Interview with Isaac Mercer

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Wednesday, December 29, 2010. My name is Mark DePue, the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here today in Dixon, Illinois with Isaac Mercer. Good morning, Isaac.

Mercer: Good morning. How are you?

DePue: Good. I've been looking forward to doing this interview. We're getting close to the end of 2010, so I can't think of a better way to finish off the year than to come up here and chat with you. Isaac is a Korean War veteran, and so this is obviously part of our *Veterans Remember* program. Isaac, where I always begin is to ask you when and where you were born.

Mercer: Metter, Georgia.

DePue: Metter, Georgia? Is that how you pronounce it?

Mercer: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Okay, and when were you born?

Mercer: 1927, May 18th.

DePue: May 18th. Tell us about growing up in Metter, Georgia.

Mercer: Well, I didn't really grow up. I left Detroit, Michigan, going down to Metter to visit Grandma, and got in to Atlanta, Georgia. My dad always had a good car. So a couple of men—I thought they were firemen then; I didn't know the difference between a fireman and a policeman. My dad stopped for a stoplight, so they come over and said, "Where you'd get that car, boy?" So they talked to him there for a while, then they yanked him out and took him into the police station for about a half-hour, forty-five minutes, and he came back out. We're going to Grandma's, and he's going to come back in two weeks and pick us up. He didn't come back for eight years. He got back in Atlanta, they stopped him, took his car away from him and said he stole it, and they put him in prison way down in Perry, Louisiana.

DePue: Where in Louisiana?

Mercer: Sanso Perry. I never heard of it.

DePue: Senso Perry.

Mercer: Mm-hmm, Louisiana. I haven't looked it up on a map or nothing. He didn't read or write, so we didn't hear from him.

DePue: Did you not grow up in Metter, then?

Mercer: That's where I started, because see—we went to Detroit, and then in 1933 was when we was heading back from Detroit, back to Georgia to visit Grandma in Metter.

DePue: So the family moved to Detroit when you were quite young, it sounds like.

Mercer: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Do you remember what year that was?

Mercer: Boy, I don't. Because we went back to Metter, Georgia, and I was just six years old. And a lot of that stuff, I used to tell Mother. She said, "You must have heard us talking about that. Your memory is not that good." But I remember it, believe it or not.

DePue: You remember when your family was stopped by the police?

Mercer: I sure do.

DePue: Can you tell us more about that?

Mercer: Well, they came over and tapped on the window, so he rolled the window down, and they said, "Where'd you get that car, boy?" And he told them he bought it, you know. And they jockeyed him around a while, then they yanked him out and took him in this police station and kept him in there for about, oh, a half-hour, forty-five minutes. He came back out by himself, got in the car, and we went on to Georgia. When he left going back to Detroit, he was going to come back two weeks later and pick us up. And that's when they got him, when he was going back through Atlanta. I guess they didn't get him at first because I said, Well, they figured they probably couldn't lock all of us up, because there were four of us. And when he came back—he got out in 1941—when he came out, he came down there at night, because he had to be out of there before daylight, so he came down. And about a year before he got out, Mother remarried. So he come down and visited with us about two o'clock in the morning, got us out of bed, and he left and went on back.

DePue: So the two of them had gotten divorced while he was in prison, then?

Mercer: No, she didn't know where he was. She didn't get no divorce back in those days.

DePue: She thought he was—

Mercer: But they didn't—yeah, she thought he had passed away or something. But then when they went to get their marriage license, she explained all this to the guy, and he said, "How long has he been gone?" She said, "Seven years." She used to—you know, she was a Bible scholar, and she used to say that she read something in the Bible that said if you and your husband separate, get dislocated, you had to be single seven years. That's why she waited seven years before she remarried.

DePue: Well, this is quite a story here, and I'm going to have to ask a lot of questions to make sure I have it—understood it. First of all, what was your father's name?

Mercer: Louis Alex Mercer.

DePue: Louis Alex?

Mercer: Mm-hmm.

DePue: And what was your mother's name?

Mercer: Lucinda, L-u-c-i-n-d-a.

DePue: Okay. And what was her maiden name, do you remember?

Mercer: Just a second. (pause) Lanner, L-a-n-n-e-r.

DePue: Do you know what your father was doing for work up in Detroit?

Mercer: Yeah, he worked in a block factory, like, well, we have one out here, here in Wiley. He worked in that, but then after he got out of prison and went back, he bought the place, because in Detroit, you know, people didn't have any problem; a person was a person. And then, oh, in the early '50s—he could do a little bit of everything. He could build a house, but he couldn't read a blueprint. He'd have you draw it out for him on a piece of paper. Electrician—he could do a little bit of everything.

DePue: After he was arrested, where did you and the family stay?

Mercer: We stayed with Grandma?

DePue: In Atlanta?

Mercer: No, Metter.

DePue: In Metter. Is that basically where you remember growing up, then?

Mercer: No. After she remarried, we moved to a place that was Moultrie, Georgia. That was down, oh, about, they said, a hundred miles from Tallahassee, Florida, pretty close to the Florida state line.

DePue: But if that was seven years after your—that would have been 1940 when that happened. Is that right?

Mercer: Uh-uh. Wait just a second. (pause) My stepfather was a farmer. We worked on a farm, and then I got sixteen, seventeen, I wanted to leave and go back to Detroit, because in Detroit, well, it was just like you and I; people was people, you know, and I was used to that. So she told me, she said, "Well, son," said, "I don't want to see—first I'll miss you and cry." "Son, I don't want to see you leave," she say, "but you're getting to the place now," she said, "they're going to hurt you." She said, "They say, Oh, he's crazy, don't pay him no attention." Because, you know, I call them by their first name, you know, and they didn't like that. You know, they want me to call them Mr. and Mrs. I couldn't handle that. So I took off and went back to Detroit in 1946, as soon as I got out of high school.

DePue: That's when you went back to Detroit?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: And you were—okay. Okay.

Mercer: From '33 to '46, because I went to school in Georgia.

DePue: Tell us about going to school and growing up in Georgia, then.

Mercer: Boy. The school was all black, and we didn't have any [new] books, so what we would do is, the white schools would give us all their books after they get all banged up and everything, and that's how we got our books.

DePue: Did you have black teachers as well?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: Do you think you got a decent education?

Mercer: Uh-uh.

DePue: Did you grow up in a religious family?

Mercer: Mm-hmm.

DePue: What was the religion?

Mercer: Baptist.

DePue: Did Mom take you to church every Sunday then?

Mercer: She sure did. Every Sunday. Don't care how sick you was, if you wanted to go out in the yard and play after you come from church, you had to go to church.

If you didn't feel like going to church, you didn't feel like playing. (laughs) Yep, she was a sweetheart. Everybody loved her, God bless her. Not because, she was my mother. I tell you what, she was strict. She said do something, you did it. One time, sitting in the bedroom and she and my grandma was talking. So, boy, I was sitting pretty close to her, and they started talking, and I stuck my nose in it. And she backhanded me, man, and I went over two or three chairs and was seeing stars for a week. So then, when adults were talking, I kept my mouth shut. Yeah, she was real strict. I used to tell her all the time, I said, "You know, I used to think you was the meanest mother in the world." But you know what I did when I got grown? I went to her and I thanked her for it because they kept me out of trouble. Never been in jail a day in the life.

DePue: You had some siblings, then, as well. Were they younger than you?

Mercer: Two. I had a brother and a sister younger than I. My oldest brother Jim, then myself, then my sister, and then my younger brother Al. Four of us.

DePue: How did she keep food on the table for the family, then?

Mercer: Well, she and my grandma was cooks, you know, and that was in 1930s—I can remember that, because I used to see the people in the soup line, and I'd say, "Mother, what is that for?" She said, "Well, that's where those people go to eat food," you know. Oh, she'd work for these people, and she'd come home. She knew just how much this family—like the Kennedys or somebody, had all kinds of money. What she would do is she would fix more than they could eat, then they'd give that to her, and she'd put it in a big dishpan, put a towel over it, bring it home, and that's what we would eat.

DePue: Well, it sounds like they knew that she was doing that.

Mercer: Oh, sure, they knew. Absolutely, they knew.

DePue: And these are very tough times.

Mercer: Tell me about it, mm-hmm.

DePue: Did you know—when did you become conscious that you were different, that people were treating you very differently from the whites?

Mercer: Oh, probably ten, eleven years old. First year or two in school, but then you didn't start school till you was eight years old, and then (phone rings) I could kind of see this…

DePue: Go ahead.

Mercer: We lived out in the country on a farm. There was a guy, rich guy, he lived probably about from here to Third Street—that's just one block over from us.

And I used to walk to school, and he rode the bus. And he'd pass right by me, and he'd be the only child on that bus.

DePue: This was a white boy, then.

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Couldn't even get near that bus.

DePue: Do you remember any incidents that especially stick with you that reinforced that you were living in the South at the time?

Mercer: Uh-huh, mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: Can you tell us about those?

Mercer: Yeah, I didn't like it, because—that's why I got out of there as early as I could. Everything was [segregated]—the restrooms, white, black, and you couldn't eat at a restaurant. You could go to the window and they'd hand it out the window to you, or if they had a back room someplace. I can remember real good when we were working on the farm, they would fix dinner, but we couldn't eat inside, we'd have to eat out on the porch. That was pretty hard on me, but I said, Well, I know what it's like, so as soon as I get old enough to go, I'm going to take off. So I took off, I went back to Detroit, and I got—

DePue: And that was what—how old were you at that time? Right after high school?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, seventeen. So I go out to get a job with Ford Motor Company. So a guy came in, and said, "Well young man," he said, "I got to have your birth certificate. You've got to be eighteen years old." And I said, "Well, I'll go home and see if I can find it." "Oh," he said, "don't worry about it. Bring it tomorrow." He never said nothing else about it.. (laughter) Then in the fall of '46, when they go for the model changeover, or—

DePue: When what changed over?

Mercer: Model changeover.

DePue: Okay. That would have been right after the war, then, when they started building cars again.

Mercer: Yes, sir. I liked working with General Motors because we'd go in sometimes—we would switch cars—I'll think of it after a while—a trucker was the job. Then, the cars would come down on this track, facing you, and then when you'd take it off of there, you'd put it on a thing, you'd turn it around, and then we'd have to push it into the next room. That's what we did. If they didn't have no work for us to do, our foreman would come up and say, "You guys go out on the parking lot and pick up cigarette butts." There wasn't none out there, you know, but he wanted us to work. But then when they went in for model changeover, we was all… And I had saved enough money—I had

three or four hundred dollars with me. Then, that was pretty good money. And I was paying rent.

But I had met a guy who's going to Sterling, Illinois. His wife had a cousin out there working a steel mill, so he took off and went there. And so when he got there, he said, "I don't know where I'm going to be staying, but I'm going to stay with my cousin for a while." So I gave him my address, and we kept in touch. December 12, 1946, I wrote him a letter—it was before the twelfth, because that's when I ended up out here—and he answered my letter, and he sent me forty dollars. He said, "I stayed with my cousin." He said, "A couple days ago I got me an upstairs apartment," he said, "and I talked to the landlord and I told him I knew you." So he said, "He and his wife was in one side and I was in the other." He said, "They're going to move back downstairs, in the master bedroom, and you can have the other side."

So I left Detroit on a Monday night, tears in my eyes, because I really liked Detroit, but I wanted to work, too. I got in on a Tuesday morning, in Sterling. There was an old gentleman sitting there and had all dirty clothes on and everything, you know. I asked him, I said, "Sir, is there anyplace around here where you can get a job?" He said, "Yes." I didn't even know the name of the place my friend was talking about anyway. He said, "Go up the street to the Elks Club and take a left and go all the way down to the river." He said, "They're hiring down there right at the wire company, you know."

DePue: What was the name of the place they're hiring?

Mercer: Northwestern Steel and Wire Company.

DePue: Northwestern Steel and Wire Company, okay.

Mercer: Mm-hmm. So I goes down, and I go in the employment office, and I told the guy what I wanted, signed and everything. And he said, "When you get this steel lot now" he said, "you take this upstairs to the doctor, and he's going to give you a physical. I goes upstairs, and Doc Bolander—super guy—sitting in the chair, and he was about this big. He looked at me, and "Isaac, how do you feel?" "Well," I said, "I feel pretty good, sir." He said, "I'm your doctor. I'm going to give you a physical." I said, "Okay." He said, "Do you have any kind of venereal disease?" I said, "No, sir." He said, "Well, go downstairs and tell them to put you to work." (laughter) So I goes downstairs, and a guy, he got me and everything. He said, "Do you want to take a tour?" I still didn't know where my friend worked. He said, "Do you want to take a tour?" I said, "Yeah." We goes all around the steel mill, then we came across the railroad tracks to the wire mill and nail department. So we was walking around, and just when we went out the door back to his office, we went through a room—the machines run just about like that, you know. The guys were all sitting on cans and stuff talking, you know. Had old pads on them where you could sit down on them. We got back across the street, and he said, "Isaac, got any

money?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, you got to have safety shoes. We'll furnish the goggles," he said, "but don't spend your money, because it'll be two weeks before your check. " So he said, "You know where Sears and Roebuck is?" I said, "Yeah. I seen it when I got off the bus, right across the street." He said, "Well, you go up and get you safety shoes and come back." I went and got my safety shoes and come back. I told him, I have a friend who works in a factory out here someplace." He said, "What's his name?" I said, "John Stanley." He gets this book and he starts going through. "Hey, Isaac, I got a John Stanley." And I say, "You do?" He said, "Yeah." So he said, "Where do you want to work?" I said, "That last place we came through, where they was sitting down and the machine running real slow." He said, "That's the drawing room." He says, "That's where your friend works." I said, "Can I work in the same department?" He said, "You sure can. You want to work on the same shift with him?" I said, "Yes." Okay, now it's about 11:30, twelve o'clock.

So I walked out to his house, six, seven blocks, where he was staying. I got out there, you know, and at one o'clock, he started moving around, you know. He said, "Well, you better start getting ready, We're going to go down and I'll go in the employment office with you." I said, "Okay." He kept bugging me. I said, "Okay, let's go." So we walked down there. And believe it or not, it was in December and it was fifty degrees. I said, "Oh, this is the kind of weather I like." So we sat on a bench out there, and he kept bugging me. He said, "Come on, let's go over to the employment office." He said, "I want to help you before I go in." I said, "Well, let's stick around a while." What they did, when I went back, he gave me my time card, and I stuck it in my pocket. So the guard came out and they opened the gate, and I'm right behind him. He punched in, and I punched in right behind him. You should have seen his face. (laughter) Yeah, three hours after I got out here, I was going to work.

And man, I tell you, that was hard for me to stay there, you know. Rock Falls, just across the river there, is about eight, ten thousand people. And I worked right on the river, and I'd look out there about nine o'clock at night, and you can barely see the lights, you know. I said, "I can't handle this." Detroit had lights all over. I said, Well, I think I'm going to go back to Detroit in the morning, where I knew I wanted to work. Well, I'm going to go back the next day, go back the next day. Those next days turned into thirty-six years. (laughter) But after I got out here awhile and everything, I kind of adjusted to a few people. I like it, you know. But the main thing about it, I could work, you know. I had a job every day. And sometimes if you didn't feel good through the week and miss a day, they'd let you come in on Saturday and make it up, but they wouldn't pay you overtime because you didn't have your forty hours in.

DePue: I wanted to back up a little bit and ask you a couple questions here.

Mercer: Go right ahead.

DePue: One, I am curious about your mother finding out after eight years that she had two husbands. Now, you got to do something about having two husbands. What happened there?

Mercer: Well, that's the last I can remember.

DePue: Did you lose track of your family then after you came back north?

Mercer: No, I didn't. When I came out here, every summer I'd go down to see her, and every year it got harder and harder, and I couldn't take it. They'd come out and look at the license plate on my car, and they'd say something, and I'd say yes and no. They didn't like that. So one time I had my wife with me, and she wanted to use the restroom, and they wouldn't let her use it. He was putting gas in my car, so I went over and I said, "You take that out." I said, "My wife can't use your bathroom, I can't use your gas." I told Mother, I said, "Mother," I said, "I think I'm going to have to come every other year now." I said, "I can't come every year." That didn't go over too big either, you know. So I went in fifty… No, after I'd got out of the service then, I'd go once a year—'54, '56. So I went down in '56. She and my sister was real tight. Everybody used to call them sisters, you know. I told her, "Mother," I said, "I won't be coming back next year. I'm going to have to come every other year. I can't handle this." So she said, "Well, I don't know." So then a year later, I called her up and I talked to her and I wrote letters and everything. I said, "Mother, we're going to come down." I said, "Now, I want you to be ready to go." So we goes down, you know, and I took my car and my brother took his, and we brought her back with us. So then finally I got my whole family up here.

DePue: Did your mother stay married to your stepfather, then?

Mercer: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. But they had some kind of little thing she said that when they went to get the marriage license, they wrote on this little piece of paper or something. I don't know what that was. But that was the way it worked down there, believe it or not.

DePue: Yeah, I would imagine that—okay—I would imagine there was some kind of legal documentation there. Do you remember when the Second World War started? Do you remember much about the Second World War?

Mercer: First time I'd ever been scared in my life, when they come on the radio and everybody yelling and screaming, saying, "They bombed Pearl Harbor, they bombed Pearl Harbor, they bombed Pearl Harbor." I was thirteen years old. It scared me to death. (laughs) The first time I'd ever been scared in my life. So then pretty soon, my older brother got called in, and he went into the Navy. When he did his two years—he's a second class petty officer—and when he came home on furlough, he just had on the old cap, and this jacket with all these buttons on it, you know. Boy, and everybody from Metter asked Mother,

"What's your son's rank?" and she told them "Second-class petty officer." They said, "How long was he in the service." She said, "Two and a half years." "Then he must be pretty smart," they said. "Most black soldiers, they just wear that…" She said, "Well, he ain't black, and he got it." That's when I went back to Detroit. He told me, Well I'm going to be leaving," and that's the first time I ever seen my mother cry. I almost didn't go. She was cooking, and I went in and I told Mother, I said, "Mother, I'm going to go back to Detroit with Jim." I said, "I remember how the people was up there. People was people." She said, "Son, I don't want to see you go, but I know they going to hurt you, because right now they just say, Oh, don't pay him no attention." I said yes and no, and that didn't work. So she said "Sooner or later, they're going to hurt you." When I seen those tears come out of her eye, I almost didn't go, but I figured that was the best thing for me to do, and that's what I did. That's how I got out of Georgia.

DePue: When you moved to Sterling, how many blacks were living in Sterling and Rock Falls at the time? Rock Falls is right across the river.

Mercer: Yes. Probably two dozen at the most, but nobody paid nobody any attention, you know, so you can adjust to that. In the steel mill at that time, before they expanded, we were at 860 people in the mill, and there was only three black persons in there, myself and my friend and our landlord, the only three. He was a foreman on the shipping dock, and boy, they gave him a hard time.

DePue: Did you live in Sterling, or did you live in Rock Falls?

Mercer: No, lived in Sterling. Never lived in Rock Falls. Like I said, there were very few black Americans. My oldest brother came out about a month after I did because he got laid off too. He'd always come to Dixon, you know, and he said, "I met a girl in Dixon, and I really like her." So what happened, I came, I said, "I like it down there, too.", I said, "I feel more at home here, you know, because everybody goes where they want to go; I live here, you live here." People didn't pay no attention. So then that's when I moved to Dixon because, like he said, there's more black Americans here and places to go and stuff like that. So that's how I ended up in Dixon.

DePue: Was that after the war, though?

Mercer: Uh-uh, that was in '46, '47. I didn't go into the war until '52.

DePue: Right. When did you move to Dixon, then?

Mercer: Nineteen forty-six. 1947, because I work—I got here in December, and it was after Christmas.

DePue: Were you still working over in Sterling, though?

Mercer: Yes, sir.

DePue: Okay.

Mercer: And the company, they had a bus. The bus driver, because they had people in Amboy, he'd come through to Dixon and he'd pick up everybody. The kind of man Mr. Dillon was, they don't make them like that anymore. We used to go on the Old Prairieville Road then. That's a little way around about. That's before we got the freeway down here. And if we got hung up in the snow in the morning and we didn't get to work till eleven or twelve o'clock, the old man would tell us don't punch our card. He said, "Take it into the department and give it to your foreman," and they'd put us down as seven o'clock. He says, "You was on that bus, so you was coming to work for me."

DePue: Now, what was his name again?

Mercer: P.W. Dillon. They don't make them like that anymore.

DePue: You weren't married at the time, I assume. Were you…

Mercer: No, I was a jockey. (laughter)

DePue: Did you continue to go to church like your mother had raised you?

Mercer: I knew I better, but what happened, there was three or four ladies about the age of my mother that lived right next door to the church, you know. Boy, I better show up. One of them told me one time, she said, "You going to church?" I said, "Yes, ma'am," and I did. But that was one of the best things I ever did, because after I'd been here so long and the job situation—in the middle fifties, the job situation got kind of tight, because when I left to go in the Army, the steel mill worked four shifts, twenty-four seven. So when I left, everybody was working. This is in January. And six months later—my basic was in Camp Roberts, California. They sent me back to Fort Sheridan here for reassignment. Never got a furlough the whole while I was there. So when I came back, all the guys are walking the street. I said, "What's going on?" "You know, we were laid off." I says, "You got to be kidding me. How can you lay off three shifts of people in six months?" But that's what happened. And it stayed like that until nineteen… And what happened—and that's when I moved my mother, what I would do then, when they had those big layoffs in the summer, I could ride a forklift tractor, and I was making 150 dollars a week on my machine, and the forklift tractor, they just pay you a straight hourly wage, ninety dollars, sixty dollars less than what I made when I was on the machine. And believe it or not, at that time we bought this house. We bought this house in 1954.

DePue: Okay. Well, we're ahead of the story again, but that's great. You've got a very good memory for these things. I'm wondering—

Mercer: I wish it was as good as it used to be, you know. Some things now, I have to ask my wife, you know.

DePue: Yes. I wondered if the plant that you worked in in Sterling was unionized when you joined.

Mercer: No, it wasn't, but it was after I joined it.

DePue: When did that happen, do you remember?

Mercer: Sure I do. (laughs) We had a lot of Mexican-Americans working at the plant, and then when World War II was over, a lot of guys come back to the plant, see, and unbeknownst to the old man, Mr. Dillon, what they would do, they'd take those Mexican-Americans off the machines, make them sweep the floor. And that busload of guys they brought up from down South, they put them on the machines. I said, "Wait a minute, something's wrong with this picture. That shouldn't be." And so I kept talking to my guys. But when I was working in Detroit and we go out in the parking lot to pick up cigarette butts, there's a little shed down there, oh, probably about as big as this room, and open all the way around. And what happened, when they bring a car off the assembly line, one of those guys would take it out in the parking lot and park it, and then next time it's your turn, next time it's my turn. And there weren't no cigarette butts out there. Every once in a while I snoozed down there, and I'm listening to those guys talking union, you know. I kept asking questions, kept asking questions, and they told me. When I came out here and saw what was going on—at that time we only had 860 people working that plant because they hadn't expanded. In my department, I said, "Look, we got to organize a labor union." I said, "If you do the same work, you should get the same pay." Because I know my dad, he would work, and he'd get a ten-minute break, and you'd get a thirty-minute break. And if he wasn't back in nine minutes, they'd go get him. They got fifty cents an hour and he got a quarter. I said, "That ain't right."

So I kept talking to the guys, I kept talking to the guys. So believe it or not, only two guys agreed to help me. The rest of them, "Well, I don't want no part of it. I don't want no part of it." So one day we was organizing. I said, "Well, we got to organize a union." (laughs) So I told the guys, "I've got to have some help." So our supervisors, little upstairs thing, the little block. He could sit up there and look all around the whole drawing room. So I told the guys, "We can't handle this." I said, "That shouldn't be." So two guys—they was, oh, probably fifteen, twenty years older than I was—I was talking to them one day. He said, "Sounds good. See if you can get some people to help you." So I kept talking around here, kept talking around. I finally got these two guys that said, "We'll help you." I said, "OK, now, I'm going to tell you what we're going to have to do." I said, "We have to have two-thirds of the membership signed up," because these guys told me about the National Labor Relations Board and the whole nine yards, and I found out it was in Peoria. So I told this one guy, McDonald—he was a hothead, you know—I said, "Okay, now, you keep that in your shirt." I said, "Now, if you see somebody coming,

hide it." He'd stand right in the aisle. They'd come up to him and—so they nailed him one day. They kicked him out the door.

And we was just on the block of getting reorganized, and they brought him back. So I told the guy, "Well, we got to make them bring McDonald back." I said, "He helped us get this thing going, now I feel like he should be back." They said, "What should we do?" I said, "Well, why don't we just put our tools up and take a walk." Two guys. Then I went around to the rest of the guys and said, "You guys do what you want." I said, "We're going to punch out." "You're not going to leave us; we're going to punch out too." So the guys start punching out. Our supervisor is standing up in the room looking at us. So I went upstairs and told him what we were going to do. He said, "Wait just a minute." This guy was an alcoholic. You know, every day he—we got paid on a Monday and he… Oh, man, they canned him. So, "What do you want?" "Well, if you don't bring Mac back to work, we're not going to work." And I told the guys, "Put your tools up." I said, "I'll meet you guys out front." So he got on the phone, called across the street, got a hold of the old man. I'm sitting there listening to him. So he called the assistant foreman. "Oh," he said, "what's going on over there? I hear some of your men have left." So he said, "Where's the general foreman." "Oh," he said, "well, I don't know." He said, "Well, you find him." (laughter) So, after the old man got through, he brought the guy back, see. Called the old man up and everything. "Well," he said, "you guys go ahead and put your tools back to work and go back to work," and that's what we did. And that's how we got unionized.

And then what they would do, they would say if you were just starting, you started low on the totem pole. You didn't walk right in and take a guy's job away from him. And everybody got the same pay. Now, some—for an hourly job, you got paid by the hour, but meanwhile they called it piecework over and above. We got so much an hour and so much for—say if I would get out about two tons, about what my—and just figure just about what [please explain further]. And then what we started doing—we didn't stop, because I don't believe in goofing around. I said, "Well," I said, "I think what we should do," I said, "They're going to bring an adjustor. I think we should kind of slow it down a while." I said, "Keep busy and make it look good." So they did, so we got a fairly decent raise after we got our union organized and everything. And then, 1980, the old man—Mr. Dillon was ninety-four years old—and he come through that mill. He'd sit and talk. You know what? The first time he met me, he knew my name and he never forget it. And he got his hair cut in the same barbershop we did. One day, we was up there, and the old man had just left, and the barber said, "Mr. Dillon just left." You know what he asked me? He asked me how many men did I have working for me." Said, "Know what he said?" I said, "No." He said, "He said about half of them." (laughter)

After we got the union going and everything, they paid me extra. You go and pick up your check in a little brown envelope, you know, and all your

money is in there There's a tavern, four taverns up there about a block and a half from the mill. Well, them guys get off at seven to three—three to eleven only had about an hour because they closed at midnight. When they got home at night, no money, no food in the house, no clothes for their kids. And I said, "Wait a minute, what's going on here? Something ain't right." So (laughs) what he did, he knew people. About ten or twelve of those guys' wives went up to see Mr. Dillon. He sat down; he listened to them. And he never said a word. What he did, he had his foremen to come through the mill and get everybody's name and address. He started mailing the checks. When the guys got off at three o'clock, the wife had bought groceries, clothes for the kids, and the whole nine yards. He didn't hurt anybody's feelings, because believe it or not, two thirds of the people who worked that mill, they lived in the surrounding—Clinton, Iowa, Freeport, all over. And those guys said, "Boy, I'm sure glad the old man did that." Because what they would do, they'd get up and go get their check and go back home and get to the grocery store, and then they'd go back to work three to eleven in the afternoon, you know.

Avenue G down there, it used to be trains used to switch and everything, you know. So if we got there with our car and the railroad track was blocked, we'd have to wait until they moved, then we'd go and park the car. So this one guy—he's running for governor—so I got up and I looked and said, "What's all the limousines doing out there?" And I seen them out there pointing towards Avenue G, you know. So after he left, I said, "Well, Mr. Dillon's trying to get those guys to get an overhead pass down there so when we get ready to go to work, we can get punched in on time." They laughed about it. Two and a half years later, the bridge was down there.

DePue: When was this union organization going on? What year was that?

Mercer: Wait just a second. (pause) Early '50s.

DePue: Was that after, though, you came back from the war?

Mercer: No, no, that was before I went.

DePue: Okay. That was before you went, then.

Mercer: Uh-huh, mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: Do you remember June 1950 when the North Koreans invaded the South? Do you remember hearing that news?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: Did it occur to you at the time that might have some implications for you?

Mercer: Never did. After I got, oh, in my late teens, I said, "They're not going to bother me." Boy, I'll tell you, they got me. (laughs) DePue: Well, let's talk about that, then, Isaac. How did you end up in the military?

Mercer: Well, they sent me a letter and said, "Your friends and neighbors have chosen you," blah, blah, blah. We caught the Greyhound bus down here and went to Chicago. That's where we had to take our physical and everything.

DePue: When was it that you got the letter? When did you get the letter?

Mercer: The end of December.

DePue: Of 1951?

Mercer: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Okay.

Mercer: And I went in January 7, 1952, is when I caught the bus and went, and we all got our physical. And then they put us on a bus to Fort Sheridan, and never even got to come back home.

DePue: Okay.

Mercer: Yep.

(pause in recording)

DePue: Okay, now we're back. Go ahead.

Mercer: What were you asking me?

DePue: Well, when you got drafted. You had just gone to get your physical, I think.

Mercer: Yeah. I left there and went to Fort Sheridan. We stayed there a week, then we went to Camp Roberts, California. But while we were up there, there's a lot of rumors going on, you know. They said, "Boy, I hope you don't go to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri." I said, "Why?" They said, "Well, they got the black soldiers on one side"—after Truman went to all that trouble to make people people—said, "And the white soldiers, on Saturday afternoon, they go to town on furloughs and everything, and they take the black soldiers over to police the area, and they sit under a shade tree and laugh at you and throw rocks at you. Well, two or three days later, four o'clock in the morning, a guy comes in banging on the door and came right on in. "All right," he said. "The following named men are going to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri." Scared me to death. I'm sitting there. And when we went to bed, something like this, you put it on the foot of your bed on the bunk with your name on it.

DePue: A little piece of paper with your name on it.

Mercer: Yeah. He come by, and he looks at this thing, you know. He walks on by—big flashlight—he goes about two bunks down, and he makes a U-turn, and he comes back. He looks at it again, then he walked on by. I was happy then. Then about 8:30 that morning they got on the horn. "All right, the following-named men fall out. We're going to Camp Roberts, California." Oh, man, that was it. (laughter) Got out there and got us unloaded and squared away and everything. The next morning, "All right, E Company," blah, blah, blah, blah, "fall out. All right, soldier, you know how to get in attention?" "Yes, sir." And he's walking down the line. He said, "I got a"—I was the only black soldier in the line. He walks down there, and he said, "I got to get a squad leader." He walks all the way down, comes back. "You." I said, "Come on." (laughter) So I got stuck as… Boy, I'm telling you, but we had a good time. At that time, you took sixteen weeks of basic training. Sixteen weeks. Boy, I tell you, that was hard. That was hard. But, you know what? You adjust to it after a while—

DePue: Now, this is 1952—

Mercer: Yes, it is.

DePue: —three or four years after Truman had integrated the military, but I'm sure there are still people—I would guess that there's people in your squad and your platoon who are from the South who had a different frame of mind. Was there any of that coming out during basic training?

Mercer: Well, not really. After Truman left, I think when things start getting a little ugly, I think everybody pretty much adjusted to everything. But out there, why, we was all in the same barracks, you know, but there wasn't no problem. But they'd heard about us, you know. "Well," they'd say, "boy, that's good.". Some of them was from down South, you know.

DePue: So the drill sergeant has treated you just as badly as they treated everybody else, then, huh?

Mercer: Yeah, sure. Everybody was the same. I was blessed, I tell you. So I went over—I used to play a little baseball, and when I come back there for reassignment, I was up at Fort Sheridan and they had some guys out playing baseball, practicing rather. And the guy, he said, "You ever play any baseball?" I said, "I played a little bit." He said, "We're practicing this afternoon. Why don't you come out and practice with us?" I said, "Okay." Well, I goes out there, and he said, "What position do you play?" I said, "Well, I pitched a little bit and played a little bit of third base." All the rest of the guys are sitting under a shade tree. He said, "Get your glove." He said, "Go out to third base." I went out to third base, and he whispered in this guy's ears. So he came out there, man, and he hit me three rockets, you know. Hit me three balls. "What's your name?" (DePue laughs) And then we started

traveling around, see. Well, the guy said, "Boy, if we can get through the"—he said, "You play basketball?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, you got to learn how to play basketball, because, if you play in some kind of sport," he said, "they won't send you overseas."

But what happened—Fifth Army, we had a tournament. We went up to Camp McCormick, Wisconsin and we had guys from all over, Fifth Army area, from Kentucky to Nebraska—all over. So we goes, and this commander up there, he lost his right arm, and he'd salute you with his left. So, boy, we was his thing, man, you know. Just go up there and practice and gee whiz, you know, the rest of the day off, you know. I figured that sounds pretty good. But anyway, we won second place at the tournament, and Fort Custer, Michigan, that was the only team that could beat us. So, man, we got down to two teams, and that night, we goes down to the gym where they had all their trophies and stuff in there, you know, and jackets, and jackets had a baseball on the pocket that said, "Fifth Army Champions," and then they had a trophy about this high just lay in place.

DePue: Two and a half feet high, okay.

Mercer: So we—oh, man. Man, we tried them jackets on, man. We should have never did it. Rained all night, and the next day we had to get out of there. So they got the choppers out and they oiled down the field and burned it off. You was talking about something making me sick. So the two managers got to yell at us and say "What happens if we get rained out?" He said, "Yah, if we get rained out." He said, "Go out there and if you get five innings in, it's a complete game." We goes out. And I'm looking back over my shoulder, you know. Man, them clouds were dark. I said, "Come on, come on." We had a two-to-one lead. (laughter) "Come on!" And we had a center fielder, a German, Zulesdorf was his name.

DePue: What was the name?

Mercer: Zulesdorf.

DePue: Boy.

Mercer: Z-u-l-e-s-d-o-r-f. That guy was center fielder. And they had a little fence out there about this tall. So this guy comes up to the plate, and he drug his bat up there like he's about half asleep, you know. He's Polish. I can't think of his name right now. But anyway, the pitcher threw one right down, and the umpire said, "Strike one." Another one, "Strike two." And the catcher, he started saying something to him. And we're a two-to-one lead. This was five innings, and man, those clouds was getting dark. Well, he starts bugging the guy, and the next pitch, man, that guy, he cranked up and he hit that ball. I seen Zulesdorf, and he turned his back to the infield. Man, he was going. He got back to that fence, and he leaned up against that fence, and when he threw

it on in, almost home run. Oh, man, you talk about sick. (laughter) So we got out, and I said, "Well, that's what happened. We went down there last night and looked at them trophies." So we got second place. And when we got back to Fort Sheridan—

DePue: Is that where you were stationed at the time, then, is Fort Sheridan?

Mercer: Yeah, Fort Sheridan, yeah. The old man had a band at the gate to meet us and the whole nine yards. And, like I told you, he had the one arm. So the guys were saying on the way back, "Well, if we can get a basketball team going, we can play during the winter, and we won't have to go overseas because, you know, we won't have enough time left." About two or three weeks after we got back, a guy's coming around and telling everybody, "Fall out." Okay, we falls out. They shipped the old man out, see, and put a new guy in there. "All right," he says, "nobody's going to participate in sports." He pulled the plug on us.

And then a week later—I ended up in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Got down there, and about a week or ten days, had a roll call one morning. "Okay, I have the name of seven men that got to go to Fort"—Kentucky. Fort Lewis?

DePue: Fort Lewis—or—yeah.

Mercer: No, that's Washington.

DePue: Fort Lewis, Washington.

Mercer: Well, I'll think of it in a minute. Anyway—

DePue: Fort Campbell, Kentucky?

Mercer: Fort Knox, Fort Knox.

DePue: Fort Knox.

Mercer: Fort Knox, mm-hmm. So what happens—I was one of the seven. And when you travel like that—we had one sergeant, and the rest of us were corporals, so he'd get a meal ticket. We catch the train, and the conductor said, "Well, you guys are getting to Louisville at midnight." "Where's a restaurant." "You can go right across the street, twenty-four seven." We gets down there, we go and we walks in, we sit down, and the sergeant go and got all the meal tickets. He's the big cheese. And I see him and this guy back there at the cash register, man, and man, they was going nose to nose, and his face was red. I said, "What the heck's going on?" So he got up and he come back and he said, "Let's go someplace else." Well, dummy, I don't know what's going on. "Let's go someplace else." I said, "The place looks pretty clean." We goes out and we get about a block out, and he say, "You know why we didn't eat in

there?" He said, "That so-and-so didn't want to serve Mercer." "Oh, man, wait a minute. We're going back down there and wreck the joint." He said, "No, you're not. If you go back down there, you're just as bad as he is. Leave it be." We walked up the street about another block and a half, and a big restaurant, and see two or three black girls going around. So this guy, our sergeant, he goes in, he comes back to the door. He said, "Everybody can eat in here" real loud. (laughter) We go in, and we sat down, and we ate. We went to Fort Knox for that training, man, the bombs and all that stuff. So we come back. I got another delay en route. I got two delays en route.

DePue: Were you being trained in what specialty? Infantry?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, yeah, yeah. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Yeah. We got back, and boy, in three days, I had to be in Fort Lewis, Washington. And the guy said, "You wasn't very smart." Said, "If you'd have been a little bit smarter, you wouldn't have had to go." Said, "Once you have less than a year [left in service], you don't have to go overseas." Big deal. So that's why I ended up over there. Sure did. Wasn't pretty, but the good Lord seen fit to bring me back, so I got back, and I'm thankful for that.

DePue: Did you have a girlfriend at the time, anything to—

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: Were you married already?

Mercer: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Well, tell me when you got married.

Mercer: Got married in July the nineteenth, and January first, I was out of here—six months. And all that time—and they said in another two years—because I was twenty-two—said another two years, they couldn't have sent you. Once you get twenty-five, they can't send you. That's how my luck's been running. DePue:What's your wife's maiden name? What's her name?

Mercer: Earlene Kinney.

DePue: Kinney?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, K-i-n-n-e-y.

DePue: Where did you meet Earlene?

Mercer: Here in town when I was working at the mill. Her family's from southern Illinois, and when she'd get out of school, she'd come and spend the summer with her mom. She worked at the state school out there [where? Southern IL?]. I met her when it was time for her to go back to school. Sometimes

when I worked eleven to seven—she lived over there on Lincoln Avenue—I'd see her and her girlfriend waiting to catch the bus. They'd walk down here. You know where Casey's is over here?

DePue: Yeah, just a couple blocks away.

Mercer: I'd come in there. This was an old dirt road then. They knew just what time I was going to get down there, and they would (laughs) walk down there, and when I'd reach over and open my door, they'd get in, you know. I talked to her and listened to what she had to say, you know. Yeah, she convinced me that she was the one, and believe it or not, if she don't kick me out the door by the nineteenth of July, [it will be] sixty years.

DePue: Wow. What did she think about you going into the Army, then, about being drafted?

Mercer: Well, it was a sad situation, I'll tell you, because, like I said, we'd just gotten married and everything, and she hadn't really adjusted to the people, you know, like… But she lived right next door to her mother, and they were saying one day, "You know, if we would have known that you'd just gotten married, maybe.." I said No. So what happened, they wrote a letter to—and my mother-in-law was telling me. She said, "You know, they said by you being almost overage," said, "there might be a chance they can…" And then she said that my big cheese wrote them a letter, and she said, "They're not going to let him come home. He's going to do his time." Said they seemed to think pretty well of me. So I did my time, and got out. You know, you get out, you stay off your job—union—stay off your job ninety days, but you have to go back in ninety days. I said, "Boy," when I was overseas, "when I get back home, if I do, I'm going to stay out eighty-nine days, then I'm going to work." When I came back, and two or three weeks later, you know, I couldn't handle it, I had to go to work. (laughter)

DePue: Well, let's get you over to Korea, then. You were at Fort Lewis when you deployed. When did you actually get shipped to Korea?

Mercer: I'm going to say it was close to—it wasn't February, it was late January.

DePue: Of 1953? '52?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. So we went over—

DePue: Wait a minute, wait a minute now. I thought you just were drafted in January of 1952.

Mercer: Yeah.

DePue: So this had to be a year later, in 1953, when you were shipped.

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: Okay. Were you literally shipped? Did you go over by ship?

Mercer: Yeah. Well, you know what—shows what my luck was—the guys that left before us, they flew over. It took us fourteen days. Then we get over there after the ceasefire and everything, and we come home. And guess what happened? I was going to go through Tokyo—because they always go back through Tokyo—and bring some things for my wife and my mother-in-law. I'd seen a little jacket; I knew she would like it. I thought she would, anyways. When I brought it home, why suddenly that jacket disappeared. (laughs) If I'd known that, I'd have bought this one for her. But, so time for us to come home. I had a friend working in the headquarters. This was after the ceasefire. We pulled back about eight, ten miles behind the line. We had tents, you know, and most of my guys were carpenters. They built big Quonset huts, you know, man. They used to call that the Conrad Hilton. We had a tent to sleep in then.

But anyway, a friend of mine worked in the front office. He was from New York. His name was Mark Kelly. I'll never forget his name. Every once in a while you'd hear something scratching on the side of your tent, you know. He come in one night, and he said, "Sergeant Mercer, I'll tell you something if you don't tell anybody." And I said, "Well, I'm pretty good at keeping my mouth shut. What's up?" He said, "I just got the orders over there." He said, "Tomorrow," he said, "you're heading home." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah." So he snuck on back out. So late that night, my squad was in charge of what they call charge of quarters. They sit in the shack down here all night, you know, and make sure everything's up to snuff. So the next day we were all at the Quonset hut, and I looked out, and here come one of my guys. When he got there, he right about pulled me out the end of the street because that's about how long that streets were. We cleared everything, put up the tents, man, and the guys called it Conrad Hilton. When he got to the door, he was tired. He said, "Sergeant Mercer, you're going home tomorrow." I say, "No kidding?" I already knew, you know. (laughter) And then that night—my guys, they know I didn't drink—the guys threw a party for me, and the lieutenants and everybody that we was working with come over,. Everybody was taking a little sip, you know. So my platoon leader, he didn't—he really wasn't my—I was my platoon leader. He got hit in the face when he was coming up on the front lines with some shrapnel, and he had to go back to Tokyo hospital, and he didn't come back till after the ceasefire. So they all come over, and we had a ball. So one of my guys, they knew I was pretty truthful. They knew I didn't drink. We put up a little building down there, and what they would do, they let the guys go down and have two—I think they used to call it two-point beer or something like that, but they said it wouldn't make you tipsy. So what happened, we went down there, and they don't let the sergeants in. I said, "Wait a minute, what's going on here?" I said, "Those guys built that thing." Okay.

So what I did, every time the promotion list would come up, this guy, Copatelli come over and told me—I learned a lot from him. He said, "Sergeant Mercer," he said, "if you ever want to get any of your men promoted, I can tell you how to do it." I said, "I'm listening." He said, "When you make up that promotion list," I said, "Yes," he said, "You're going to get promoted." And he said, "The way they promote," he said, "if I want you, I put their name above mine." And believe it or not, when we'd go down about from here to the end of the street, they had a little tank down there, and we'd go out every day and take a shower. And the guys that come in and replace us, they're right across the street, and they used to throw up(??) show up(??), and they'd jockey around. So we'd march down there and come back. And we drove by, and this one guy, he looked. They didn't have a sergeant in their company. And I had one guy—he's from Detroit, an old football player. So the old man called me in the office, and he said, "Sergeant Mercer," he said, "Mike Company just come in. They ain't got a sergeant over there." He said, "They want you to give them one." I said, "Sir," I said, "what I went through with those men," I say, "I won't give them none of them." Then I go up to see the old man. I told him how I feel. I said, "Sir," I said, "I'll go and ask them which one want to go." So I went back to them. He said, "I'll go." I said, "Look now, you don't have to." I said, "You stay here." He said, "They ain't got a sergeant over there?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, I want to go." He said, "I can run that outfit." (laughter) He goes over, and we'd been washing down to get a shower, he'd be sitting there with his foot up on the desk. (laughter) Yeah, that's right. I had a good bunch of guys, boy, I tell you. Yes, sir.

DePue: What was your rank when you shipped over to Korea? Were you a sergeant at that time, or corporal?

Mercer: Corporal, mm-hmm.

DePue: Okay, so corporal in the infantry; you pretty much know what you're going to be doing once you get there.

Mercer: You got it, yes, sir.

DePue: Tell me what it was like when you first got to Korea. What was the sights and smells, your first impression of Korea?

Mercer: I don't see how people live like that. See, there weren't no houses. They had what they call hootches, this old thing up, you know, and man. But we didn't stay very long on the front lines, and I was glad, because man, I tell you, that stuff makes you sick, that smell over there, you know. But the people over there, they were used to it; it didn't bother them.

DePue: Well, did you get to Pusan, or did you come into Inchon?

Mercer: Inchon. Come in at Inchon, left out of Inchon. Sure did.

DePue: Did you go through Japan first and then transfer to another ship from Japan?

Mercer: Uh-huh, mm-hmm. Right, mm-hmm.

DePue: When did you find out what unit you were going to be assigned to?

Mercer: When I got over there.

DePue: Was it over—once you'd arrived, then you found out what unit you were going to be assigned to?

Mercer: Yeah, they told us when we left Tokyo we was going to be in the 44th Division—or, 45th.

DePue: Forty-fifth.

Mercer: Forty-fifth Division, yeah, mm-hmm.

DePue: Okay. Now, you mentioned you were in I Company. Do you remember what regiment you were in?

Mercer: I sure don't. I looked all over for everything and I couldn't find out. I was hoping I could, but I couldn't find it.

DePue: Okay. So the 45th Division. And they were pretty much right in the middle of the line, were they not?

Mercer: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Pretty rugged territory. Tell me about the first day you went up to the front lines, then.

Mercer: Oh, boy. Oh, oh, oh, tough man, you know, never been afraid in my life. I was a little bit afraid when this Pearl Harbor deal. And just my luck, the night I go on the front line, they come in on us.

DePue: "They" being the Chinese?

Mercer: Koreans.

DePue: North Koreans? Go ahead.

Mercer: Scared me to death because I couldn't see out there and I didn't know the area or nothing, you know. But man, they come in, man, *bang, bang, bang*. But you know what? They'd tell you when they was going to come in on you. They'd come in on their own artillery and everything. That's when we knew they was coming. As long as they was quiet, no problem. Well, when they start bombing you, here they come. Just blowing all over and everything, you know. We captured seven that come in one night. I had my men on patrol.

You know, the old man didn't like for me to go, but I didn't want to send my men someplace I won't go, so I would go out with them. And you can't go out at the same time every night and come back. They know all that stuff, you know. You have to kind of flip-flop back and forth there. So one night, I ran a patrol, and I got out there—and it shows you how blessed I was—Each Platoon(??) had one Korean. I had a little Korean didn't look a day over fifteen years old, with a smile on his face all the time. And he could speak English just as good as you and I. We run in patrol, you know, and they'd be yelling over there, you know, (makes speech noises). He said, "Sergeant Mercer, do you know what he's saying?" And I said, "No, that's why I'm thankful to have you." "Oh, he said tell the GIs to come on over; we got a lot of girls over there. He said, we know how them GIs is; they like a lot of girls." I said, "Yeah, I got news for him." (laughter) Yes, sir.

DePue: Well, you said Sergeant Mercer. Did you get promoted, then, early in your time in Korea?

Mercer: Yeah, mm-hmm. After my platoon leader got hit in the face, Lieutenant Kelly, they sent him back to Korea, and the old man comes up and he looks and he said, "Mercer," said, "you got his job." And then after—

DePue: Now, there had to be other sergeants in the platoon at that time, weren't there?

Mercer: Nobody. We was all just—no there wasn't, not a one.

DePue: Did you all come into the platoon at the same time, or did people come in one at a time? They were doing the rotations by that time.

Mercer: Yeah, uh-huh, mm-hmm, mm-hmm, yeah.

DePue: Okay.

Mercer: Yeah, when I got over there and got off, I never saw any of my men anymore that I went over there with. It was a whole different group down there, after we got over there.

DePue: Were you a little bit older than most of the other people in the platoon?

Mercer: Uh-huh, yeah. I was the old man, yeah. I was the old man.

DePue: So that was the reason that he was—

Mercer: I thought about that too, you know, I sure did. Yeah, sure. If Lieutenant Kelly, he came back about, oh, a week or ten days after the ceasefire, and I see him coming, you know—super guy. Because he was drafted, you know. He said, "I wouldn't be stupid enough to sign up." He said, "I got a sweet little girl in Chicago." He said, "When I get out, I'm going back with her, you know." So he come in, and when he got hit in the face with this shrapnel on the way up

the front line, he had no feelings in this side of his face, so he used to ask me would I mind shaving him. I said, "No, sir, I'll shave you." And I've shave him because he couldn't feel. But he was an all right guy, I'll tell you. He wasn't one of them gung-ho guys. But boy, I tell you what, after we pulled back, them lieutenants, aw man, they'd rush away to the states. A lot of my guys told me when we was on the front line back then, the ninety-day wonders, we called them, would treat the guys and they told me—God's truth—they told me, "Sergeant Mercer, I wish you was our platoon leader." I treated them with respect, you know. That's what you got to do. But, boy, I tell you, up on that front line, you know, what a goody-goody, you know, because you got trouble in front and behind you. But just like you and I are sitting here talking now.

DePue: Can you describe what the terrain was like, what it was like on the front line, what your positions were like?

Mercer: We had trenches, and if you got cut off from your trench, you had to dig you a foxhole. And they had—

DePue: Was this pretty rugged terrain, mountainous?

Mercer: Mm-hmm. The trenches were down, and we had big logs of wood over them, had camouflage on there, and you could walk back and forth down there, through there, going to different areas down underneath there.

DePue: Well, it sounds like when you first got there, it would have been February. Cold?

Mercer: You kidding me? And you know what? You wore what they gave you. If you even thought about building a fire, they'd court-martial you. And what they did then, they got us all down. Man, they had a stack of clothes. This guy was… I said, "What's that?" "This is what you're going to have to wear." Man, I put them—I was as big as that door. I said, "What happens if we have to run?" And one of the other guys said, "What do you mean if you have to run?" He said, "What happens if you have to take a crap?" (laughter) He said, "It'd take you an hour to get out of this." (laughter) Yes, sir. Yeah, we pretty much went through the grinder, yes, sir.

DePue: What kind of boots did you have? Did you have what they call the Mickey Mouse boots?

Mercer: That's it.

DePue: The insulated boots.

Mercer: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Did it keep you warm?

Mercer: It sure did. It sure did. Your feet never get cold. What would happen sometimes, your socks would get wet. You know how we would dry them? Take them off and put them in your armpits. It was really something.

DePue: Can you tell me what a typical day, when you're up on the front lines, what a typical day would be?

Mercer: Uh-huh. Now, when you're on the front lines, like I said, they won't bother you in the morning, but at night, you got everybody out there. So what I would do when we came back, I said, "Okay, half of you guys take a nap." Then in the afternoon, they'd flip-flop, but then at night, everybody was up and at them, you know.

DePue: Were you guys fairly frequently conducting patrols out into the no-man's land?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. The old man, he don't really go, and a little medic from eastern Tennessee, little freckle-faced guy, a nice little kid said, "Sergeant Mercer, I begged my parents for two years to sign where I could come into the Army." He said, "I wish now they'd have kicked me every time I asked them." And he jumped the old man one time. (laughs) He said, "Sergeant Mercer shouldn't be running them patrols." He said, "Sergeant Mercer's a good man, and you're going to get him killed." That's what he told the old man. (laughs) Yeah, he said, "I wish my parents, every time I mentioned it, I wish they took a baseball bat to me." He was scared to death.

DePue: Do you remember any patrols that went bad on you or got a little bit too exciting?

Mercer: Well, no. Believe it or not, the only time we ever came close to anything, was when the tankers were right up above us, and we went out one night, and when we came back, they forgot we were out there. (makes shooting noise) You talk about guys hitting the dirt! And I can tell you something you probably won't believe. My little—I call him baby-san. You know how you have your grenades around here?

DePue: You're talking about the Korean who was with you.

Mercer: Yeah, mm-hmm. So he was always right by me. They open up on us, and we hit the dirt. So what happened, the ones we captured, we took everything they had, put it in an old helmet, and took it down to the old man's office. And they had a little badge around his neck. We took all that off. And the old man, he calls us all down. That was dope they had in there.. And that's the only time they'd come in. As long as everything was quiet, don't worry about it. When they start bombing, here they come, right under their own artillery. And they hated tanks. The first night that I really had any contact with them, I had just come off patrol, and the guy that relieved me, he was in the foxhole, and we had a trench about that wide, but it had concertina wire in it, see… And this

kid, he's from Detroit, and nobody liked him because he wouldn't talk. He'd sit down there just about every day and write his girlfriend. So when this other, my relief, come and took off, he goes around and crawls in his position, where he can look right down that trench and see them coming. And believe it or not, he left his rifle in the hootchie. So that's where we all come in with little blocks over the top and everything and put a curtain over the door and have a little drink or a little snort of booze. But anyway, the funniest thing about the whole thing was, believe it or not—and a lot of people won't believe this. I do a lot of things; I'm not a liar. The next morning, we were checking, and you know what? That hand grenade on his belt had a hole in it. One of them bullets went through that hand grenade and didn't explode it.

DePue: Wow.

Mercer: That is the God's truth.

DePue: Had to feel a little bit lucky that day.

Mercer: I told him, I said, "Look, that's a blessing." And nobody had ever seen or heard anything like that. They saw that hole in the grenade. One of them caliber bullets went through there. I said, "Well, I wonder if any of them will go off at all, you know, after that." Yeah, but that's what scares you, you know, something like that. After it's done, you know.

DePue: Well, you were in Korea at a time when the peace talks were finally, after about two years, finally starting to wrap up. And I used the wrong words in calling them "peace talks" because they ended up with an armistice. But I also know that as they got closer and closer to that armistice which happened July twenty-seventh, the communists got more and more ambitious with their patrols and their offensive actions, didn't they?

Mercer: They did. The old man said, "Sergeant Mercer," he said, "there's going to be a ceasefire at twelve o'clock. If one of your men is firing around, you shoot them. Twice I was ordered to shoot my own men; that's how bad it was over there. But anyway, about 11:30, man did they unload on us! [firing?]

DePue: This would have been on the twenty-seventh of July, or the twenty-sixth?

Mercer: They walked that hill all the way up and walked that hill back down.

DePue: When you say "walked that hill," with artillery rounds?

Mercer: Yeah, they come up, then they go back down, come up, go back down again. That was… So about five minutes to twelve, they cease fire, and they don't fire another round. We were up on this mountain; they were up on that one. We come down this way; they come down this way. They were empty-handed. Man, we had machine guns and falling down and everything. They come down empty-handed. I said, "Yeah, those guys are pretty smart." I said,

"They come down empty-handed and we come down this hill stumbling and falling over one another." And I didn't see nothing over there worth fighting for, just whoever got to the highest mountain would bully everybody. And you never have to worry about them as long as everything was quiet, but when they start bombing, you better get ready, because here they come.

DePue: What did you think about the armistice when it happened? Did it make sense to you?

Mercer: A lot of things happened I don't think should have happened. I think the guys were sent a lot of places they shouldn't have had to go, because it wasn't pretty out there. Sometimes they get a little disgruntled some time. But otherwise, why, it really wasn't too bad because at least they would warn us, you know, when they was coming in. They'd never sneak in on you. But the one night I was telling you about while ago, this guy—this is the first night I really come in contact with them up close—and they didn't like tanks. There was a tank set up on the hill. So this one little guy, a Korean guy—I never did trust that guy, because every place you see him—he had a flashlight, and nobody else had a flashlight. Well, he was guarding in this hootchie while we was on patrol. So when we come back—and he never did this before—the guy that was in the pit took off, and he took his spot. So he left, and one of my guys says, "Look, Sergeant Mercer," said, "So-and-so left his rifle." I picked—excuse me just a minute.

DePue: Hold on.

(pause in recording)

DePue: Okay. We were talking about this Korean you didn't trust who had the flashlight.

Mercer: Okay. Always. Wasn't nobody out there. I said, "How did that guy get…?" For some reason, I was always suspicious of that guy. So what happened, I grabbed Murphy's rifle, and I had to go, oh, probably about from here to Van Buren but on a curve, the trench. You had those logs and everything over on the?) camouflage. I heard "Oooo." I said, "What the heck is that?" I'm down in the trench. I looked up, and there the Korean was, over that tank. So one of my little Koreans is following me around. He goes back to the tent and says "You guys come out and help Sergeant Mercer." So one of the guys grabbed his rifle, and they caved that whole place in, so we got to dig him out, you know. So what happened—the first time I ever got to shoot anybody—I'm in the trench, see, and I hear this (makes noise). And I look, and they was up above the trenches, and they run a little bit, squat down. See, they was trying to get to that tank. They hated tanks. And anyway, my little Korean went back and said, "You guys come around and help Sergeant Mercer." What happened, they had hit that hootchie that he was in and caved it in, see. I told you how the little guy with the flashlight, when he went on patrol, he left his

rifle in there. So when he got in there, he saw a rifle. Pretty soon he heard this noise. He looked. And believe it or not, we had trenches this wide with concertina wire in them, so he's coming up the side. He left his rifle. Thank God, he got his rifle. And then nobody would talk to Murph. They called him Murph because every other day he'd write his girlfriend, you know. But when he got in there, he said, he seen his hand. Must have pulled that screen off. He got the only one. Got him right across here, blowed him back. And he laid in that trench the rest of the night, (makes moaning noise). We got to get that guy out of there, you know. They had an old saying, if you capture one alive, you get to go back to Tokyo. We finally got the tankers to come down, and this one in the trench, he was (makes moaning noise), and they had forty-fives, so he got out. Looking at him, wanted to make—he thought he was faking it, you know. So we got him out of there. I said, "Now, handle that guy careful," I said. "Now, you know what the old man said, if we can get one—if we capture one and get him around to the rear, we get a furlough in Tokyo." Got the guy up, you know, and but when he come up, I knew he wasn't going. He caught him right across here. DePue: Right across the brow.

Mercer: And you could lift that up and see your old brain down and everything. So they put him on a dolly to send him down to the rear. He got down there, you know, and we're seeing Tokyo, you know. Pretty soon, somebody got on the horn. "Sergeant Mercer, So-and-so-and-so just passed away." You should have seen the look on them guys' faces. "There went our Tokyo trip." (laughter) Yes, sir.

DePue: Well, that's the kind of the strange sense of humor that the GIs in combat have.

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, yeah, yes, sir. But you know what it, it wasn't pretty, but like I said, I'd rather go over there than them come over here, especially when you see what happened to the ladies and their children. Sad. And what bothered me for a long while, they would never say "Korea; they'd say "police action." And I say, "I wish them politicians that are sitting up there on their duff not doing anything came over there and looked at kids I seen get slaughtered, never even got their patch off their back. And if that's police action, I hope we never have a war." DePue: So that bothered you to know that the politicians were referring to it as a police action?

Mercer: Well, I wish they would have said "Korean War." That's all I wanted them to say. I got a book last May, must have been Memorial Day. I looked at it, and it says, "Korean veterans." I said, "Well, what do you know. Finally we're human." I don't want no pat on the back or nothing like that, I just felt we should have been called Korean soldiers, not police action. That hurt a lot of guys' feelings, you know. That's just not the way you do it, for God's sake. But, you know, they say there's two ways of doing anything, the right way and the Army way. They do a lot of…

DePue: Well, I know the last couple months—and we'd already been talking about how things started to heat up—you got a couple medals for actions during those last couple months. Do you have those citations or some of that material here?

Mercer: No, but you got the jump on me. I figured you'd be here early afternoon, and I got them scattered all over.

DePue: Well, can we take a break, and you can go get those?

Mercer: Sure.

DePue: Let's do that.

(pause in recording)

DePue: Okay, I'll go ahead and get us started here.

Mercer: Okay.

DePue: We took a quick break, and Isaac found a couple articles here. One of them is actually the official order for the 45th Division. Isaac, what I wanted to do here is to read from this article about the heroic act where you received the Bronze Star, and this apparently—wait a minute, let me go back here. Which one happened first? The Bronze Star happened in July. So let's go to the Silver Star, and I'm going to read the official orders. This is from headquarters, 45th Infantry Division, APO Eighty-six, and this was dated October 21, 1953, so this would have been several months after the actual action had happened. And you just showed me you got pictures where you were receiving this award.

Mercer: You know what? I really didn't like pictures, but my guys said, "You're going to take a picture, or you're going to have to deal with us." I didn't like pictures. [But] I'm glad, because if you show them to people, [they] say, "Well, maybe…" But if you're talking about some of the things you went through, they say, "Well, but I don't believe that," you know. But I'm glad they sent those.

DePue: Well, Isaac, you're in a pretty darn elite group of being a Silver Star recipient. There aren't a lot of people out there that can say that, not even those who've been in combat. That's pretty darn rare. So here it is: "Sergeant Isaac Mercer, then Corporal, Infantry, United States Army. Sergeant Mercer, a member of an infantry company, is cited for heroism in action against the enemy in the vicinity of Pau-Gol, Korea. On July 16, 1953, Sergeant Mercer's unit was defending an outpost position during an intense enemy mortar and artillery barrage when hostile troops infiltrated into the trenches. Without hesitation, Sergeant Mercer left his position to engage in hand-to-hand fighting with the assailants. His heroic performance demonstrated determination and

unwavering courage in the face of great peril and was instrumental in saving the lives of several of his comrades. Sergeant Mercer's outstanding act of heroism and devotion to duty reflect great credit upon himself and the military service. Entered the federal service from Illinois." That's kind of an interesting way to finish it: "Entered the federal service from Illinois." Okay, so it was July sixteenth for the Silver Star.

Mercer: Mm-hmm, I know it was just shortly before the ceasefire.

DePue: Well, why don't you tell us about that action, as much as you can remember, if you're willing to.

Mercer: What about?

DePue: The Silver Star, the incident itself.

Mercer: Well, that was—like you just said, you don't see many people on their feet with those, you know, but I don't know, I just felt that a lot of guys should have got awards that they didn't get. I don't know why. But I was shocked when I… Somebody from the newspaper found that for me, because I didn't have nothing. I talked to them once in a while, but never at any length, you know. And like I said earlier, I sure wish I would have—because a lot of that stuff, I probably could have found if I'd have started looking for it a little bit earlier.

DePue: Do you remember that incident, though?

Mercer: Which one?

DePue: Can you tell us what happened at that time?

Mercer: (pause) When I was receiving the medals, is that what you're saying?

DePue: No, no, what happened that caused you to receive the medal. You had mentioned before that you were defending an outpost at that time. You don't remember any of the details of that, though?

Mercer: Now, give me an idea of what—I can remember probably a little bit of it if you can… But I thought we had it pretty good, and all of the sudden, we had company. When those people, they started coming in on us—it was kind of a scary situation, really, and it's something I hope I never have to go through again. You know, my secretary and my wife, she —oh, what I did?

DePue: Yeah.

Mercer: Oh, boy, I got to—I can remember a little bit. I got to work that up now. Can you tell me in particular what—just what…?

DePue: Well, I was—

Mercer: How we reacted or what happened or something like that, is that what you're saying?

DePue: Yeah, can you remember the details of the specific incident here that ended up where you got the Silver Star months later?

Mercer: We just, like I said, we knew when they was going to be coming in on us. They'd start bombing us, you know. And we better get ready, because here they come. So we just got out there and did what we thought was right and the best we could, and what's really amazing to me, I lost one guy while I was over there. None of my guys got hurt, believe it or not. You'd have to see some of the things we went through. They say, "Boy, I don't see how you guys made it through there." But—

DePue: Well, Isaac, if you don't mind, I'm going to—

Mercer: But I would always—I never sent my men anyplace; I took them.

DePue: Okay. I think what I'll do here is read this article, because it's got a little more information here as well.

Mercer: Yeah, because a lot of that I can't remember, uh-uh.

DePue: Well, and it's what, sixty-some years, fifty-eight years? That's a long time ago now.

Mercer: Tell me about it, mm-hmm.

DePue: Okay, here's what it said. And what threw me before—I think maybe this newspaper article got these two incidents mixed up, because it said you received the Bronze Star in July sixteenth, and we now just read the official record which said you received the Silver Star.

Mercer: Yeah, it was the other way around.

DePue: "When his unit was defending an outpost position during an intense enemy mortar and artillery barrage against enemy troops who had infiltrated into the trenches," the award says, "Without hesitation, Sergeant Mercer left his position to engage in hand-to-hand fighting with the enemy. His heroic performance demonstrated determined and unwavering courage," *et cetera*, *et cetera*. So you were being attacked by—were these North Koreans or Chinese?

Mercer: North Koreans, North Koreans, uh-huh, mm-hmm.

DePue: Your unit always faced North Korean troops?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: Do you think they were good soldiers?

Mercer: They was pretty vicious. They was tough. They was tough. I tell you, one time when I was… That M-1 rifle got a plate of steel on the butt of it, about like that.

DePue: Yeah, a good, thick butt of steel on the base. Okay.

Mercer: You know what? Don't tap him with that, it'll bounce right back up. I learned a tip from my buddy. You put them down, and then they stay, but old goody-goody, you know, didn't think about that for a while. Man, my life was on the line, you know? But yeah, you got to be cold-blooded. It's either you or them, you know. And believe it or not, at a time like that, sometimes, you can do more—if you don't panic, you could do more than you really thought you could do, you know, really do some of the things you do, and it's scary. It's scary.

DePue: Now, it must have been June eighteenth where you received a Bronze Star for this action: "Mercer was leading a squad which engaged in hand-to-hand fighting with the enemy and captured ten prisoners." Were you out on patrol at the time?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: You remember that one?

Mercer: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Can you tell us anything more about that particular action where you captured these ten prisoners?

Mercer: Well, yeah. See, there was just a few of them and a few of us, you know, and yeah, we done them in pretty good. And like I said, the ones that we didn't do in, those are the ones we took all that stuff from around their neck and took it down to the old man for him to go through it. But basically that was, you know, you or me, you know. But…

DePue: Was this a night patrol?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: In the middle of no-man's-land?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. See, they'd been making a lot of noise, see, (makes noises) so you know basically where they're at, you know. But as far as getting a good eye look, uh-uh, you can't unless you—you don't want no kind

of light out there. When you get in something like that, you say, "Well, it's either me or them," you can do a lot of things you didn't think you could do.

DePue: Well, how did you motivate yourself to go out on these patrols all the time?

Mercer: Well, I didn't want to send my guys—I didn't want to send them someplace I didn't want to go—I just felt like it was my job to take them. No, no. The old man didn't like it, but I took them anyway. I never was one for sitting back, giving orders. I want to get in there and do my thing, and especially with some of them, they look like they're seventeen and eighteen. They're just little kids, you know, and I said, "Boy, I can't turn them kids loose out there; I got to get out there and do my best." That was my main concern.

DePue: Well, some of this is going to sound like stupid questions, maybe, but were you scared when you were doing that?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: How did you deal with putting that fear behind you and just doing your job?

Mercer: Well, when you get down to the point where it's you or me, that's when it all comes out, because you ain't ready to go that way, you know. And if we had some guy that wasn't too… But boy, I tell you, when that happened, they was out there with [hard to understand] the rest of us. Oh, you look like an easy-going guy, that guy won't do nothing, but you get in a situation like that and you know it's either you or me, you'd be surprised how a lot of them would spring up. Some of them, I had no idea they had that much guts, just talking to them, you know, but yeah, that's why I jump right out there and help them. Boy, I tell you, I said, "Well, if they see me out here, they're going to help me," and they did.

DePue: Did you get—go ahead.

Mercer: Later on—I lost one guy when I was over there, and when I get to that point, I'll tell you how it happened.

DePue: Well, let's go ahead and talk about that now, if you don't mind.

Mercer: Sometimes we'd be talking and going over different things, you know, and I heard this mumbling. I had an assistant, a big guy out of Indiana, about six-two, 250. I told him, "When I'm going over these different things with my men and asking a question, there's somebody back there mumbling." I said, "Next time, you get behind everybody. I want to know what's going on." I'm looking to see what it was. Well, he was a little short guy. And in about five minutes—Mercer was the guy's name.

DePue: Another Mercer?

Mercer: Murphy, M-u-r-p-h-y.

DePue: Murphy, okay.

Mercer: He picked him up and he brought him around just like this. He said, "Sergeant Mercer, this is the guy back there doing the blowing off." I said, "What's your problem?" "Where I come from, a black man don't tell me what to do." He said, "I don't want to fight if you're sergeant." I took that jacket and ripped it—the buttons flew everywhere—and threw it on the ground. I said, "I'm not a sergeant now." He went on back. Now, the night of the ceasefire, we were up there, and man, they was after us. They walked that hill up and they walked it down. But when we got there, I couldn't send out my fourth squad because that's my machine gun squad, so I sent out the third squad. I said, "Now, when you guys get there," I said, "the old man just come in on a horn. They're going to hit us again tonight." I said, "For gosh sake, when you get out there, dig in." They hadn't no more than got out there, they walked that hill up, they walked it down, walked it up, walked it down. But when we got there, there's a little second lieutenant there, and he's the only guy up there running around. So he took off that night. I don't know where he went. But the next morning, just about daylight—you got to come in before daylight, because they see you walking up there, man, you're dead meat. So I'm looking, see all my guys coming in. And I couldn't tell who was black or who was white because, man, they was all dirty and everything. When my men started coming, I started feeling a little bit better. And then the lieutenant shows up. "Sergeant, all your men back?" I said, "No, I got one missing. He wasn't here all night." My guys tried to get me to report him; I said, "No, leave it go." But anyway—and I had two Germans. Man, them guys was gung-ho. They'd kill a snake. (laughs)

DePue: When you say Germans, were these—

Mercer: No, my guys. If I went on patrol or did something and didn't tell them, they're going to whup me. But anyway, they was in the squad. I said, "Now, so I start crawling down in the trench. They said, "Where you going?" I said, "I'm going to look for Tyree. That was the guy's name. They said, "What are you trying to prove?" I said, "Nothing." I said, "Don't you ever try that again." They'd killed a stump. (laughter) But anyway, this little second lieutenant, he out, oh, probably about—maybe pulled me out there during (makes machine gun noise) Walking behind me. And we didn't get as far as here to my driveway out there. I looked to my left. There's a little trench about this deep. There's Tyree laying in there. All my men that dug in, every one walked back. So what I did, I walked over and I looked at him, and his whole leg was blown off, and the only thing that was holding him was the outside skin, and he was just about covered with blood. So my two guys come over, Mathwig and Culver. I watch my guys like a hawk. Hey, he's got a fifth of whiskey in his hand. Now, where did he get that bottle from, I don't know. But anyway, I picked it up and I threw it as far as I could. And I had them guys to pick him up. This little lieutenant, he backed up. "Is he dead?" I said, "Yeah." So then

he—I don't know where he went, but anyway. We took him back over the hill, and my guys said to me, said, "Mercer, why did you throw that bottle of whiskey out of his hand?" I said, "Well, he's supposed to have a ten-thousand-dollar funeral if anything happened to him." I said, "If he had that bottle in his hand, you think that little lieutenant would have said, 'Forget about it'?" I said, "That way, they'll give his parents or somebody ten thousand dollars that he's entitled to." The only man I lost, the only man.

DePue: That was the last day of the actual fighting, the war?

Mercer: Yes, sir. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: Did you get injured yourself?

Mercer: No, I got a couple of bruises, knocked down, and a piece of shrapnel. You know, I've got a piece of shrapnel up there?

DePue: Right above the eyebrow?

Mercer: Yeah. You know what? I could feel that thing, you know, and the doctor said, "No," he said, "don't worry about it." I said, "What do you mean don't worry about it?" You know what? One day I woke up and I felt—he said, "It'll work itself out." I woke up one day—it was gone, just like that. But other than that, as far as getting knocked down or something like that, that's about the extent of it. I never had no real serious injuries.

DePue: Well, I think I read in the article here you did get the Purple Heart, though?

Mercer: Hmm?

DePue: Did you get the Purple Heart?

Mercer: Mm-hmm.

DePue: For the shrapnel and the…?

Mercer: Yeah, yeah, mm-hmm. But see, what happened then, they just give you a Purple Heart, but now they give you a Purple Heart and a cluster, see. The way I was, that was just it. I said, "We only had one." I guess in Nam or someplace, but yeah, we only had one, and the guys before me just had the one. But, yep, that was a sad, sad situation. Boy, I tell you, I don't ever want to go through nothing like that ever again. And I'm glad my good Lord watched over me. Our three sons went in the service, volunteered, and Tony, the oldest boy, he's Air Force, and he's over in Turkey, but Steve and Michael never even left the States, and boy, that does my heart good. (laughs)

DePue: This is towards the end of the war now. Did all of this make any sense to you?

Mercer: No, no. I didn't see one thing where it was worth losing the life of those men, not one thing. What are they fighting for? They had an old what they called a hootchie and a little grass over the top of it. That's what they lived in. Now, on the way home, we stopped off in Seoul for a day, and their ammunition that used to come in little wooden boxes, they'd take that and make an old shack out of it, you know. But as far as seeing a home or something like that, no. And after I got home and I was looking at the TV one day, and they built that underground railroad for them and coming across—up here it was loaded. They had buses running down the street in Tokyo, kids sitting there all over the place, you know. And that thing comes through, man, comes right—I said, "Look at that." They go over there and shoot them people up, then they rebuild it. That don't make any sense to me. That's just crazy. Yeah, they rebuilt. I said, "That's why they do that, where we rebuild them and everything where they can…." But other than that, I…

DePue: Were you upset at the time, or were your other buddies upset, that the war ended in basically a tie instead of with a victory for the United States?

Mercer: Yeah. There was real anger. They said, "Why didn't the so-and-so let us finish the job?" you know. Yeah, they didn't want no ceasefire, they wanted… Because, see, some of them went through a lot, you know, and everything, so they wanted to more or less get revenge. But I said, "No, we got to do what we're told."

DePue: What did you think personally? Were you happy to, okay, let's just call it a tie and that's it?

Mercer: Well, no. I think we should have finished the job. That's my personal opinion. Because if you don't, sooner or later you're going to have to go back again or someplace else, you know. And I'm not a vicious man, but something like that that they start, I think we should have finished the job, I really do.

DePue: Okay. You were there, then, at the end of the war and after the war. Do you remember anything about the prisoner exchange? You were probably pretty far away from where that was going on.

Mercer: Uh-uh.

DePue: What was it like—did your unit stay basically on the front line after July until you came back home?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. You know, you're supposed to be on the front line three months and off three, and just my luck, we got in one of them outfits that had never lost a foot of ground in Korea, and every time somebody—if they was right on the front lines, which is very seldom, if somebody's getting killed over here, over here, Item Company—they call them Fight 'em Item. I said, "Yeah." Yeah, they had a… I said, "Well, I'm not gung-ho. I'll do what I'm supposed to do, but don't, you know, make a big deal out of it." Yeah, very

few days I spent on the front lines. We was back waiting to move right back up.

DePue: So after the armistice, you were basically behind the front line someplace, just waiting?

Mercer: Yeah, mm-hmm, mm-hmm, yeah. That's where we had the Quonset huts and everything, everybody waiting to be shipped out or something like that. But yeah, that was quite an area.

DePue: Well, Isaac, you're a sergeant by that time. There's not much worse than a soldier that doesn't have much to do. (laughs)

Mercer: I know. And, now, that's what the old man used to get on me about. "You're not supposed to do it, your men are supposed to do it for you," and I'd just keep right on doing it. I'll tell you a funny story about him. He was Captain Colelaw. He's from California.

DePue: Caldwell?

Mercer: Colelaw, C-o-l-e-l-a-w, Colelaw. He liked flowers, and most of my guys cleaning off that area, you see, where we was getting my millers(??), they cleaned that off and put flowers along there. But anyway, this hootch is up at the end, and my guys said, "Come on," said, "we're going to…" Okay. I'm down there, too, you know, in the trench too. The old man comes by. "Sergeant Mercer," he goes, "you're not supposed to do that. Your men are supposed to. You're supposed to see that your men do it." Okay. Come along the next day. "Sergeant Mercer?" "Yes, sir." "I'm going to come on along here tomorrow. If you're down there on your knees, I'm going to kick you out of here." And he come along the next day, I'm still down here. You know what he did? He shook his head and walked right on by. (laughter)

Another funny story: My guys, most of them were carpenters in civilian life, and they wanted this little Quonset hut for a beer joint. My guys got down there and they built that thing—sergeants, corporals, and the whole nine yards, privates. And then they come up with this law: unless you're a sergeant, you can't go in there. I said, "Well, wait a minute, what do you mean you can't go in there?" So what happened, I had three—at least three sergeants in every one of my squads. Now, what I did, this guy that I was just telling you about from New York that come and told me I was heading home, he said, "Sergeant Mercer," he said, "do you want to get one of your men promoted?" I said, "Yeah, I would like to." He says, "You want me to tell you how to do it?" I said, "Sure." He said, "You're the sergeant, and you're going to get promoted." He said, "The way they promote, if I want you to be promoted, I put my name right behind you, and everybody from me up will get promoted." We had so many sergeants, some guys in that new company had come in, they come in. If we was going down to shower, they would go

down and take a shower and come back, and one guy said, "Damn, they had a whole platoon of sergeants." (laughter) So that's how I learned… But you know what I would do? I would put everyone's name on that list, and I would pass it around. I said, "Now, if you don't get promoted, it's not my fault, because I've got everybody on the list." But I didn't tell them how I was doing it. Because I know we had some guys there that deserved to be sergeants, and some wasn't quite ready. The old man used to call us the zebra club. That's when I wished someone would have took one of the pictures like that where I could show everybody. But yeah, we were loaded. DePue: I want to ask you kind of some general questions about some of your memories here. Are there any other combat experiences that you can recall that you want to tell us about?

Mercer: No, that was about the extent of what we basically went through there, when they would attack us or something like that. But other than—basically what I told you, that's just about…

DePue: Do you think the Army did a good job in integrating the military?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. I think it was, because, you know, if you're in a situation like that and you got to be over here and this person, it can cause a lot of friction. So I think it was with Harry Truman, because I remember reading way back, that started when Harry Truman was in office. They just put people together. But down in Fort Leonard Wood, that's when I really—those two months, that's when I really got to looking. I just couldn't understand it—black soldiers over here, white soldiers over here. They go on furlough on weekend and the black soldiers go around and police the area, and they'd sit on the porch and laugh at them. That's not very good for your morale.

DePue: For the people you—the other soldiers in your platoon—do you think you guys received good training?

Mercer: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Did you get the kind of training you needed to go do what you did?

Mercer: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. The only thing, our equipment wasn't like I thought it should be. But we went through sixteen weeks of basic training. Nowadays I think they're going through eight weeks. You don't learn nothing in eight weeks, not to go through what we went through. Yes sir, the only thing, we just didn't have the proper equipment, but as far as that basic training—and one thing about it, if you missed—unless you were sick, if you missed one week during that basic training, unless that doctor said it was for real, if you missed too much, then you had to wait until the next company comes in and you get with them and finish out that time. Everybody was sixteen weeks, four months.

DePue: We've talked about some of the people in particular in your platoon and in your company, but in general, what'd you think of the guys you served with?

Mercer: Oh, great. They were great. Even the second lieutenants, you know, they get a little grunt hole. [What's a grunt hole? Please explain, it sounds interesting.] Even if we was on the front lines, they were just like you and I. But once you got back down on the hill there, you know… And we had one, what he would do as we moved back and got set up back there, he'd walk up and down the street, and he'd act like he didn't see you, you know. But if you didn't salute him… (laughter) That's the God's… But I said, 'Well, one thing about it, up on the front line, everybody's all alike,' you know, because you got a guy behind you with a rifle and a guy in front of you [with a rifle?]. You're one big happy family up there. As soon as we got back down there—and this one guy, I think he had second platoon—he did ninety days, and he gets the second. He's over there. He don't know squat. Yeah.

DePue: You're talking about what they call the ninety-day wonder?

Mercer: Ninety-day wonder, that's it, yeah. Ninety-day wonder. That's what… (laughs) That ninety-day wonder don't have nothing. I said, "Lord have mercy." Well, when they got back down there—

DePue: Well, they're supposed to be smart enough to listen to the NCOs that know what's going on.

Mercer: You'd think they would, but boy, you can't tell them nothing, no, no, no. Yes, sir.

DePue: How about the Koreans that you encountered while you were over there? What'd you think of the Korean people?

Mercer: We stayed down before we went on the front line in a little area there, and they was pretty friendly. They'd come and they'd go, you know. Of course, I think that was really because we had C-Rations, and I think that was just because we would give them that. But basically—and they waved at us when we left. Matter of fact, when we left coming back to the States, from(??) Inchon, you'd be surprised how many was out there waving at us when we left.

But then we got to San Francisco about nine o'clock at night, and some of the guys, I guess they thought they was going to get off. They said there was fifty-five hundred soldiers on there, Marines and every… I said, "Well, that's an awful lot of people." So that's the one other thing, I wish I'd have checked the name of the ship that I went over on and come back on, but I didn't. But anyway, that next morning, we're getting ready to come off, and there come a little captain about this tall, two hundred Marines behind him. "Get back, guys." He marched them on off, you know. In a way, I was kind of glad, because when it come time for us to march off, about from here out to

your vehicle, there's ropes along each side. I said, "What are all the people doing back there?" You know, when we was coming down that gangplank, they was trying to spit on us. One of my guys said, "I'd just as soon go back to Korea." He said, "They did treat us right, you know." That's another thing that sort of sticks in your gall too, you know.

DePue: What was that all about? What were they upset about?

Mercer: It was our fault we was over there. Yes, they did.

DePue: These are American civilians you're talking about?

Mercer: Yes, sir, in San Francisco, California. I said, "Why is this?" Now I knew why they had them so far back; they was trying to spit on us. I said, Boy, I'll tell you, that really hurts. In Korea, as far as you could see, man, they was waving. A whole lot of them are down there, too, at Inchon when we took off that morning.

DePue: So you think the Korean people were sincere that they appreciated what the Americans had done for them?

Mercer: That's a tough one, it really is. I believe some did and some didn't, I really do. Because some of them, they give me the impression all they want is just what they could get, you know, and not, you know… But yeah, they was—the ones that were with us—then after the ceasefire, like, down there, they had the Koreans come through and do certain jobs or something like that. And they'd always speak to you and everything. So I guess they should be, because, boy, they was in hog heaven then because they had food every day and everything. Yep.

DePue: How about the Korean soldiers that served with you? What'd you think of them? You talked about—I think you referred to him as baby-san, the one that was in your—

Mercer: Yeah, oh, each platoon had one of those that speak a little English or something like that when you go on a patrol to keep you abreast of what was going on and what they were saying and everything. Yeah. But as far as just as soldiers, not all Americans. Yeah, that little guy I had, like I told you, he didn't look a day over thirteen years old. Boy, he could speak good English. (laughs)

DePue: Well, you mentioned C-Rations. Is that basically what you guys lived on when you were in the front?

Mercer: Mm-hmm. Right, right, mm-hmm.

DePue: Okay, Isaac, what was your favorite C-Ration?

Mercer: Well, none of it. (laughter) None of it was! That's garbage, you know what I mean? But boy, I'll tell you, you get cut off out there for three or four days, you learn to eat it, and that little cracker in there. One time I got really disturbed. We kept a bunch of prisoners one night, and the next morning they gave us a truck and we took them back to the rear. We got down there and it's like in a park. You know, there's a picnic table and a nice building. We sat there for a while, and pretty soon here comes this guy out with a big steak, potatoes, seven of them, give it to them, and they sat down at the table. We said, "Are we going to get any food?" "No, you guys aren't going to get any food. You're out of here." So they called a truck and put us on the truck and got us out of there. I said, "That's really something." Boy, it sure did look good. And this guy, he had a, you know… I said, "Well, he's going to try and get some information out of those guys. That's what he's doing with paper and a pen in his hand, I guess, but…"

DePue: You're taking them back for interrogation, then?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: Did you have any R&R while you were there? No?

Mercer: You know what they told us when we first got there? "If you do a good job, every three months you get R&R." We didn't get any.

DePue: They just forget about you guys?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. We stayed right there the whole while I was over there. And some of the guys were saying that some of their buddies, they get R&R like that, they go back to Tokyo for a week or ten days. We didn't get not one bit. The only thing we got, when we stopped going through, and then when we come back, we didn't go through Tokyo because the guy that left ahead of us had met a girl over there, and he, you know, fell in love with her, and she told him that, "When you get ready to go back to the States, I'm going with you." They found out about it. When we left Inchon, we came straight to San Francisco—no more going through Tokyo. (laughter)

DePue: No more complications like that, huh?

Mercer: You got it.

DePue: Do you remember ever having an opportunity where some entertainers, the USO shows or anything like that, came?

Mercer: Not a one. And I said, "I wonder how all those enter…"—not one time from early February until the twentieth of October. No it wasn't, it was November, because when we got back in the States it was December third. Not one. I said, "I see all that stuff on the…" We didn't have not one to entertain us or come up. One day after the ceasefire—we didn't have hardly none of our

equipment—they wanted us to take what equipment we had and lay it out on our poncho and said, "The big cheese is going to come over and visit tomorrow." I told them, I said, "Man, we don't hardly have anything." "Well, just put out what you got." The next morning, about ten, ten-thirty, a helicopter come over, and you could just barely see it up there. He went on about his business. Man, those guys were cleaning up, you know. And I said, "He should have had the decency to just swing down for a minute," you know, but he didn't; he was just way up and just kept on going.

DePue: How did you—

Mercer: But it would have meant a lot, I think, if he would have stopped by and just said a few words to the guys, you know.

DePue: Yeah, I'm sure. Were you able to keep in touch with Earlene back home?

Mercer: Mm-hmm.

DePue: How did you do that?

Mercer: Well, I'd write her a letter, but what I would have to do—I couldn't seal it—I'd have to take it up and give it to the old man. If there was something in there that wasn't supposed to be in there, you know what happened.

DePue: So somebody was reading the letters to make sure there weren't secrets going back home?

Mercer: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Tell me about mail call.

Mercer: Same thing. Every other day they have a guy to go make the call. We had some guys that hadn't gotten no mail for three months, and they used to come out. This one guy, he said, "Sergeant Mercer," he said, "I haven't heard from my wife in I don't know when." So what he did, that night, he went AWOL. They found him someplace and brought him back. We had one the same way when we was in basic training. Had a little short heavyset guy that was from Kentucky, and he would write her, but then when we finished our basic, they took a picture, you know, and he sent that picture home to her, and man, she wrote him a letter back like—he'd gained a lot of weight—"You dirty so-and-so; I don't know who you are." Woke up the next morning, and he wasn't in his bunk. He took off. About three or four days later, here MPs come back with him. (laughs) So the old man, he said, "I see you missed two or three days during your basic training." He said, "Now I think we might as well take care of that." So he said, "The next group of trainees come through," he said, "we're going to put you in that for another sixteen weeks." Boy, he looked at that, you know, and this girl was—boy, he's almost crying, you know. "I don't know who you are." Well. I never gained any weight. All my guys

gained weight, and they'd laugh at me. We'd be double-timing, you know, and after a while, you can run forever, and those guys would be coughing—I didn't smoke—and those guys would be coughing, and they used to call me a whole lot of dirty names. (laughs)

DePue: Well, Isaac, you're still a pretty darn thin guy today.

Mercer: (laughs) Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

DePue: How important was it for you to get letters from Earlene and letters from home?

Mercer: I tell you, it means a lot to you, because if you don't get that mail, man, you know, you're all by your lonesome. She would write me and tell me, oh, so-and-so and blah-blah-blah, you know, and everything like that. It kind of makes you feel a little bit like you was home.

DePue: Did you get any other packages, cookies or anything like that?

Mercer: No. I'm not a cookie man. (laughs)

DePue: She knew that already, huh?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, yeah.

DePue: You wouldn't happen to have any of those letters that went either direction, do you? No? Didn't save those?

Mercer: Uh-uh, no, sir. Like I said, for a long time, I had nothing, I didn't want to do nothing with the way we was treated, I had nothing to do with everything. A lot of that stuff, I wish I'd have kept, though, because I'd like to be able to explain this to my grandkid, now, because the one asked a lot of questions one time. He's a sports nut, and he was talking to me, and he says his coach told him if he kept… They'd go to Tokyo, I think he said, every so often, for certain things, and he said, "Grandpa, I'd kind of like to go"—and he said his mother told him I was in the service. And I told him, yeah, and he wanted me to explain a little bit about Tokyo, man. He's sitting there and looking me in the face, you know. And like I said earlier, I wish I'd have kept a lot of that stuff. Some of it, I would like to have kept where he could have seen it or read it or something. I believe it would have meant more to him than just me explaining it to him, where he could actually see it.

DePue: Well, let's talk a little bit about you coming home, because apparently you came home earlier than that one-year rotation, but I assume that had to do with the war being over, basically.

Mercer: Right, mm-hmm.

DePue: When did you come home?

Mercer: I left the twentieth of November. It took me thirteen days. We got home December third.

DePue: So you came back on a ship as well.

Mercer: Mm-hmm, both ways.

DePue: Was it smooth sailing?

Mercer: No, not really. The one going over, man, I'll tell you, and I was looking at those little notes they had along there. You know how much that ship weighed? Just take a guess. It's as long as here out to the end of the street.

DePue: Oh, I have no idea.

Mercer: Two hundred and seventy-two tons. I guess that was with everybody loaded and everything. I said, "That is a lot of weight." And then that water—that's when I really learned how powerful water can be. And sometimes, man, that thing would have that ship doing just like that.

DePue: Going up and down and every…

Mercer: Yes, sir. Man.

DePue: Were you able to keep your stomach?

Mercer: Mm-hmm. But you know what was funny? Some of them guys, going over, they didn't eat hardly anything; they wouldn't go [to meals?]. And I said, "Ain't you going to eat?" "No, I don't want it." I'd eat it. Well, seasick. You know what happened? Them guys, every other day they'd get seasick. When we got over to Tokyo and they were getting off, this medic was standing down there, you know, and he said, "I'm going to let you guys in on a secret." He said, "There's no such thing as a water pill." He said, "Those things we give you was plain aspirin." (laughter) You should have seen the look on some of their faces. He said, "It's all a head thing, you know." It was pretty calm the first day, and then about midnight, man, that's when that thing really started. And sometimes it was just as smooth. I looked, and I said, 272 tons. I guess that means when it was loaded. And you just think about it. You'd think it would be impossible to get five thousand soldiers on a ship, you know. There were a lot of them. There was a bunch of Americans, and we had I think two or three hundred Canadian soldiers on there. Man, it looked like a baseball field or something when you see them all out running around and they're unloading. That takes forever to unload them. Man.

DePue: You told us what happened when you got back to San Francisco already and how the crowd treated you or disrespected everybody when you got there. Tell us about from that point until you had your reunion with Earlene.

Mercer: Well, let's see. We stayed two, maybe three nights, and then of course on a train. And I got back I think it's December the tenth, something like that. I know it was early December. They put us on a train coming from San Francisco. Guess how long it took us to get here. You could never guess.

DePue: Two days?

Mercer: Two days. (laughs) Two days. I said, "Ain't that something?" Two days.

DePue: To Fort Sheridan? Is that where you came back to?

Mercer: Uh-huh, mm-hmm.

DePue: And that's where Earlene was, was Fort Sheridan?

Mercer: No, she was here with her mother, on Lincoln Avenue over there, just past the high school over there. Yeah.

DePue: Well, Isaac, do you remember the reunion, then?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. But you know what? It takes you a while to readjust to yourself. We used to be in bed at night, and those kids would go up and down Lincoln Avenue over there at ninety miles an hour, and sometimes she said after those trains would backfire, and I didn't even remember it—and she said I'd just start hitting on her. Just a nervous wreck, you know. And I'm not easy to get shook up. But I didn't know a thing about it.

DePue: Now, you mentioned already you're not a drinking man, so that wasn't an issue for you when you came back?

Mercer: No, no.

DePue: Did you know some other buddies that had a hard time readjusting?

Mercer: A lot of them, a lot of them. I worked with a lot of them, and I knew a lot of them. They had to have that booze. No, I had one experience with that, and that was enough for me. My oldest brother was dating a girl, and when I got sixteen, I could go with him, but we had to be back home at a certain time. So I went with him one night, and the youngsters—he had three daughters, and one of the other brothers, they had an old Model A Ford with the rumble seat. They had a little place out in the boonies someplace where you get what they call—you couldn't buy it out of a bar—they would get what they call homebrew—you ever hear of that? And then these gas stations, they would get—it wasn't liquor. What is it? The other thing. Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Moonshine?

Mercer: Yeah. And the closest I ever came—but I learned my lesson the first time. This one night, well, see, these brothers, they'd go out in the country and get some of that booze. And so they'd come back and say, "In Millerstown up there," they said, "they have homebrew." "What's homebrew?" And I knew how those guys were, you know. So they were booze… So I said, "I want to taste a little bit of that stuff." So what happened—it was twenty cents.. All four of us threw in a nickel, you know. And one guy reaches, "Give me that." (gulps) Got back to where my brother was, and we start home. And I got, oh, long away—probably about from here over to Third Street, the lights went out. To show you how my mother is, we come up on the porch—this is our bedroom, then you go through the door, and her bedroom was on the other side. Any time any of us came in, she could hear our walk. She didn't have to turn the light on; she could hear us, knew who it was. So I heard her, just like I was down in a deep pit, and I heard her say, "Jim," said, "where's Ike?" I said, "Mother, he's not feeling good." And that's the first time in my life I could ever remember any of us coming in didn't feel good that she didn't get up and come in and see what was the matter. But see, I probably wouldn't have been here now. But I got about halfway home, and that's when I learned my lesson, that one dose. I remember getting about halfway home, and my brother had to pack me the rest of the way. I said, "That's it." I don't ever want to be in a position where I don't know what I'm doing. I got threatened—a lot of guys—you know, I'd go and have a Coke or something like that, —and they always knew I was kind of funny about my clothes. "Why don't you have a drink?" I said, "I don't drink." "Either you take a drink or we're going to pour it on you." They never poured it on me. (laughter) I don't have no problem when they drink, but when they start fighting and arguing among themselves, I don't think that's polite, you know; you shouldn't be that way.

DePue: Isaac, you've already mentioned that coming back, this incident you had in San Francisco, and then the problems you had with people, with politicians calling it a police action rather than a war. How much did all of that bother you?

Mercer: Well, it bothered me quite a bit because I know they didn't know. I'll give you an example. After the ceasefire, one of my guys came to me one day. He says—when it was just the two of us, we'd call each other by name—he said, "Mercer," he said, "I wonder how many politicians got any relatives over here." I said, "Yeah, I don't know." I said, "Why don't you get two or three of the guys from the other company," because everybody was back, "and see if, you know, guys from different companies will go with you?" We got about six or seven of them together. This was the end of July, because it was about a week or ten days after the ceasefire. August, September, October, about the middle of November, they all come back and we all got together. They told me, "Sergeant Mercer, we've found one guy, his dad was a politician." Said,

"He was so far back to the rear," they said, "he just might as well be in the States." It was all working people and, you know, just ordinary people. It wasn't none of the big shots. I said, "Now, that is really something." That many soldiers over there, and only one guy, and they said, well, he might as well be back in the States, as far back as he was. Other than that, none. We talked to guys, you know, like that, and I never heard a one of them say they had met… Now, there might have been, but this is the time I was over there. And some of them, you know, they felt you should go because of who you are, as long as you're in condition, you know. I said, "Well, things like that happen, you know. It really does."

DePue: For the World War II generation, when those guys came back, you always heard the stories that you couldn't buy a beer, that you'd go into a bar and everybody would be buying a beer for you and treat you like the conquering hero. Did you get any of that sense when you came back home, came back to Dixon?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm, yeah. The night on there when they throwed that party for me and I was leaving, the officers that come over brought their jug because they can get the real McCoy. They had tons of that stuff sitting there. One of my guys, after we'd been there about probably half an hour, forty-five minutes, came and said, "What you want me to get you to drink?" I said, "I don't drink." And I never lied to any of them guys. And that was the end of it. That one dose that one night, I tell you, about killed me. I said, "I want to be where I know what I'm doing basically all the time and not all slashed out like that, but…"

DePue: When you got back to Dixon, did you get the sense that people appreciated what you'd done in Korea?

Mercer: Some of them did. I had a cleaners down here where I used to get my suits and things cleaned and pressed, and he wouldn't charge me a dime. He'd just say, "Forget about it." And I had several people go in and say give a soldier this, give a soldier that, you know. Yeah, they were real kind when I got back.

DePue: Now, I think you'd already mentioned earlier in our interview that it didn't take you long to get back to work again.

Mercer: Nope. I was so frustrated, and I said, "I'm going to take out eighty-nine days." Boy, I come back, man, three weeks. I called my boss down there, and I said, "Well, I think I'm going to come back next week." So I went down to the employment office for something and he found out I was over there. Here he come. Come over there and he sat there and we talked, we talked, and he said, "You want your same job?" I said, "I sure do." So I came in that Monday—and was bringing a lot of soldiers up, and this one guy was from Kentucky. So I went in that next morning and go over to my machine, and oh, he got hot. He went up and got the boss to come down. He said, "Isaac," said, "this man, he

has a problem." I said, "Like what?" He said, "That he was here before you were and now you're taking his job." I said, "What'd you tell him?" I won't tell you what he said. He said, "I told him he wasn't worth a so-and-so; if he had've been, he wouldn't be a 4-F." (laughter) So he got his tools and went to another job, you know. Yeah, yeah, he came out there, and he asked me a lot of questions and shook my hand and everything. Yeah. He had a temper sometimes, but he and I got along real good. All you had to do was just sit down and talk to him like you and I are talking. He was a fair man. But some of them, they didn't want to, you know… But I bump into him once in a while now.

He retired the same day I did. There was four or five of us old-timers had been in, and we was retiring. Some of them, they didn't have to retire but they could. And the day that we retired, well, we were all on there, and I was just looking at the guys that were there. Very few guys had been there less than thirty years. When we retired, we retired early. I was fifty-five when I retired. I used to tell the guys, I said, "Right now, these young men are raising families, and they're being laid off." And I said, "Why don't we…?" I said, "We can retire." I said, "Our kids are grown and we got our homes and everything." I said, "Let's get out and give those guys…" But after Mr. Dillon died and he turned it over to that grandson of his, he wanted us all to take a pay cut. He had a son, too, but his son married a lady in Chicago, and she had a little—down on Halstead Street, she had a little place, something like that. It was a small one. I said, "The reason he didn't leave the company to his son, I believe he thought he would have sold it or something." But that's what this kid did—twenty-two months, belly-up.

And we're sitting there during contract negotiation—and the old man wouldn't lie to you. I had asked some people in the front office, they kept me abreast of what was going on. They said, "Mercer, we'll tell you, because we know they're not going to say anything." When they was broke, they had bought another steel mill down in Texas and wanted us to take a big pay cut. He brings a guy from Alabama, and he said, "Well, see that guy sitting there?" "I see him. I ain't blind." "He got a factory down in Alabama, and they work for three dollars an hour." I said, "Well, there's two things wrong with that, Pete," the grandson. "I'm not in Georgia, and I'm not going to work for no two, three dollars an hour." And I told him, "It don't matter to me, Pete," I say, "but what you should do, you should walk through the mill once in while." I said, "It's good for a lot of guys on the rail." I said, "It don't make me no difference." I said, "Because your grandfather used to come through." "Yeah," he said, "I realize I've been guilty of that." And I worked another nine months, and I'd stop in and see some of the guys once a while, and they said, "He ain't put his foot in here yet." I said, "It might mean a lot to them to see you walk through the building, because I tell you right now, the guys are losing their homes and everything, and a couple, three guys, their wives run off and left them and the kids and everything, and boy, they come out of the office in the morning and they were really hurt."

DePue: When you first got back, did you take advantage of the GI Bill? Did you ever have a chance to take advantage of the GI Bill?

Mercer: Well, when I was in the service, I was sitting there one night and I was doing some figuring. I said, "Gee whiz," I said, "you know," I said, "if I'd have been buying me a house, I could have just about had it paid for." So when I came in, we wanted—so we lived over on Lincoln Avenue. So the lady that owned this house, the kids that were here, they moved into a housing project. So she come over to me one day and she said, "Isaac," she said, "the Joneses are going to move over," and said, "I want to rent my house, but I want someone like you to rent it, because I know you'll take care of it." I said, "Okay." I said, "Now, we'll do it on one condition. If you decide to sell it, you give us first choice." She said okay. I go down and talk to the VA down there, you know. "Oh," he said, "Isaac," he said, "we can go ahead and do that for you, but," he says, "you know what?" He said, "It would probably take at least a year for you to get that going." So I said, "I'd kind of like to do something right now." So I told him thank you. And see, while I was overseas, they goofed my pay records up and everything, and then when I got out, I got mustering-out pay. So we paid in May, paid in June. In July, she said, "You still want to buy that house?" I said, "I sure do." So we bought the house. Yeah, some of the guys said it took them three or four years to get a GI loan through. "Well," I say, "I've already bought a house and can't live in it, so this is where we want to do it." Yeah, we bought this one.

DePue: Did you go to school on the GI Bill?

Mercer: Uh-huh.

DePue: Didn't need to; you had a job already, huh? (laughs)

Mercer: Yes, sir. The day after we got unionized and everything and everything settled down, what I was hoping I could do was get a house while we were young and everything and wouldn't have to buy one, and somebody else owned it. But yeah, as I started thinking, I said, "Boy, that's a lot of rent to pay." Yeah, we paid four months' rent after I come home, and we moved in here in May of '54.

DePue: Well, you didn't waste time in that, then, did you?

Mercer: Uh-uh, uh-uh. And then, like I said, the job I had was—we made a good living. And every year, every time the contract negotiation come around, they was bringing a lot of them guys up from Texas and Arkansas, all over, and they were making pretty good money. I said, "Yeah, is that why you ending up up here?" So they said, "Well, contract time is coming up." I said, "Yeah. We want a raise. We want a raise." I never was a raise person. That's why if anybody come up to me and is talking about labor union, if they never belonged to a union—I belonged to Northwestern Steel and Wire, and I knew

what it was all about. So what happened, I said, "Well, we got contract coming." "What are you going to ask for? Ask for a raise; ask for a raise." So I asked for a raise. Price on the cars went up. The price on everything else went up. The next time around, "Hey, Mercer, don't ask for no raise, don't ask for no raise. (DePue laughs) Get us some of them pensions and benefits." I said, "Really?" (laughter) I said, "Get something in pensions and benefits, that way if you try you probably can live decently." That's what we did, a lot of guys. Yeah. But I tell you, once we got in there and got going and learning everything, boy, you stayed, you know. Very few guys left. We've had guys that leave to go to other jobs, quit and come back, go back in the other one.

DePue: I want to finish off with some general questions, looking back at your experiences in the Korean War especially, and life overall. What do you think now—the Korean War has become known as the "Forgotten War" over the last years, and it wasn't too long after you got back that Vietnam started heating up, and that got an awful lot of attention; World War II generation has always gotten a lot of attention; but the Korean War soldiers have always been kind of overlooked. What do you think about that?

Mercer: It kind of bothered me because I knew what was over there and what was happening, see, and I think most of those people that was saying that, I don't think they had a clue as to what we were going through or what it was like over there. It wasn't no picnic, no way, uh-uh. And I just, you know, like I said, I don't want them to give me nothing, just say, you know, "Well, we appreciate you guys going over" and thanking like that, but boy, it's not that way. And then after eight years down there, somebody mentioned "Korea police action," "police action." That kind of bothered me for a while too, but I got over that stuff now and it doesn't bother me.

DePue: Did it take you a while to begin talking about your experiences?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Oh, yeah, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Years, years. Not a year, years.

DePue: Was this the kind of stuff you didn't necessarily talk to Earlene even about?

Mercer: Well, a little bit but not much, because a lot of things that—

DePue: What was—

Mercer: Because I didn't want to mention it to her because I didn't know if that would make her feel different or something like that, so I—

DePue: What was holding you back, then, all those years, and reluctant in talking about things?

Mercer: Well, it was hard, believe it or not. Sometimes you'd be sitting there and you'd want to say something, you know, but I just left it. If they asked a

question or something, I'd try to answer it, but as far as just like you and I discussing it, no, I would just say, "Sir, I'd rather not do it, but thank you anyway." But, you know, you raise a family and, you know, the kids as you different questions and you take a little bit of different look at things, you know.

DePue: Was it too painful for you to talk about, or didn't you think they'd understand what you'd be telling them about?

Mercer: That was the main thing. It wasn't painful, because once I got back home safe, I was okay. But that's exactly what I thought, what you just said.

DePue: They just wouldn't understand.

Mercer: Right, mm-hmm. They wouldn't believe me, you know. "Ah, come on, Mercer," you know, because we had a lot of people felt that way, that it wasn't a war, you know. But yes, sir. You know, I don't jump up and make any quick decision. I've always tried to make decisions that, you know, that was right or fair, you know, but yeah, that was really a bummer, to be away from your family like that, and then… But the good Lord got me through it, and I'm grateful.

DePue: You just said at the time, when you're in the trenches fighting day in and day out that it didn't make much sense to you. Does it make much sense to you today why we were there?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. You know, I think sometimes, though, some of these I think we start them ourselves, you know, by sticking our nose in things. I think that they should try and let them people work it out themselves, you know.

DePue: But you think it was the right thing to do at the time, that the Americans were there?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm, because if they hadn't, there's no telling what would have—maybe they would have come over here, you know, something like that.

DePue: Are you proud of your service, then?

Mercer: Yeah, I'm proud that I was able to serve, yes. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Like I said, you know, I got a lot of bumps and bruises, but that's not the point. I felt like I went over and I did the best I could for my country. And that makes me feel good.

DePue: Do you think you came back the same person?

Mercer: Uh-uh. No. Don't ever let anybody tell you any different. Once you go through something like that, you're never the same. You're never the same. There's a few minor things that bother you that ordinarily wouldn't bother you, you know, and some things you can think about. And just like when the boys were in, I was thinking and hoping and praying, I said, "Well, if they want to go on their own," I never said no to them. When they go in their own, I pray for them and I hope they come back okay.

DePue: How did it change you, you think?

Mercer: Hmm?

DePue: How did it change you?

Mercer: Well, sometimes when you go through something like that, then when somebody else is going through something like that, you kind of have an idea of what they're going through, and it makes you feel like, Well, I know a little bit about it because I've been there, you know, something like that.

DePue: So a little bit more sober in how you look at things down the road?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Definitely, mm-hmm.

DePue: I know you've been bothered by this notion that people called it a police action, and some people still do. What would you like people today to understand about what you experienced, what the war was about?

Mercer: I would like for them to just forget about that word and say "the Korean War" or "Korean soldiers." That "police action," that don't get it with me. It kind of hurts you a little bit, you know. But as you get older, you know, you kind of—well, there are certain people going to do certain things regardless, so don't let it get you down.

DePue: Well, I know just in the last few years, people have finally started to discover this story that you've got that you served. Has it been rewarding for you to tell the story now after all these years?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. And I don't mind talking about it now, but I used to—I don't want to hear it. But it makes you feel good to find out that finally somebody had a general idea it wasn't a police action.

DePue: Well, how long ago did that start? Was that just a couple years ago, or…?

Mercer: Mmm, I'd say in the last four or five years, mm-hmm. I've mentioned some things that I never would have mentioned six or seven years, you know… It just affects you. You know, there are a lot of guys that say—it didn't make sense to me at first, but it does now—they said, anybody that's ever been in a war, you can't say that you're the same as you was before you went in when

you come out. You changed in someway, you know. And I understood what they was talking about now, because boy, when you first come back from something like that, you don't want to hear nothing. You want to hear things on the positive side, you know, and everything's going okay and people getting along fine. But I always try to keep my head up and help people if I can, because I tell you, I had a lot of people to help me to get where I am, so I just try to give a little something back.

DePue: Tell us a little bit about the family that you and Earlene raised, then. You've mentioned them quite a bit, but…

Mercer: Yeah. Three sons and two daughters, and believe it or not, they all—they might not be the best-paying job, but they all have jobs. And when everybody is home and we go to church on Sunday, a lot of parents will come up to me and say, "Mr. Mercer, you sure is lucky. All your kids got a job." I say, "Don't give me that 'lucky' stuff." Because what I used to tell them, I said, "You go in and put in an application down there," and I said, "if you don't hear from them in a week or two, just accidentally on purpose stop in, you know, say, 'I just happened to be in the area and I just wondered if you was starting to hire anybody.'" I told them, I said, "You're not going to get a job walking up and down the streets. Go in there and put the application in." And it ain't the best-paying job, but yep, it's something. My youngest daughter, my youngest son, they bought their homes and paid for them, and then my one daughter, she's not married, she rents, and the oldest one, Tony. Steve, he owns. So my oldest son Tony don't own, and my oldest daughter Joyce,, she has a nice place of her own. But yeah, they got their homes. They sit down and talk to me a lot, and I give them my opinion, you know. And I would never say, "Do it this way. Do it this way." And believe it or not, we're real proud of them.

DePue: You said all three of the boys had military service, then?

Mercer: Mm-hmm, yep. And just like I said, Tony ended up in Turkey, but Michael and Steve, they stayed right here in the States. I told Steve, I said—Steve's a Marine—I said, "Gee whiz," I said, "I was in the service for two years and I got to stay at the house two or three times and a day or two I was gone." Every weekend I look up, there's Steve walking in the door. (laughter) I was like, "Don't give me that stuff." Yeah, it's true. Yeah, we have really been blessed, yes, sir. All of them in good health and everything. So, boy, we're just tickled to death.

DePue: Well, Isaac—

Mercer: And they very respectful, too. They know to be respectful, yes, sir. "Yes, ma'am" and "no, ma'am," "yes, sir," and "no, sir." That's' the way we were brought up, mm-hmm.

DePue: Well, Isaac, then what words of advice would you like to close with here today?

Mercer: Well, believe it or not, I'm glad that I was able to get back home and my family's okay and they're all well and out on their own and they don't bother their dad for a thing. And if they did, they'd know they could get it. But every day some of them check in. The two oldest boys, Steve and Tony, they live here in town, but Michael and our two daughters live in Rockford.

DePue: So it's all still pretty close.

Mercer: Oh, yeah. Yep. Yeah, they've been scattered over quite a bit, and it's hard on their mother. It's hard on me, too, but I wouldn't let her see it. I miss them just like she did, you know, and worried about them.

DePue: Well, it's been a real pleasure for me to sit and talk with you today, Isaac.

Mercer: Same to you, and I appreciate your getting as much information as you could. I just wish I would have had more, but I said, well, just as long as it'll help you out, it's something you want to do, why, that's fine with me. Appreciate it.

DePue: Well, you had an important story to tell, and appreciate you telling it.

Mercer: Not a problem, sir. Glad to do it.

DePue: Thank you, Isaac.

Mercer: Thank you, thank you, thank you.

(end of interview)