood for awhile, until we got a new general who said, "Shave!". (laughter) But actually it was done for identification purposes. I don't think you're going to find that in the record books.

DePue: No. I've never read about that. But I would imagine part of that is also people taking pride in their regiments then, too.

Stockmeier: I know I wrote my wife that I had finally shaved, and I was hoping to get a picture of it before it was gone so that she could see what I looked like with a red beard. (laughter)

DePue: So you do recall Ridgway coming in—

Stockmeier: Oh, yeah.

DePue: And what kind of things were changing about that time, in terms of morale?

Stockmeier: It was just a tightening up the ship. It was overall. Again, this is one of the things that bothered me so much, is the lack of discipline, the lack of control. I don't know. Maybe I expected too much out of a peacetime Army, but I just couldn't see myself trying to work under those kinds of conditions.

DePue: So Ridgway came in and discipline was tightened up.

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: And from where your perspective was, it was exactly what needed to be happening?

Stockmeier: It was one of the things that needed to be done.

DePue: What are some of the other things that stuck with you?

Stockmeier: Well, the food situation wasn't the greatest. The beef and gravy rations, or pork and gravy rations, so often were about 75 percent gravy and no meat.

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Stockmeier: Supply –maybe I told you –I needed some casualty report blanks, and talking to the guys, we figured we needed about 10,000. Well, every other time I'd put in a requisition, I'd get a fraction of what I ordered. So this time, I ordered 30,000.

DePue: And you were at the regimental level, which is roughly about 1,000-plus?

Stockmeier: Well, a little more than that. But I got the 10,000 that I thought we needed, and a short time later, I got an additional 20,000. (laughter) So we didn't lack for paper. But it was so frustrating to try and get something. You'd go to supply and they didn't have it. You'd go out on the streets and the black market did. I went over there, didn't have a winter sleeping bag; I had the old blanket type. And this was all I had. I latched onto all of the newspapers, anybody got mail and had newspapers, and when they were done with them, I latched onto the newspapers, and they were on my—

DePue: And it was insulation for you.

Stockmeier: Yep. (laughter)

DePue: Did you have a cot that you slept on?

Stockmeier: Most of the time we did have a cot.

DePue: You were in the personnel section for the regiment. There are three battalions, so obviously it's much larger than 1,000, now that I'm thinking about it. But GP medium tent that you're working out of?

Stockmeier: We had the old familiar squad tent, the eight-man tent. We had those long—what did you used to call them? –hospital tents? Anyhow—what the hell did they call those things? I don't remember. But anyhow, they were quite a bit larger than the eight-man. But we set up our office in an eight-man tent, and we slept in it. So that meant you had bunks around three sides wherever you could get them, and in the middle, you had your field desk. For a long time—I say long time, that is for a few months—somebody had requisitioned a generator out of a damaged piece of construction equipment. So the 9th Regiment had electric power. Not a lot, but had some.

DePue: Enough for some lights.

Stockmeier: Enough for lights. And then one night the General decided that he ought to have them too, so we had to run some wire to the division area, and that burned out the generator. So we were back to Coleman lanterns.

DePue: What was a typical day for you in personnel section?

Stockmeier: Oh, get up, go to chow, come back, sit down, start typing. Break to go for a noon meal, come back, sit down, type. Break for an evening meal, come back, sit down, and type. You were either typing or checking as long as you could.

There was no such thing as an eight-hour day. After we got on top of the heap, yeah, then it began to ease up a little bit. But—

DePue: So you were doing casualty reports; you were maintaining the regiment's 201 files. What else were you working on?

Stockmeier: Well, we just had the individual serviceman file until we had the information for the report, and then it went back up to a—

DePue: Battalion?

Stockmeier: The company clerks and so on. They were the ones that actually had control of them.

DePue: Of the 201 files.

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: Well, I'm surprised.

Stockmeier: Well, I mean, they, like us, had to access them every once in awhile. But we didn't have them permanently, and we avoided it as much as we could. I know at one time, I was going through some files, and all of a sudden something hit me in the head. Here this guy was making a dependency allotment to a woman who was married to another man in the regiment. I let out a war whoop, and somebody said, "What's the matter?" I said, "Look at this. This woman is getting two allotments, one from her husband and one from another GI," and everybody started laughing. They all knew about it, it had happened, they had come in, the fellow had come into the regiment married, and then later found out that his wife and this other guy were making out, so he divorced her, she married the other guy, but he had kids by her, so he was tapped for a dependency allotment.

DePue: Well, that's a heck of a note. Well, speaking of dependency allotments, and mail, how were you managing to keep up with what was going on here in the States?

Stockmeier: Well, it was a long time before we got any mail. I don't remember—I think—let's see, I landed December 7th, I think it was—it could have been about the middle of January before I got any letters. Of course, I was writing home, but until they got an address from me, they were using an old address, which meant that it had to go to the directory, postal directory service, find its way down through all the bumps until it reached me.

DePue: Not to mention that things were so fluid during that month of December to January.

Stockmeier: The mail was coming in. After they got my address, the mail was coming in. Every once in awhile, there would be a package of goodies. And I didn't take a camera along, so I sent my father $100 and told him to send me a Polaroid camera, which he did. So there I am, ten rolls of film in a Polaroid camera, and a world of GIs wanting their picture taken to send home. The USO put on a show one day, and one of the fellows came to me, and he said, "Hey, you've been to the show?" I said, "No;" he says, "Go on over. You're going to recognize some of the people." I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "There are people we were with at Knox." So I went over, and sure enough, here were a couple of guys that I had known at Knox. Well, I had the Polaroid, and I took some pictures, and of course that was when the Polaroid was still that double roll—

DePue: Yeah.

Stockmeier: Anyhow, pulled it out and waited and showed them the pictures, and—"Wow!" They let out a bellow for their officer, and he came over. "Lookit here!" "Well, where'd you get these?" "He just took them!" "How much you want for that camera?" I said, "It's not for sale." "I'll give you $200." Oh, he tried the hardest to buy that thing, and like a fool, I didn't sell it to him, because I could have gotten another one. But then when I was running low on film, I'd have to write my father to send another box of film. But I took pictures of the guys as I could, for them to send home, and they paid me a dollar apiece for them. Some of the guys just wanted to give me everything they had, because they wanted their family to know they were all right. But when I got to Tokyo on R&R, they didn't have any film for me. Thirty-five millimeters, yeah, but Polaroid, they had all heard about them, but they—

DePue: So that was fairly new technology at that time.

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: Well, it sounds like it almost was a lucrative business for you as well.

Stockmeier: It could have been. But a dollar over there didn't go very far.

DePue: Do you remember who was playing at that USO show?

Stockmeier: No, I don't know who these guys were. But I don't think they were professionals.

DePue: Okay.

Stockmeier: The professional that caused us the most trouble was Al Jolson.

DePue: Caused you the problems?

Stockmeier: Yeah. Because the photographer who took pictures had a picture of Jolson, and in the audience, there was a picture of a man, and his mother had been notified that her son had been killed in action. And she says, "That's him in that picture!" And, oh, boy, did we have to start interviewing people and everything else. I thought the picture was in here someplace. But—

DePue: Well, if you're like me, any time you try to find a specific photo, you have a hard time finding it. You found it?

Stockmeier: This is one of them. In the other picture, there were more troops with their faces visible. But, oh, we had to send people to that company, interview, get statements, even though we had a number of statements that a man had been identified as dead. I saw it, but this poor woman, she was just so sure it was her son. It's kind of heartbreaking at times. But, well, this was the Korea that we knew.

DePue: Well, we're looking at *Second to None*, the history of the 2nd Infantry Division, Korea, 1950, '51. And it looks like a college yearbook or something like that, but otherwise it's very well done, it looks like. Some great photos. And there's not much left in the countryside, is there?

Stockmeier: There wasn't much there to start with.

DePue: Yeah.

Stockmeier: I never had seen anything so primitive.

DePue: That's what sticks with you today, just how primitive it was?

Stockmeier: Yeah. And when I see pictures of modern Seoul, I can't believe it.

DePue: Well, what was your impression of the Korean civilians?

Stockmeier: Oh, they could steal you blind. They had lived under Japanese domination for so long that it was a matter of self-preservation. Do anything, anything to maintain life. Contrast that: in Tokyo, we got out of a cab, and one of the fellows left a package in the cab. We were inside, I don't know, the Dai Ichi building, we were inside of a building that we came to, and said he'd left a package. We went outside, and I said, "How are you going to find that cab?" He says, "I don't know," but he says, "I want it." About that time, the cab pulled up, and the driver came over and handed him the package.

DePue: Well, Japan, when you were there, was also recovering from the devastation of the war. So you found the Japanese much more trustworthy than the Koreans?

Stockmeier: Yes. There's something about the courtesy element that was ingrained, so to speak, in the Japanese. They were accustomed to paying respect to other people. But the Koreans were just existing.

DePue: Well, as a former POW, could you relate to what they were going through from that perspective?

Stockmeier: No.

DePue: No.

Stockmeier: Different world, a different culture.

DePue: Did you have any Koreans that were working in your personnel section, or working in the headquarters company?

Stockmeier: We had—here's that picture I was looking for. We had three ROKs— [Republic of Korea army]

DePue: The one with Al Jolson?

Stockmeier: Yeah. We had three ROKs that were doing their own paperwork on their own troops. But eventually, they were sent back to their own Korean units.

DePue: So I've got here, the location is Miryang.

Stockmeier: Miryang was—well, during the bug-out, we got back almost all the way to Miryang.

DePue: So that was well south of Seoul then.

Stockmeier: Oh, yes. It was way down in the south end of—heck, I don't know if there's maps of that in here or not. This is Heartbreak Ridge.

DePue: That's okay.

Stockmeier: It was well south. Seoul was here—no.

DePue: No, that's okay, Fred. Don't need to worry about that.

Stockmeier: Naktong, that's still—Naktong River is still north. Miryang was a cemetery. Seemed to me it was right on the Pusan perimeter.

DePue: So that would have been a long way south from Seoul.

Stockmeier: Oh, very much so.

DePue: Yeah. Did you work with Allies as well?

Stockmeier: Oh, yes. The French unit was attached to us for awhile; the Turks, Turkish unit. The Dutch. The Fourth of July, we didn't have to work. So another fellow and I took off across the hills; we had heard about the Buddhist temple. So we just grabbed rifles and went looking for it. And we found it. On the way, we found a

corpse; we decided it had to be Chinese, because no American could smell that bad. But the animals had pretty much torn it to pieces. But we found this place, and two monks in there; we couldn't speak Korean, and they couldn't speak English. But it was just a quiet, restful place. And finally, Hoppy [Hopkins] said, "I think we'd better get back." So we did our farewells as best we could, and got back. They were having turkey that night. The French who were next to us had received a liquor ration from France, and, boy, they had imbibed it. They got over to the chow house for the meal, and there was something tainted in the food we were served. About ten o'clock at night, I woke up, my stomach was rolling. I couldn't believe it; talked myself out of it and went back to sleep. But it was after eleven, I guess, close to two, when all hell broke loose. Never heard such commotion. I pulled on my pants and was pulling on my boots, and I heard a guy yelling for corporal of the guard, so I started yelling at my men, "Get up., Get your boots on. Know where your guns are." I said, "There's something going on; it could be invaders, infiltrators." And this one poor draftee said, "Well, Sergeant, what about my pants?" I said, "In this country, you can run without your pants, but you can't run without your boots. Boots come first." I got outside, and the French were in an uproar, and every place all around, everything was in an uproar. The tainted food had finally hit home, and, well, we filled up the field hospital half a mile down the road, and the rest of the guys just had to lay in their sacks, and they lost control of their bowels. The French really suffered, because on that food and that booze, that really wiped them out. Well, eventually I found out what was going on, that it was not infiltrators. So we kind of got our people settled down again. But the smell, in July, in Korea...

DePue: Oh, boy.

Stockmeier: It was three days before we had any semblance of order. If there had been any infiltrators, we'd have been at their mercy. There weren't enough of us still on our feet that could have done much.

DePue: So this was no minor case of food poisoning; this knocked people out.

Stockmeier: Yep. Knocked them out.

F: Do you fellows want some tea or something?

Stockmeier: Tea or coffee?

DePue: Tea would be fine, thank you.

Stockmeier: Don't make it weak.

DePue: Any other impressions of some of the Allies you worked with?

Stockmeier: No, not really. The Turks were no-nonsense people.

DePue: I hear that from everyone. Did you also work with some Greeks? I recall reading someplace—

Stockmeier: Did I say Turks? It should have been Greeks.

DePue: Okay.

Stockmeier: Yeah. Greeks. The Dutch, we didn't have much contact with them. They're pretty independent. But again, reliable.

DePue: And the French?

Stockmeier: Well... I don't know. They were French. I didn't have much faith in them in Europe. (laughter) And I didn't develop any more faith in them in Korea.

DePue: Well, that very same time, though, they're facing some pretty tough trials in Indochina.

Stockmeier: Well... (laughter)

DePue: Don't want to say anything more than that?

Stockmeier: No. (laughter)

DePue: Darn it.

Stockmeier: Might get sued.

DePue: Tell me a little bit more about R&R. [Rest and relaxation]

Stockmeier: We were offered the chance to go on R&R, and I said, "No, my tour of duty is going to expire," and I said, "I'll just wait and then go home." And pretty soon the old man came back, and he said, "Hey, I heard what you said." He says, "You're not going home." I says, "Huh?" He said, "Your year of duty has been extended to seventeen months, so you're going to be around for awhile." So I changed my mind, and I decided to take R&R. Well, we were assigned to Yokohama, and we got bit by the mosquitoes. So the next day we got on the train and went into Tokyo. And somehow or another, we ended up at the Meiji Park Hotel, and they couldn't take us because our orders had said Yokohama. But one of the duty sergeants said, "What outfit you from?" I said, "2nd Division." "Oh," he says, "hell, I was with the 2nd." He says, "When's the last time you ate?" I said, "Yesterday." He gave us food passes so that we could go into the hotel dining room and get some food. When we came out, he says, "Hey, come here." And he started jabbering away at somebody, and the next thing I knew, we had a Japanese USO-type there, and he started making calls. Finally, he said, "How many of you?" "Two." "Okay." And he wrote out a whole list of instructions in Japanese." He said, "Green Hotel. They'll take you. Give cab driver this paper." We got in the cab, and I said, "Walt," I said, "I

wonder what kind of a place this is if he has to write instructions for the cab driver to find it." He says, "I was thinking the same thing." (laughter) I said, "Well, look, when we get there, you stay in the cab and I'll go in and make sure." We were not going to lose this cab, because we were a long ways out. We had gone past the Imperial Palace grounds, and finally we had turned off of the main street up a narrow street, high board fence on both sides, and we came out on top of a hill, and there was the Green Hotel. And I went in, oh, yes, they had a telephone call, and they spoke pretty good English. So Walt and I stayed there. We had a room that—what did it cost us? Ten dollars a night? Overstuffed furniture, private bath, a balcony. Step out on the balcony and you're on top of the hill and you've got all of Tokyo spread out. I mean, it was—

DePue: This was a nice place then.

Stockmeier: A nice place. They had a dining room. We ran into two other guys that afternoon in Tokyo from our outfit, and they wanted to see where we were. So we got a cab and took them out and showed them. "Oh, wow!" One of the fellows had been stationed in Tokyo, and he'd never heard of this place. But anyhow, they couldn't get in. So the main reason I wanted to go to Tokyo was to get clean and get decent food, and that we did. We'd go to the NCO club, [Non-Commissioned Officers] tipped the waiter fifty cents, the equivalent of fifty cents, and, boy, he was right there. This one fellow had the desire for sparkling burgundy and deep fried shrimp. We'd be sitting there drinking sparkling burgundy with a cheeseburger and shrimp. (laughter) That was just wonderful. The young lady at the hotel spoke pretty good English, and I said, "Walt," I said, "do you think we could hire her to take us around and show us the town?" He was all for it. So we went up to the desk and asked the young lady; I said, "If we pay your salary, would the hotel people let you have a day off, and you could take us around and show us Tokyo, and we'll pay for everything?" Well, okay, and she went in another room, and I could hear her, and she came and she shook her head and said no, so we didn't make it. But again, we weren't out for anything except clean living. I mean, food and bed and everything else.

DePue: Sleeping between clean sheets.

Stockmeier: So our last day, we got back out to Tachikawa Air Force Base in Yokohama. We checked in and we were waiting for a flight, and we went over and sat down in the waiting section, Walt and myself. Then there was a Captain sitting a chair or two away, and other guys—pretty soon, a young fellow came walking in towards us, and he was looking like this, and I said, "Walt, that guy was aboard ship coming over. He was a Southern kid." And he had enough fruit salad on there, I said, "My gosh, look at all of those ribbons!" I said, "Where did you ever get them? Especially the European medals." And he looked at me, and I think he recognized me, because he did an about-face and took off, and the Captain busted out laughing. He said, "I was wondering about those things too." I says, "Well, Captain, he and I came over on the same ship, and I had a chance

to talk to him." I said, "He never saw combat in Europe because he wasn't old enough to be there."

DePue: He was a PX hero then.

Stockmeier: Oh, he was. (laughter) But those kids, it was sad. So many of them had lied about their age to get in. Well, they got over there and they found out winter in Korea ain't a nice place to be. So they were writing Mama and asking, "Get me out of here!" And they're getting in touch with their Congressman, and finally they put out an order that there would be no one under eighteen allowed in combat.

F: Thought I had water and a couple glasses in here a long time ago.

DePue: Nope.

Stockmeier: Well, we've got some cheap beer out there that a friend gave us; we've got to get rid of that too. (laughter) But these kids, I felt sorry for them. Aboard ship, I'm in the latrine one day shaving, and this kid is standing there just looking at me. And finally I said, "Do you want something?" "No, I'm just watching." "Watching what?" He says, "I'm watching you shave. I've never shaved." These were our replacements.

DePue: But during World War II, you weren't much older than this kid who was watching you shave, were you?

Stockmeier: Well, I was nineteen.

DePue: Yeah, old enough.

Stockmeier: Yeah. To me, it was—did you want sugar?

DePue: No, I'm fine, thank you.

Stockmeier: To me—well, this one kid came back, "I'm not eighteen." So they finally found his records and checked; sure enough, he wasn't. And whoever found the record went over to somebody, an officer, I guess it was, and they had a little confab, and he came back and said, "Well, your records aren't complete." He said, "We'll keep you around for a couple days and get things straightened out." Three days later, he was sent back forward, because he was now eighteen.

DePue: So they waited him out. That'll teach him. This is a little bit of a change in subject for you, but being a POW during the Second World War, and you got there during a time when the 2nd ID, in fact the entire 8th Army, was just reeling back, and lots and lots of the casualty reports that you're processing are missing-in-action. So I'm sure you had to be thinking that these people were now POWs, if they were alive at all. Any feeling about that?

Stockmeier: Well, you'll have to remember that I landed in Korea on Pearl Harbor Day, and I left there in the following August. My twelve month orders were honored, not seventeen months. So while a lot of the casualties were people that had gone over at the same time I did, it wasn't until I was home and the Toledo newspaper would daily publish lists of people who were found to be KIA or MIA or recovered from a status. Between Korea and what I saw after I got home, about ten percent of the people that I knew quite well came back. We got there at that time when everything was in turmoil, and there wasn't much attention given to preservation, because it was a matter of protection first, protecting what you could, and worrying about it later. I hate to put it that way, but in simple English, that's what it was. And a lot of the fellows—well, I had worked in records aboard ship going over, so I had a lot of names that came to mind –they didn't come home. That's the only thing I can say; they didn't come home.

DePue: So it was in total flux; the big bug-out was reaching its culmination, if you will, when you got there. But by no means did the heated combat stop during the year that you were there either.

Stockmeier: No. Well, you read that citation for Snowden on the Distinguished Service Cross.

DePue: And this is somebody that you met on the way over there?

Stockmeier: No, I met him at Knox.

DePue: Oh, before you went over.

Stockmeier: And then he joined us; he came over later.

DePue: Well, it's probably a good time to mention it, or ask you about. You mentioned before that he was black, and this was of course the first war the United States had where there was an integrated Army. What were your thoughts about that? Was that going well?

Stockmeier: Not the best. There was still friction between the white and the black. I've been fortunate; I've never gotten involved in that. When I was working for the Department of Labor, I worked as much with the black—Negroes, I called them, because that's the way my parents raised me. They're not niggers or colored; they're Negroes. I worked as much with Negroes as I did with whites, and they accepted me. At one of our job corps training centers, the center director called me into his office one day, and he said, "You know, of all the people who come here from Chicago, you're the only one I trust to go out and look around." He said, "Anybody else that comes, I get ten minute reports: where they were, who they talked to, what was said." But he said, "You can do anything you want." He says, "I learned early, you're here to help us." And my wife was with me once when we were coming back from—I don't know where it was. Anyhow, we stopped at Atterbury; I wanted to see this woman, because I

had an idea that I could help her get a different position. Anyhow, we got to the center, and this woman was busy, but was going to be free, and I was not to leave. And a few minutes later, this big black woman came out, came running over to me, and I got a big hug. (laughter) My wife was looking. But you don't have any common feeling—in the military, there was no common feeling between the two segments. It was black and black, and white and white, and they didn't mesh. Most of our troublemakers, unfortunately, were black.

DePue: Well, this story you told about this Snowden, what was his first name?

Stockmeier: Houston.

DePue: Houston Snowden. He was a medic in a different unit?

Stockmeier: No, he was black, he was with our F Company, I think it was.

DePue: Oh, okay. And he ended up getting the Distinguished Service Cross? You don't get that just because you're out there; he got it for bravery.

Stockmeier: Yeah. That's the reason that I treasure this letter, because it's got the official account, and it's got his personal account.

DePue: In his personal account, he plays it down quite a bit, doesn't he?

Stockmeier: He does. But this was typical of the man.

DePue: But you also made a comment when we were talking earlier about the way the rest of the fellows in the F-company felt about the man, too. If you could repeat that again?

Stockmeier: Well, they just had the highest regard for him. He never let them down.

DePue: And if somebody else was going to give him grief because he was black?

Stockmeier: I don't think in that company they would have allowed it.

DePue: So they got to the point where they just saw him as another soldier, somebody they respected and trusted.

Stockmeier: Yeah.

DePue: But it wasn't the case in most of the places that you saw?

Stockmeier: I can't say that there was another black that got the respect that he got. I've been trying to recall the last time I saw him. When he was rotating back to the States, he was on his way to the East Coast where he lived, and he stopped in this little town in Ohio, and we had quite a chin-fest. But again, even in this little town, we had no Negro residents, so when he goes looking for me, people were kind

of wondering why. But I had nothing but respect for the man, and I wish I knew why he had died, because he was quite young.

DePue: So how long ago did he pass away?

Stockmeier: Oh, golly.

DePue: Well after the war.

Stockmeier: Yeah, it was well after, after he was home. And I didn't hear about it, except I read a notice in the Graybeards magazine that he had died.

DePue: And the Graybeards is a 2nd Division organization?

Stockmeier: No, it's a Korean War Veterans association.

DePue: Okay. You mentioned Walt; what was Walt's last name?

Stockmeier: Wolters, W-o-l-t-e-r-s. First name was Carl.

DePue: Oh, okay. And you called him Walt? Okay. Was he one of your best friends over there then?

Stockmeier: C instead of a K.

DePue: Okay.

Stockmeier: He and a cousin were peacetime draftees who were finishing out their time in the reserves, and both of them were called to active duty and both of them were on the ship going to Korea, or Japan. And Walt was assigned to the 2nd Division along with me.

DePue: Okay. Who else were you good friends with that you were able to maintain a friendship with afterwards?

Stockmeier: Literally nobody, because I came home. There was one fellow who lived about fifteen miles from me who had come into the outfit a short time before I left, and I used to see him occasionally. But no. I can't say that there's anybody else who I remembered as much as Walt and Houston.

DePue: Did you fly back or did you ship back when you came back home?

Stockmeier: Shipped.

DePue: And were you released from active duty then shortly after you arrived?

Stockmeier: We came into Stoneman, and—where did we end up? We ended up at Breckenridge, Kentucky. More processing, and then I was released from active duty.

DePue: And what did you do for a living after you got back home?

Stockmeier: I became a Deputy Sheriff again.

DePue: And how long did you stay with that line of work?

Stockmeier: Oh, golly. Too long. Henry County was relatively small. Twenty-three thousand people. I forget what it was, 410 square miles. It was one of those things that people seemed to appreciate you at times, and at other times, they didn't. Incidentally, I got home just in time for hunting season. And I grabbed a 410, [shotgun] was going out to get my pheasant, and I'm walking across the twenty-acre field, and—*zing* –went past my ear. And I stopped, and I heard the pop, and I turned around and I went home.

DePue: (laughter)

Stockmeier: I did not go hunting again. If somebody in Ohio is hunting pheasant with rifles, I'm not hunting pheasant. After I had been in Michigan for a number of years, I decided, Oh, I'm going to go get a deer. I came out of a town near Grand Rapids on my way home at the end of the week, and I'm driving along, and my windshield exploded. And I went back to the closest town, went to the police department, said, "Does the Sheriff's Office have a deputy here?" He says, "Oh, one of my men is a deputy." He says, "Why?" I said, "I just got my windshield shot out." He said, "Tailgating?" I said, "Nope." "Oh," he says, "had to be tailgating." I said, "Chief, you go out and you take a look at my car, and if you tell me that you think that that was a rock," I said, "I'll buy you a bottle of booze and the biggest steak in town." He says, "You mean it?" I said, "I do." Well, he called a fellow over, and he says, "Look, go out and take a look at this man's car. Come back and tell me what you think." The guy never came back. I said, "What did he do? Go on patrol?" He says, "I don't know." So we went out, and the guy was just standing there looking and shaking his head. He says, "Chief, that was no rock." Chief went over and he looked, and he says, "I agree." I got home to Lansing; next day, I went to the home office –my office was at the home office –went to the insurance company's home office, and went down to the claims department, got ahold of the head of the claims; I said, "Cliff, I need a new windshield." He says, "Ah-h, you. You were up there in the Stone Road country again, weren't you?" I said, "I was over at Grand Rapids." He says, "I'll bet it's a stone." Anyhow, I told him the same thing. He called a guy, one of his adjustors, and says, "Go take a look at Fred's car." Didn't come back. We went out, and this guy says, "That was no rock." (laughter) The claims manager said, "Get it fixed."

DePue: Well, it's more than a bit ironic that you've survived World War II and combat, were captured actually, went all the way through the Korean War, and twice you were almost shot after you got back home, both hunting incidents. So was that the last time you went hunting then?

Stockmeier: Yeah. I didn't go hunting that year either. (laughter)

DePue: Well, was working for the sheriff's department your career then for the rest of your time working?

Stockmeier: No. I reached a point where I realized it wasn't fair to the family. And so I went to work for the post office. Unfortunately, it was a clannish situation, and I soon got myself in a spot where I could be blamed for some things that weren't quite being done according to Hoyle. So I went into the Postmaster and told him what was going on, and he got kind of huffy; he stood up and he walked over to the window and he looked out of the window; he wouldn't look at me. But I kept on; I told him exactly what was going on. And he says, "Well, if you weren't involved, you shouldn't worry about it." And I said, "Otto, you weren't raised that way and neither was I." He was a Lutheran minister's son. So anyhow, I left the post office, got a job with the insurance company up in Michigan. But again, when you say frustration, you look for somebody who knows right from wrong, who's also trying to improve things, and the only thing you get is disappointment. There's no other expression about frustration. You get to be as frustrated as a one-legged man at an ass-kicking contest, and that's it. These were the things that, when we first got back from Europe, the three of us would get together, and we couldn't stand these other people. They just seemed to be in a different world; had no concept of what was going on. Well, eventually you learn to control it, up to a point. But every once in awhile, you'll reach that breaking point, and you let somebody know. But you spend a lot of time as a prisoner wondering why, and there's no answer there to why; it just is.

DePue: But would you say, because of that experience especially, you came out of it with higher expectations or hopes?

Stockmeier: Well, I don't know. I was brought up in a strict family environment, and it seems to have stayed with me. I know one time when I was transferring from one job to another job in a different office, the supervisor in the office I was leaving, I asked him, I said, "Well, aren't you going to take an inventory before I leave?" Because I was charged with a bunch of stuff. (laughter) He says, "Not you." He says, "I know you well enough." So you can influence people. But, I don't know. I had a man working for me in the city of Milwaukee that—he was making an inspection of one of our facilities, and the next morning, he turned in his report, and I was reading it, and, uh-oh, got a problem here. I picked up the phone and I called the supervisor in that area, and told him what the report said. And he says, "Well, Fred, I'll check into it and I'll call you back." About an hour later, he called me back, and he says, "Fred, I don't know how to tell you this, but your man lied." I says, "Okay, I'm coming down. Don't say anything more." So I went down to that shop, and we had a heart to heart, and I was convinced my man had lied. So the next morning when he came into the office, I asked him to hang around for a bit. I got some necessaries out of the way, and then I said, "Let's go for a ride." We went down to the motor pool and drove a car, and I drove down along the river there in Milwaukee where I knew we wouldn't be

disturbed, and I told him what I had done, following his report, and what I had been told. And I said, "Now, which is true?" He says, "I lied." I said, "My God, man, why?" He said, "I thought I was supposed to find something wrong every place I went." I said, "Clarence, you used to work for an insurance company. Would you turn in a report like that to your underwriters on a risk that you're considering?" "No." I says, "Now, look. This is the end of it this time." I said, "If there's another time, that will be the end. And one last thing: if anybody in our office finds out about this, it will be because you told them. Not me. I am not telling anybody else about this." Well, a day later, he came in and he just—he was so thankful that I hadn't told the girls in the office. He left us shortly after that, thank goodness, because he had become a person I couldn't trust. But it had been a battle to get him, and at least we had the name and the body, even though the product wasn't something I could always hang my hat on.

DePue: Well, we're getting close to the end here of the interview. This has been a wonderful interview. You do very well at telling these stories and painting these pictures for us. I want to have your reflections on the Korean War, and maybe I asked you already about your view of World War II, and was that something that we needed to do. What are your thoughts about Korea?

Stockmeier: Well, an unspoken thing in my decision to go to Korea: I had a chance to see the Russians in action. Not good. I had a chance to see the German army in action, and the way they treated people. And it just seemed to me that the world is getting worse rather than getting better. So one of the things that I considered is that the line has to be drawn someplace. Maybe it's in Korea. And that as much as anything helped me decide to go back on active duty. The Russians were unbelievable. The German army, the treatment that they gave the Russian soldiers, you can't believe it. There was a man up here in Milwaukee that, like me, had a chance to see the Russians in prison camp. In my case, they were just across the fence from us. In his case, I don't know. But he told us about, in the morning, the Russians would carry their dead out of the building that they were sleeping in over to a huge pit and toss the body into it with quick lime. And it was enough to make that man cry when he told about it. Some of the things that you see in this life are things that you can't believe. But they're there; they happened. Can't make a better world by ignoring it. Maybe I'm a dreamer, I don't know. But I tried to be hopeful in any job that I had. I don't know if I succeeded. But one thing that I know, I had the respect of my kids. They were raised strict. But when I was in the hospital with cancer, and no prospects of living, my kids were there. Right now, I can go sit down at the computer and send email, or if she's online I can chat with my daughter in Texas, or my one in Iowa, or my one in Wisconsin. My son just lives a little ways from here. And I was always proud of my kids. Lot of comments from people about the way our children acted as children, and what they're doing today. My son works for the University of Chicago out at Argonne, [Argonne National Laboratory] out at Batavia, and he's in something to do with the hazardous waste material. Two weeks ago he was in Taiwan for a world symposium on nanotechnology. Nano-huh? (laughter) My oldest daughter: when she lived in Milwaukee, she was the

manager of a store with eighteen employees. My second daughter had a degree in education—incidentally, all four of them have bachelor's, and my daughter in Wisconsin has a master's in botany. But the daughter in Texas taught in a parochial school one year and said the kids are no better there than they are anyplace else, so she gave up teaching. She and her husband moved to Texas, and she got a job, and she literally taught herself computers. Her husband is a geologist and also up on computers. Carol's company was moving to a more distant location, and a company she had worked for before offered her a job if she'd come back, so she did. So she must be doing something right. And our daughter, the one in Iowa who at one time was manager of a store: anyplace she works, she always comes out with flying colors. Now, we're Protestant, and she's working for a Catholic university in Dubuque. A somewhat confidential job. And, oh, the stories she tells about the way people have accepted her. Laurie, the daughter up in Madison, she was a supervisor in a chemistry—her bachelor's is in chemistry –she was supervisor in a chemistry testing program of some kind. And she gave it up to go back to school and get her Master's in botany. And then she was back in—she's working for a company, oh, pharmaceutical products testing or something like that –where pharmaceutical companies send them their product, and it's tested to see that it meets requirements or whatever. And she has just now left—quality control or quality analyst, something like that –and is a step above that now. And she could go and do more than that. I've always said I don't know what Ruth and I did in raising our kids, but we sure did the right thing, because every one of them knows how to control money, how to handle money.

DePue: Every one of them can be trusted, and are trustworthy, it sounds like. And that's obviously something very important to you, too.

Stockmeier: Well, it should be to everybody.

DePue: Yeah. I would agree.

Stockmeier: I'm sorry. I'm preaching a sermon, aren't I?

DePue: No, well, that's what this is all about, Fred. Right now, as we're talking, this Ken Burns series on the Second World War is being shown. I don't know if you're seeing any of that or not. You're a veteran of both World War II and Korea. Any thoughts about how the American public remembers those two experiences?

Stockmeier: Mixed emotions again. People my age, of course, remember it vividly, compared to what kids are. Reader's Digest last issue has an item in it about a college student who asked a professor whether or not the Pearl Harbor raid was in retribution for our dropping atomic bombs on Japan. I've had kids—what do you mean, December 7? I've had young people that are not being taught history. This morning, we went out to meet a small group of people at Woodfield; we have coffee with them every Wednesday morning that we can. And I asked—

let's see, there were one, two, three, four, five, six, seven—I asked how many people were watching Ken Burns' *The War*. None of them. Now, these people range in age from my area downward. Ruth?

Ruth: Yes?

Stockmeier: Can you come here a moment? Who's the youngest person, would you guess, would be the youngest person, in our coffee clutch at the mall? Shirley?

Ruth: I expect they're all ten years our junior.

Stockmeier: Yeah. But nobody is watching *The War*.

Ruth: Nobody's doing what?

Stockmeier: Watching. Remember I asked this morning if anybody was watching Ken Burns?

Ruth: Oh, I didn't hear that. (unintelligible)

Stockmeier: But we are such a self-centered group of people.

DePue: And if they don't know much about World War II, they know absolutely nothing about Korea then, I would suspect. Do you know about this Korean War museum that's being built down in Springfield?

Stockmeier: I take it you do.

DePue: I do know something about it. It looks like you have an opinion about that.

Stockmeier: There's so much politics involved, I hate to say anything. Lynetta Brown—you know Lynetta Brown?

DePue: No.

Stockmeier: Well, she's on line as a Korean War educator, and she actually started this business. And then the glory-hungry boys started getting involved, and as far as I can tell, they literally tore apart everything that she had put together. But there was to be a museum and a library, et cetera et cetera, down at...

DePue: Well, it started at Tuscola, I believe.

Stockmeier: Tuscola, yeah. But now, they took everything away from Tuscola, and they want to put it in Springfield. And the people who were responsible for even germinating the idea have been pushed out. So I spent a lot of my adult life in jobs where I had to correct other people's mistakes, and they got the credit for it. But there's no point in getting mad, because it's not going to change anything. But every once in awhile, I get my two cents in. I get my satisfaction out of the people like—well, one woman when I was working for the Department of

Labor, I made arrangements for her to get a medical exam, and she was found to have a condition that needed treatment. She came to me, and she said, "You saved my life." Well, I didn't, but I had at least showed her how she could do it. Or at the city of Milwaukee when I was leaving, one of the assistant superintendents in public works said something, and I said, "Well," I said, "I'm an outsider." I said, "There's only one department head in Milwaukee who is not a native of Milwaukee, or at least Wisconsin," and I said, "That's the personnel manager. But everybody else that you look at in top management is a native of Milwaukee. Now," I said, "I'm not, and I haven't been here for forty years. I'm at the top; where can I go next? Because I wouldn't get that position if it opened up." And he just looked at me, and he says, "Well, this is pretty good. We finally get somebody in here who's trying to help us, and now he's going to run out and leave us." And that hurt. I didn't sleep much that night. But I had no place to go. And in public works department, there were top level management, would see me walk down the hall or something, "Hey, come in here!" And one of them, assistant, I asked him one day, I says, "How come he called me in there?" He says, "Well," he says, "he likes you. Your predecessor never even got in the office," but he said, "You, you're only here to help." It's those things where I get satisfaction. Nothing that I could go blow up and fly a kite with or anything else, but it's just me. I have that personal satisfaction of knowing that sometime, someplace, I have done some good.

DePue: Where was that, Fred, that you were working? Up in Milwaukee, where—what was—?

Stockmeier: The city of Milwaukee.

DePue: So you were the Personnel Director for the entire—?

Stockmeier: No. I wasn't in personnel. The Personnel Director, though, was the only one hired from any distance away from Milwaukee. No, I was heading up the safety program, employee safety program, for the city of Milwaukee and the Milwaukee school district, 20,000 people. And I knew what it was when I went in, but after I was there, I told the boss, I said, "This is not a one-man job." "Well, we're going to have a meeting with the school board to see just what kind of service they want." Well, the school board decided to go their own way, so now, instead of 20,000, I had something between 9,900 to 1,200 people, seasonal fluctuations. And it was amazing. Personnel called me one day and said they were putting together a training manual for employees who wanted to make the break into supervisor positions, and we'd like for you to write a section. So I did, I got a call, the fellow said, "You know what? We've asked any number of people to write selections to put in the book. Yours is the only one that has an illustration in it. The rest of it is just text." He says, "You've got us thinking, we've got to brighten up our publications." They had a custom up there, on certain level positions, they would ask a team of personnel people from another city to come in and review the applicants and make recommendations. So personnel called me, said something about a team from

Madison had come in to interview prospects for the position. And they came to us, when they took their first break, they came in to us and said, "Why are all of these people talking so much about employee safety being so important to a supervisor?" And he says, "I told them, because this is the work of our safety engineer." Those people from Madison went back home and reported to personnel there about what had happened here in Milwaukee. For the first time ever, they hired a safety man, simply because of what—and we had been preaching safety. You know, a safety man seldom if ever does something that creates a change. The safety man works through supervisors, and they get the inspiration to make changes. It's—

DePue: It sounds like this was very satisfying work for you in that respect, and I've got just a couple more questions to ask you, because we're getting close to three hours here, Fred.

Stockmeier: Are we? (laughter)

DePue: I don't know if you realize we were this far into it or not. The experience that you had in two wars, and especially the experiences being a POW. I want you to just reflect for a minute or two on how that has changed your outlook on life, how it changed you as a person.

Stockmeier: Well, I think it served a great deal in making decisions as to what was worthwhile and what was simply frills. We always dream of the ideal, but we never see it, because I'm not even sure it exists. But for myself, I think I learned a lot about self-control. The night the German major knocked a cigarette out of my face, there was a temptation to say something; I spoke enough German that I could have said something less than complimentary. And I was really tempted to, but I simply walked over and picked up the cigarette and started smoking again, and they left. But there are times that you are eager to get involved, but I'd say common sense steps in, and let's see this thing develop a little bit more before you do. Yes, you learn self-control, but at the same time, there are times that you exceed your authority knowingly, but it serves a purpose.

DePue: So the times to take a chance, and the times to—

Stockmeier: Well, it's not so much taking a chance. Well, yes, it is, but there are times when you can sense that somebody is beginning to see what you're driving at, and you give them that encouragement to adopt it. I don't know how many, in public works up there in Milwaukee, I don't know how many people have said that it didn't take me long to find out what was going on. And one said, "We were wondering how long you could take it." And I said, "Well, nine and a half years. Is that long enough?" But to me, it was amazing. These people are so clannish and cliquish up there that you have to be in the in-group to know what's going on or what's about to happen. When they had a job action, I could walk out on the street, and the union boys would, "Wahoo, look who's here!" They knew me. But I'd say, "Okay, what's going on?" And they'd tell me. We took a group of

union people over to Detroit once to observe an operation there, and on the way back, the union president got into the plane with me and sat down on the side of me. We hadn't much more than taken off from Detroit, and he says, "Fred, I've got to ask you something." And I says, "What?" He said, "Our union is getting too big. We need a business agent. And we've been talking about it and talking about it, and we don't know where we can find one. And at the last meeting, one of the fellows kind of laughed and he said, "Hey, we ought to get Stockmeier." And he says, "I've been authorized to ask whether you would take the job." I said, "Matt, your local has given me more problems than all of the other unions put together! What are you trying to do, get rid of me?" "No," he says, "we don't agree. But," he says, "Fred, you have never lied to us." And that was the basis for offering me the job of business manager. I tell you, I couldn't believe it.

DePue: I assume you did not take the job.

Stockmeier: No.

DePue: But obviously, that has meant a lot to you over the years afterwards.

Stockmeier: Well, when you're dealing with union people, what do you expect? You never know.

DePue: Well, here's the last question: what would you like to tell people in the future? What advice or wisdom would you offer up to your kids, to your grandkids, to anybody else who might be listening to this later on?

Stockmeier: Now, I've become a missionary. Read the United States Constitution. Try to reconcile the way our country runs today with the intention of the people who wrote that Constitution. One thing that bothers me especially is this business of free speech. At the time the Constitution was written, and for years before, it had not been possible for a citizen to criticize the government. Congress adopted a Constitution which guaranteed free speech. You can criticize the government. But this does not give you the right to castigate a neighbor, castigate a neighbor who doesn't believe the same way you do. Restore our government to one of openness and honesty. On the personal side, you have to believe in something. I'm a Christian, at least I hope I am, and I would hope that everybody would have some guidelines such as the Christian has, some guidelines to guide their lives and their relationship with others. I think those two items right there are what I would want my kids to know, and as far as that goes, the rest of the country also. So I'm a missionary.

DePue: Well, I asked you that, so you had permission to be. Any final comments that you'd like to make then, Fred?

Stockmeier: No. As I've said many a time, the military changed me. But hopefully it broadened me.

DePue: Changed you for the better?

Stockmeier: Hopefully, yes. Not in itself, but tied in with life experiences overall. I kind of regret having volunteered to do this, because I'm not an orator; I can't say things and make them come out wonderful. I'm just another human being.

DePue: Well, Fred, I think anybody who's going to have the opportunity to listen to this or read the transcripts down the road is going to have cause to disagree with you, because you did a wonderful job of explaining things and speaking from the heart, and I think that's probably the most important thing. So, thank you very much. Thank you for the privilege of having the opportunity to interview you, Fred.

(end of interview)