Interview with Bob Bastas

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Interview # 1: October 13, 2008

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Monday, October 13, 2008. It's actually Columbus Day. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here with Bob Bastas. Good morning, Bob.

Bastas: Good morning. How are you, Mark?

DePue: I'm doing great, looking forward to this one. I know Bob from the Breakfast Optimist Club; I know Bob to be one who can tell colorful stories, also true stories, right?

Bastas: Absolutely. Everything's true.

DePue: There we go. We're going to talk to Bob because he's a Korean War veteran. So without further ado, when and where were you born?

Bastas: I was born October 28, 1931 in Benton, Illinois, Franklin County.

DePue: Okay.

Bastas: Southern part of the state.

DePue: Way south.

Bastas: Right. About seventy-five miles north of Cairo.

DePue: Okay. Much of the time that you and I have spoken, you've talked about your father. He seems to come up quite a bit; obviously he had a pretty strong influence on you. Tell us the story of your dad.

Bastas: Okay. He was a Greek immigrant. He was born on the island of Zakynthos in the Ionian Sea, a little town called Agios Leon. I think the top island is Corfu. This is

on the west side of the mainland of Greece. Lonnie and I went on vacation over there in '97.

DePue: Lonnie would be your wife.

Bastas: My wife, yes. We noticed the Venetian influence on this island, because of it being out in that area, by the architecture and some of the cultural things. But basically, it was still Greek.

DePue: How old was your dad when he left?

Bastas: He was only either fourteen or fifteen. I'm not exactly sure. My father was very evasive about a lot of things in his early life. Also he was a very good storyteller.

DePue: Well, that's where you got it then.

Bastas: Yeah, he was.

DePue: Why did he leave?

Bastas: I am not sure about that. It seems like most of the people in that age group didn't like to—especially if they came over from another country—they didn't seem to like to go into detail. And of course he died when I was 13 years old, so when I would have really gotten interested into his background, I lost the chance. He came over, though, when he was between fourteen and fifteen, somewhere in there.

DePue: What year would that be?

Bastas: Good grief, I don't know. Probably—I'm guessing, because as I said, the information's very vague—probably about 1910, somewhere in that era.

DePue: So before the First World War.

Bastas: Right. He claimed he was born in 1892, but there were always questions about the exact birth records. When he died in '45, he had some different dates on a couple, three or four insurance policies he had. So it was within two or three years of 1892.

DePue: He came over with his parents?

Bastas: No, he came over by himself. He told me that he came steerage. He slept with the cattle and the horses in the hold, and that way he saved money when he got to the United States.

DePue: Do you have any idea what was going on with your dad and his parents?

Bastas: I'm not sure. This is all surmise on my part. I know there was always turmoil between the Greeks and the Turks, and there were probably some kind of wars or something going on. I have no idea. But just guessing at this, maybe his mother

decided it would be a good thing to send him away from there before he got inducted into the army or had to go fight.

DePue: Well, that was good timing because, of course, shortly after that, four years after that, the First World War started and that whole region was engulfed.

Bastas: Engulfed, right.

DePue: Did he know somebody here?

Bastas: As I understand, he had a cousin that lived in New York City who was his sponsor, so to speak, I guess.

DePue: Okay, here's the next question. Did he go through Ellis Island?

Bastas: Ellis Island.

DePue: Did he ever talk about that experience?

Bastas: Absolutely. He related that he could speak no English. He remembers that the guards put these big placards around your neck and it hung down by your waist—it had some printing on it—and that the doctors checked you over, checked your eyes, checked your teeth. They asked you questions, and like I guess a lot of these foreigners, it was very difficult for them to try to figure out what they were saying. I think that's why a lot of these names that come in from Ellis Island are all kind of mixed up, because they probably didn't get the spelling exactly right. Although my father's name was B-a-s-t-a-s in Greek. It's the same. The B is, I checked it when I was over there, and it's like two or three characters that form the B sound.

DePue: But otherwise it was B-a-s-t-a-s?

Bastas: T-a-s, right.

DePue: That's a short Greek name, isn't it?

Bastas: Right, it is.

DePue: What was his first name?

Bastas: Tom, Thomas.

DePue: That was his given name?

Bastas: Right.

DePue: How was it pronounced in Greek? Tomaś, or..?

Bastas: Something, it probably was. But you have to remember, my dad, he felt himself American. Period. You know, he didn't really relate with the ethnicity of being a Greek; although, I mean, when I say that, he was very cognizant of the fact that his mother was in occupied Greece by the Germans; during the war he sent money and packages to his mother and brothers that were there.

DePue: Was he proud of his Greek heritage?

Bastas: Oh yes. Yeah, very much so.

DePue: But you say he wanted to identify himself not as a Greek but as an American?

Bastas: No, not really that. I just think that he didn't like to be involved in the closeness of being with that ethnic group. I would assume that's what it was. I don't know for sure.

DePue: Tell us about what he did once he got off of Ellis Island.

Bastas: I don't know the exact story. I just know that he told me that after he'd been in New York City—I don't know the time element or anything—but he got a job as a gandy dancer on the railroad. I don't know how far he went, but I think he said something about he went almost clear across the country working on railroads.

DePue: It might surprise you, Bob, but I don't know that everybody knows what a gandy dancer is.

Bastas: Well, I don't know the legal definition. As I understand, it was the guys who were in the labor force that laid the ties and the rails and actually built the tracks.

DePue: So the classic pictures that we always see of expanding the railroads: he was one of those folks?

Bastas: Yup, he was in a crew, yes, a large crew. As he said, he was in a crew with a bunch of foreigners. Because he always felt he was—I don't know, my dad, he was something else.

DePue: That he wasn't the foreigner, they were.

Bastas: Yeah. Well, that was, I think, his humorous side. He always liked to kind of kid about things like that.

DePue: Where did he end up then?

Bastas: I think—and I'm not sure about all this. This is kind of a vague history. But he ended up eventually in St. Louis and he worked for some Greeks down there in the restaurant business. Then he ended up—I don't know how he even got there—he came to Benton and opened up a restaurant there with his brother, who was Spiro Bastas, who was then in the army in World War I and was over in Europe. And then

another gentleman, I can't think of his name right now, but another Greek fellow that he was in business with.

DePue: If my math is correct and his date of birth was correct, he would have been eligible for the draft had he been an American citizen.

Bastas: Okay. He told me the reason he didn't get drafted was—probably while he was working as a gandy dancer—he had a rupture, and it wasn't really repaired very well, and that gave him a deferment. That's probably the only reason that I know of that he didn't go into the service.

DePue: Was Benton known as an area where lots of foreigners, lots of Greeks were settling?

Bastas: Actually, a variety of foreigners, so to speak, because it was in the coal mining area and almost everybody that worked in the coal mines at that time were of some kind of ethnic group: Polish, Italian, Greek, German, Irish, French. Just about everything you could think of. Because these guys, I assume, came here and had a difficult time with the language and everything. This was a good job, even though it probably wasn't the easiest job in the world, but this was a good job that they could do and understand.

DePue: By this time, did your father understand English, speak English?

Bastas: Yes. Somewhere in that period of being in New York—see, this is a time period I can't exactly pin down. Somewhere in that time period, he said that he went to night school as soon as he could and started to learn English and about the United States. So he spoke English, I think, very soon after he was here. I don't know the time element. I remember the one thing that he said, when he was in New York right after he came to this country. He said, "I couldn't speak English. I went to breakfast one morning." The waitress comes up and says, "What do you want, can I take your order," or, "What do you want for breakfast?" He said, "I wanted a couple of eggs so all I could think of was take my hand up and hold like that and go, 'Coo, coo, coo, coo, coo.'" The waitress said, "Oh yeah, I know what you want." (laughter)

DePue: Figured after that he had to improve his language a little bit?

Bastas: Yeah, he had to improve his language, right.

DePue: What did he do once he got to Benton?

Bastas: Well, as I said, he got into the restaurant business with his partners at that time.

DePue: Was he part owner or is he just working there?

Bastas: No, he was part owner. Actually he had ownership in it. He rented the space from a lady named Amy Groverman, who had the Hudson Hotel not right next door but a

couple of buildings down; she owned all that area in there and he rented that space from her. Later he and my mother owned the business by themselves.

DePue: Okay. Where does a guy who's a brand new immigrant—I can't imagine you're being paid that well as a gandy dancer working across the United States—where does he get enough money to make a down payment and to be a part owner of a restaurant?

Bastas: Well, I have an idea of what he did. First of all, he saved his money, probably whatever he made. I'm sure he did. Because he would say, Saturday night would come and a lot of the guys would go out and drink and play the women, gamble and fight and all this kind of stuff, and then came back Sunday morning and wouldn't have a dime to their name. I have an idea, from the way Dad talked, that he kind of stayed on the straight and narrow and tried to save his money. Then in Saint Louis, I don't know what that history is, I mean, how much money he made. He was there for a few years.

DePue: Okay. So he had a goal in mind once he got here?

Bastas: Yes, he must have. Yeah. He undoubtedly had a goal in mind because he had this philosophy, and his philosophy was: I'd rather work for four dollars a day than work for somebody that will be telling me what to do all the time. Very independent.

DePue: Was he proud of his adopted country?

Bastas: Oh yeah, absolutely. He undoubtedly was probably one of the—I don't know, I can't say few because I don't know. But he was very proud of his country. He thought this country was the greatest. Always was, always felt that way.

DePue: Why in particular? Why did he feel so strongly?

Bastas: I think he felt that way because he knew that he had the freedom to do whatever he wanted to do here; I think that's basically it. He was definitely a patriot all the way. He wasn't so happy with the government. He got very upset with the government because they always seemed like they took taxes, and he didn't like the idea that they'd subsidize mines, oil companies, farmers, mines, whatever. You know, the general subsidies that the United States government subsidizes. He felt that the small businessman was left out in the cold, and that if you went broke tomorrow nobody cared. Couldn't care less. I mean, that was his feeling, although even with that feeling, he was still a patriot.

DePue: It sounds like he believed in the American dream, he was pursuing the American dream, as trite as that might sound.

Bastas: Right. I think so. I remember sometime, I have no idea when it was, somebody said, "Tom, have you ever gone back to the old country?" He said, "No, I don't want to go back there. You know, those are poor folks back there." But yet he always

corresponded with his mother, who lived—I think my grandmother on my dad's side lived to be ninety years old. She lived all the way through the German occupation of World War II; he died before she did. He died in September of 1945. I can't remember when, but she died a few years later. She was in her nineties.

DePue: So she lived through quite a bit of history.

Bastas: Yes, yes. She lived, like I said, through the German occupation and through the British occupation.

DePue: Tell us a little bit about your dad's business.

Bastas: He had a restaurant, soda fountain, confectionary, and bar. He made his own candy. We had whiskey, beer, wine, also had a soda fountain with all the accoutrements that come with the soda fountain: ice cream sundaes, ice cream sodas, milk shakes, malted milks. Then he also served food. Probably the biggest bunch of customers he had were the miners themselves, because that was the predominant occupation in that area. A lot of professional people also came to Dad's store because they liked him and he was always very cordial, always. He loved the business. He loved the people. He really did. You could just tell by the way he was always talking, and you could also tell by the way people would act when they'd come in.

DePue: Did you work in the store some?

Bastas: Yeah. Just before he died I was working as a waiter. I think I was about thirteen, something like that.

DePue: We need to jump back a little bit though because somewhere along the line, your dad met your mom. Tell us about that.

Bastas: I don't know the whole history. All I know is my mother was a young gal who came to Benton when her folks moved up in this area from Kentucky.

DePue: What was her name?

Bastas: Laura, L-a-u-r-a, Perkins.

DePue: Well, you can't get much more English sounding than Perkins.

Bastas: No, no, that's right. My grandmother's name, her mother, was Molly Perkins, and her maiden name was Molly Stone. So it goes way back to the Revolutionary War, the English side of that family, yeah.

DePue: So, on both respects you're an all-American kid, then.

Bastas: Well, that's for sure. You know, I think I asked one time in school. I said to one of the teachers, "Now since my dad is a foreigner and my mom is English, does that make me a half-breed?" She says, "No, you're not a half-breed. That's only in the

Indian-American association." Anyway, I always felt very good about my family and about Dad. He was a good man.

DePue: Tell us a bit more about your mother.

Bastas: They worked together in the store. I've got the marriage certificate somewhere in there. I can't remember, but it was in like 1920, '22, somewhere in there. This was after my mother had come to work for Dad as a waitress, and he was young and single. Anyway, they were married and I think they went to St. Louis for their honeymoon, went to the Mayfair Hotel, whatever, however that was. But they worked together in the restaurant all the time. My mother worked right alongside my father.

DePue: Very much a family operation?

Bastas: Yes. Yeah, very much. All of us from time to time would help in the store.

DePue: How big a town is Benton?

Bastas: Well, at that time when the coal mines were very prominent, probably 10,000. It's now down to about 6,000, 7,000.

DePue: Okay, that's why. I was thinking it was smaller than that.

Bastas: Yeah, it was about 10,000 at that time.

DePue: Would it be fair to say, though, that—

Bastas: It was a county seat. Franklin County.

DePue: —that your parents knew practically everybody who was coming into the restaurant?

Bastas: Probably so, yes. Well, especially their regular customers.

DePue: You came along in 1931, you said. You have any brothers and sisters?

Bastas: I have a brother, Paul. He was born in 1925, May 12, 1925. He died in 2002 at 77. I have a sister who was born in 1928, February 14, 1928, I think is her birthday. Then I was born October 28, 1931. So that was the family, the three of us.

DePue: You were born in the midst of the Depression, one of the worst years of the Depression. Do you remember much about growing up in the Depression?

Bastas: Yes. And I've often thought—I've kidded about this, I kid my wife about this. I said, "I'm sure my parents were very happy they were going to have another mouth to feed, 1931, yeah." (laughter) Probably a great shake, here I come. I don't know. Anyway, I was never treated any different by any means, no. Yes, I remember. I remember a lot of things about the Depression. That's the thing that really upsets

me today is the people all whining. They have no idea what the Depression was like. They read it in books and they think that, Oh, well, that wasn't so bad. They weren't there. They have no idea. They think today, if they can't buy something or satisfy themselves immediately that there's something wrong with the economy, that there's something wrong with the country, there's something wrong. Somebody else is at fault for their not having what they want. Great instant gratification. That's exactly what seems to be the problem today.

DePue: It's probably worth mentioning here before we go too much farther: October 13, 2008, we're in the midst of a presidential election. We're also hopefully towards the bottom of about a 40 percent drop in the stock market in just the last two or three weeks.

Bastas: Yes, I think it's coming back up. They said this morning it was returning. I don't know how much, but it's supposed to be coming back up because all the world gurus are getting everything organized with the banks and the loaning institutions, and the money's going to flow and the stocks are going to sell. I have no idea. Anyway, yeah, it seems to be coming back.

DePue: I think we'll only really know if it's coming back about five years from now.

Bastas: That's right, exactly.

DePue: We're on quite a roller coaster ride right now.

Bastas: But see, that's the problem. People today want to know right now. How is it going to change immediately? Not just, it looks good in the future. It's got to be within the next two or three days or two or three weeks, and it's just crazy to think that way.

DePue: Did your parents hold onto the restaurant through the Depression?

Bastas: Absolutely. Yeah.

DePue: Did they have to make some adjustments in their lives because of it?

Bastas: Oh yes. Okay, I'll give you kind of a background of my family. My Aunt Ellen, who was my mother's sister, was a lady who was not married. I would never call her an old maid. She was such a wonderful gal. She was the one who lived with us and took care of us kind of like a surrogate mother while my mother and dad worked at the restaurant. So she was an integral part of the family. The restaurant, as I've said, the building itself was rented from Mrs. Groverman, and I remember the story was Dad had some problems in making the rent payment on the restaurant. He talked to Mrs. Groverman and she said, "Well, don't worry about it, Tom, you just stay here and when you can pay the rent, I know you'll pay me." So that was the way he stayed in business; otherwise, he would have probably had to go under or go out of business.

DePue: Had a pretty loyal clientele, though, through that time period?

Bastas: Right. I think that most of the people who were their regular customers came in all the time, as much as they could. I remember Dad making the statement one time, something about he didn't make hardly enough today to pay the light bill. So it was a tough time in the Depression. Plus the fact, we were right there in town. This was, of course, as I've said, 1930s. At our home we had an outdoor toilet, a two-seater, which you didn't spend much time at in the winter. (laughter) And there was a big garden. My Aunt Ellen actually had a green thumb. She was very good at growing everything. We had everything that you could think of, tomatoes, beans. We had dark raspberry bushes in the back. It was excellent stuff. And, of course, she did a lot of canning. Canned everything you could think of, tomatoes, corn, peas, peaches. In the house, the one I grew up in, we had a coal stove in the front that gave us heat and a coal stove in the kitchen to cook on, and a well for water. So it was a very austere program that we were in.

DePue: I'm not sure people understand or appreciate today not having to heat your homes with coal and all the pollution that might result from that.

Bastas: Well, you did with what you had. I mean, the coal was delivered to a little building out back, because the house was built probably in the early 1900s. I mean, like 1900, 1902, 1903. It was a big two-story house which we didn't have finished upstairs. We were on the main floor. This house in the back was a summer house like they used to have, where you would wash clothes or cook out there when it was hot because they didn't have air conditioning. But we didn't use it for that. We were pretty much in the main part of the house. That was where they stored the coal, and we'd go out and get coal buckets full of coal and bring them into the house.

DePue: Is this locally mined coal?

Bastas: Yes, yeah, probably coal from the mines right around Benton, yeah.

DePue: So it was probably pretty cheap, too.

Bastas: Yes. I'm sure it was. It wasn't pea coal that was broken up, it was in pretty good size chunks and you had to break up a chunk and put it in the scuttle or the bucket that you carried it in.

DePue: Let's get up to about 1937, '38, '39. I'm curious to find out more about the holidays. Since we're getting close to Halloween here, what was Halloween like?

Bastas: Hmm. You know, that's very difficult. They celebrated Halloween, but I don't think they did the things that they do now. First of all, they didn't have the money. You didn't have the wherewithal to buy costumes or any of those kinds of things. Because of the economy, I'm sure a lot of that was kind of quelled a little bit.

DePue: No boys ran around town and tipped over outhouses—

Bastas: I'm sure there were, yeah. I don't mean that they didn't fool around.

DePue: Did you go house-to-house trick or treating?

Bastas: Yeah, we went and rang doorbells, things like that. I remember the one incident. There were about five of us guys and we went to ring a doorbell at this guy's house. I think he was kind of, I don't know, we maybe were agitated at him or something, or he maybe yelled at us. I don't know. We rang the doorbell and we put a toothpick in it so it just rang (laughter). The four of us got through the opening because he had kind of a fence made out of pipe; it was a low fence. One of the guys forgot the fence was there and snagged his shins on the pipe and away he went over on the ground, and he crawled away from there. But that was the worst thing I ever did. We didn't really do any destructive type stuff.

DePue: Thanksgiving and Christmas? Were these traditional American holidays, or had a little bit of a Greek touch to it?

Bastas: No. Well, in fact, Dad's cooking at the restaurant was pretty much traditional American, because people weren't that into ethnic foods back then. They talk about discrimination today. I think a lot of the foreigners were discriminated against in years past. I don't mean overtly, but you know, if you were a foreigner, especially from the Anglo Saxon point of view, you weren't really part of America at that time I don't think. I think there was a lot of that going on.

DePue: Were you expected to adjust and adapt to the mainstream culture?

Bastas: I think so. I think that's probably true.

DePue: Did your dad have any objections to that?

Bastas: No. He wouldn't have any objections to it. But, you know, being in a smaller community, you didn't have the large ethnic groups of people like in the cities. So if you had a restaurant in southern Illinois, you'd have to have pretty much the American-type food, although once in a while, he would put in a dish. Like I remember the one that was so good, he'd just sell so fast, was the chicken pilaf. If he put that on the menu, boy, they would eat it up very quickly.

DePue: So a little bit of taste of the other country.

Bastas: Right, yeah. And he would do some things once in a while, but not very often. It wasn't unusual for him to do things as far as the family went. He would fix lamb, which most times lamb has pretty much a muttony taste, but he knew how to fix it in a Greek fashion that really, you didn't have that taste.

DePue: Do you remember Pearl Harbor? You would have been about ten years old then.

Bastas: I remember Pearl Harbor, but it was kind of faint in my mind because I think it was, December 7, 1941 I was in Peoria, Illinois, and my Uncle Harry, who was a brother to my dad, was dying of what they called then uremic poisoning. I assume what it

meant was his kidneys were failing. He died on that day. So it didn't hit me because there were other things going on.

DePue: You grew up then, hit your teen years during the Second World War. Do you remember much about that?

Bastas: Yes. I remember the rationing. The stickers on the cars: A, B, C, and D stickers. Had coupons for gas, coupons for sugar, coupons for meat, coupons for butter. My dad had to kind of stash his cigarettes away because everybody wanted to buy cigarettes; you couldn't get them because of the fact that most of the companies sent cigarettes to the war effort. I remember the different kind of drives they had, like paper drives. Metal drives, where they would bring pots and pans and all kinds of metal to a collection place where they would go off to the war effort. Another one, which I remember I thought was very unusual, was grease from cooking. You could bring grease in a container and they would collect that and they used it, as I understand, in the munitions industry.

DePue: Yeah, manufacturing explosives. Well, your dad and mom would have had plenty of grease.

Bastas: Oh yes. Also, Dad had a special ration because he made candy. He was able to get sugar and a few of the items like that more than anybody else would.

DePue: But all of these other things that were being rationed, that otherwise would have been the lifeblood of his restaurant, was he able to get?

Bastas: Well, he was able to get enough. Because of being in the restaurant business, he was able to get more than you would normally if you were, you know, in a family that didn't have a business like that. I'm sure there were times when he had difficulty getting different items.

DePue: Do you remember your folks talking about the war, especially what was going on in Greece, in England? Your mother was a few generations away from that, but certainly your dad wasn't.

Bastas: No. Another thing about Dad was—this goes back to his loving his country the way he did—he read at least three newspapers a day: the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, I think, or the *Globe*, one of those;. then the *Benton Evening News;* and there was one other paper he got. He always read all that he could about what was going on in the world, period. He had a lot of opinions. There's no question about that. When the war started and some of the local guys were going overseas, some of their folks would come in and ask Dad, "Well, what was it like in Greece and what was it like in Europe, what did you know about it?" He would tell them what he knew of the area that he was in, but he didn't know anything about the other areas. But at least he would study the maps and tell them what was in the area that he grew up in.

DePue: Did your older brother fight in the war?

Bastas: Yes. I'm trying to think how old he was. He was probably nineteen. No, eighteen when he got drafted. And then, when you were drafted into the military, let's see, he was born in '25, so what would that be? He was eighteen when...'25.

DePue: Forty-three.

Bastas: Forty-three, yeah, right at about '43 he was drafted. He and a group of fellows went to Chicago to the induction center, and I remember him telling me this. When you got up there, there was the Army, the Marines, the Navy, and the Army Air Corps. If you wanted to, you could try to choose which one you'd like to go to, which was really unusual compared to what happened when I was in the service. (laughter) You know, when Korea came, you were drafted. Period. You went wherever they told you to go. So anyway, he and his friends that went up to Chicago decided they'd like to get in the Army Air Corps, and that's where he got into the Army Air Corps at that time.

DePue: What did he end up doing?

Bastas: Well, I think he was in pilot training. He said, "I got washed out because my coordination was not too good." And I said, "Well, that probably wouldn't be a good idea if you were a pilot." So he ended up being a tail gunner. He went through basic training at DuPo, Illinois or DuPo, Missouri, whichever it is, Jefferson Barracks. That was where he had Army basic training. He then went from there to Colorado, and I don't know whether that was part of the learning, trying to be a pilot, but then he ended up as a tail gunner.

DePue: On what kind of aircraft?

Bastas: On a B26 Martin Marauder.

DePue: Which is a two-engine bomber.

Bastas: Yes, a two-engine bomber. I think after he did his gunnery training, he went to an air base, an Army Air Corps base, in Fort Myers, Florida, which is long since gone. But that's where he took his gunnery training. He said that they trained by flying over the Everglades and shooting at targets, flying targets.

DePue: Did he have any combat missions?

Bastas: Yes. He went to Europe. I'm just trying to think what year it was. Probably the last part of '44. I remember him saying that—later I found this out—he said that he was going to ship out at Savannah, Georgia, but he got to Savannah, Georgia and they changed the orders. They put him on a train, went all the way up to New York, and left on the Queen Mary, which had been converted into a troop ship. He said it only took four days, five days in a zigzag course all the way across the Atlantic; there was a huge troop group in that. I don't know how many guys. They landed in England, and then that's where he started. He went from England to France to

Belgium and to different bases; along the way, he flew thirty-six missions over Germany.

DePue: Thirty-six?

Bastas: Thirty-six. I asked him one time, I said, "Did you fly, what was it Paul, forty missions over Europe?" He said, "No, it was only thirty-six." I said, "Well, okay, give or take four."

DePue: Of course, most people think at twenty-five [missions], in the early years of the war you got to go home because you had survived, miraculously. By the time he was there, it's a little bit easier but still very dangerous business.

Bastas: Well, I've got a diary in there that he kept. He was nineteen-years-old and he kept a diary, which was really unusual. He didn't classify each mission, but almost all of them, thirty-one of them he did write about. Mostly what they did was they bombed marshalling yards or barracks. This was, like, from the end of January through May of 1945.

DePue: Was he doing this at a lower altitude than the B-24s and 17s were?

Bastas: Yes, yes. I think he said they would fly in about 10,000 or 12,000 feet. The plane was very fast. I don't know what the actual speed was. It was somewhere between 250 and 300 it would get up to, because they had huge radial engines. He said all the GIs called it the flying prostitute because it had a short wingspan, so it had no visible means of support. (laughter) It was a six-man crew: a pilot, a copilot, bombardier, navigator, radio man, and tail gunner.

DePue: I would guess that a couple of those guys that you mention were also gunners when the action got hot.

Bastas: Yeah, well, the radio man was a gunner. They might have had a gun up front. I'm not even sure. The bombardier, maybe, and navigator had a gun; I'm not sure about that. But basically the radio man had a turret gun, and my brother was a tail gunner on the rear of the plane.

DePue: Were you proud of your brother?

Bastas: Oh yeah, yeah.

DePue: How about your parents? What were their emotions about having a son who was doing that kind of business in the war?

Bastas: Well, I mean, Dad was very proud of him. I know that. My mother was, too. I mean, I'm sure they were afraid for him just like all parents would be for their sons, but he was lucky. He was not shot down and he was never wounded. But all I remember was one incident; he told me about a piece of shrapnel going right in front of his face from one, and he kept that piece of shrapnel. He's got it at home in

Dallas, or his son does; it went through the side of the plane and came to the other side and stuck. It was still a little hot at that time, and it just missed his head.

DePue: What was the mood of the American public in Benton? Again, you're a young kid growing up at this time, but any question that this was the right thing to be doing.

Bastas: Oh yeah, there was no question about it. I mean, guys would come back, and I remember some of the returning veterans and people were very much behind the war effort. Like I said, the different things that happened like the paper drives, the metal drives, the rationing, you know? The general public, I think, was very, very much behind the effort. I mean, there undoubtedly was dissension. There had to be some people that didn't believe in it, and that's fine. But I don't remember anybody making a...let's put it this way. I don't remember any demonstrations against the war. None. Absolutely none. All the bond drives, all the ways of trying to keep the morale high in the war effort were prominent at that time. I don't remember anybody making a big deal out of saying that we should not have done this, we should not have…

I do remember my father saying this to me. I don't remember how old I was. This would have been probably 1937, '38. We lived in Benton and the public square, all transportation would come down 37 from the north or from the south, come up 37 and then connect up with 45, Illinois state routes that would head toward Chicago. Trucks would come through with big, big, great big beds of scrap metal. I don't know where my dad got this. I still to this day do not understand how he thought this, and whether it's true I don't know. He would say, "There goes another load of scrap metal to Japan, and they're going to build planes and war tanks and they're going to be fighting us." Well, I don't know. Well, he must have had this in his mind because, like I said, he read the newspapers and he kind of followed all the political things that were going on at that time. I think he felt that that was what was going to happen, because we were selling scrap metal to the Japanese.

DePue: Of course it was when we stopped selling scrap metal and oil that they attacked Pearl Harbor.

Bastas: That's right, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, he had some insight that I still to this day don't know why he felt that way or where it came from. I'm sure he had a lot of conversations with the friends he had. We lived next door to an attorney. His name was Sid Ward. He had his attorney's office in the front of the house and he rented out the back. His house and my folks' house were built at like the turn of 1900, right in there. Espey was the name of the family that owned both houses at one time. Sid was a lawyer who—by the way, I'll just tell you this real quick—Sid conducted a lot of his interviews with his clients out on the front porch. Now, here I was, a little guy digging in the dirt down there, and I could hear a lot of the conversations. He was hard of hearing, too.There'd be a divorce case, and I would hear the statement, "Well, how many times did he hit you?" I couldn't hear the voice, you know, it would be too faint, the woman's voice, and he'd say, "Now

listen, dammit, you have to tell me how many times he hit you because you know damn good and well he hit you." So I kind of grew up as a kid not really knowing exactly what was going on, but I had a pretty good idea.

DePue: So you know there was a dark side of life as well.

Bastas: Oh yeah, absolutely. (laughter)

DePue: Do you remember the end of the war? Do you remember the atomic bomb being dropped? You would have been about fourteen.

Bastas: Yeah, I remember. I remember that, yes. Let's see, would that have been, what, '45?

DePue: August of '45.

Bastas: Forty-five, right. Yeah, I remember it; in fact, this would have been a difficult time because right around that time, my dad had, for the last five years of his life before 1945—so we're talking about from 1940 to '45—he had high blood pressure, heart problems, arterial sclerosis, was in and out of Barnes Hospital in St. Louis a couple of times, back when they didn't have the medicines and the technology they have now. He died when he was 52 years old.

DePue: In 1945?

Bastas: Yes, in August of '45, in fact. I can't remember the exact date, but it was in August. No, wait. Was it August or was it September? Anyway, close to the end of August or the first of September. I remember he was still alive when VJ Day was proclaimed, the victory in Japan. That was like August 20, 1945, somewhere in there?

DePue: Yeah, pretty close. I can't recall exactly.

Bastas: Because the victory in Europe was like in April, I think. All I remember was the Greyhound buses that came in, up on the square, all stopped. Two of them. People got out, you know, all bedlam broke loose, horns. One of the fellows in back of where my dad was went out and had to shoot off his shotgun; the problem was that he severed some power lines. (laughter) So the power company was not too happy with him, but it was jubilation all over the place.

DePue: Do you recall your parents' reaction to the bomb, whether or not that was the right way to end the war? Or were you too young for that?

Bastas: No, I don't remember that. But I don't think there was any problem with anything that we did because of so many guys being killed. I'm sure that there was the thought that if they went into Japan, there'd be a slaughter. So I mean, I don't remember any voiced opinion about that.

DePue: Well, at the end of the Second World War, you're just about ready to go into high school. You are beginning high school.

Bastas: Right.

DePue: Did the war develop an interest in you for the military?

Bastas: You know, I don't think so.

DePue: What were you interested in doing with your life when you were in high school?

Bastas: In high school, I was interested in just getting through, I think. That's probably the biggest thing that was in my life. You know, isn't it funny? You go back and you start thinking of the things you were when you were thirteen, fourteen years old, fifteen years old. I think also, since the war ended you had kind of a different feeling about the way the world was going to be. I don't know. It's very difficult for me to remember what it was like. I just enjoyed being; school was fine with me. I didn't have any particular ambition at that time.

DePue: But you did have a big adjustment with your father passing away.

Bastas: Yes.

DePue: Did your mother stay with the restaurant?

Bastas: My mother stayed with the restaurant for one year, then she sold it as quickly as she could, because it was a difficult thing for a woman by herself to be working at, and especially during that time. My brother and sister went off to school after he came home. He came home sometime after Dad died, probably early '45, early '46. Late '45, early '46.

DePue: What did your mother do after she sold the restaurant?

Bastas: She worked at different things, nothing of any consequences. She worked for a bakery. She worked for a newspaper agency. And she was very, very—what's the word I'm thinking of? Thrifty. Very cognizant of the fact that she had to maintain as much as she could.

DePue: But I would think that selling the restaurant in 1946 wasn't a bad time to be doing that.

Bastas: No. Well, yes. And she was glad to get out of the business. She sold it lock, stock, and barrel, you know, the whole, all of it together. Didn't take anything out.

DePue: Well, running a restaurant for twenty years, I'm sure that tends to wear you out after a while.

Bastas: Right. I remember when the restaurant was going big, we had like two cooks, two or three waitresses that would come in and out, and it was a busy place, especially the years just before the war. Because it was so busy, I remember my mother saying, "It's just too bad that your dad died because this was the time, after all the struggle he went through, that he was going to be able to make some money now." And that was true too after the war, with the guys coming home.

DePue: I'm sure.

Bastas: Yeah.

DePue: What year did you graduate from high school?

Bastas: Let's see. Forty-nine, 1949.

DePue: What were your thoughts at that time. What were you going to do with your life?

Bastas: Again, (laughter) you know how that is. I mean, I don't know whether anybody else knows how that is. I know how I was. I was kind of, yeah, yeah, what the heck. I'm going to see what I can do. And so I ended up going to SIU. Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

DePue: Majoring in what?

Bastas: Liberal arts. That basically was it.

DePue: Okay, I'm going to major in liberal arts because I don't know what the heck I want to do?

Bastas: That's right, yeah. I'm not sure what I want to do.

DePue: Did you have a scholarship?

Bastas: No, no. I paid tuition.

DePue: Now, you mentioned both your brother and sister were going to school as well. Did your brother go to school on the GI Bill?

Bastas: Yes, he did. He went to a business school in Chicago and got out of that school as a court reporter and stayed with that the rest of his life.

DePue: And your sister went to school as well? College?

Bastas: Right. No, business school in Chicago. And she worked for law firms and Kraft Food Company.

DePue: The only thing I'm going after here is that the family was doing at least well enough to make sure you two, your sister and you had opportunities.

Bastas: Right, right. Yes, that's right. I'm sure that during the time that my brother and sister were away, that they worked. Like Marshall Fields, I know they both had jobs there and things like that.

DePue: How long did you stay at SIU?

Bastas: I stayed there until, let's see, '50. Well, I started at SIU right after I graduated from high school, and I was there until 1951 in April.

DePue: You were at SIU, then, when the Korean War started in June of 1950.

Bastas: Yes.

DePue: That would have been summertime.

Bastas: Right. I was in school at the time. I'll tell you what. I remember this very well. I was in school at the time that Harry Truman was the president and he made a statement which really got him in big trouble. Of course, I think Harry made quite a few statements that probably got himself in trouble. The one that I remember very well, especially when I was at Southern Illinois University, was he had made a speech somewhere. I really wasn't into politics then. I didn't pay too much attention to it. But he made a speech somewhere and made the statement that the Marine Corps was nothing but a big propaganda machine. And of course he caught all kinds of hell for that. (laughter)

DePue: Well, you know, he was an Army guy. What did you expect him to say?

Bastas: Yeah, yeah. I know, I know. But I love that, boy, I thought, "Oh man, would you open your mouth and make a statement like that?" And especially with war that has either just happened, or one's looming.

DePue: Do you remember the day that the North Koreans invaded the South, and the next couple days that we decided we were going to go there and fight?

Bastas: Yeah. In fact, I remember it was a Sunday morning. I was a member of the First Christian Church, and about three or four of us guys about the same age came out of church that morning and said, "Did you hear the news?" This is 1950, June. "What's that?" "The North Koreans invaded South Korea." Of course everybody said, "Oh shit, here we go." So we knew. We knew. We all knew; in fact, all of us guys of that same age group said, "Uh-oh, we're in big trouble, boys."

DePue: Did you know where Korea even was?

Bastas: I think I remember one of the Withers twins, a couple of the guys from Benton that were in my sister's class or somewhere in that area, had gone to Korea in the Army back in '46 or '47. All I remember was that was somewhere in the far east. That's all I knew. I didn't really know where it was exactly.

DePue: But come that fateful June day in 1950...

Bastas: I learned very quickly where Korea was. I knew exactly where it was. I looked it up on the map. I made sure I knew where it was.

DePue: But it sounds like you stayed in school at least for another year after that?

Bastas: I stayed in school until probably, I think it was April. Well, actually January and February and March, and then April came and I decided that I was getting close to being drafted. I didn't have the best grades in the world because I kind of fooled around, you know, at college. (laughter) You know what I'm talking about. Certain classes were great. Other classes, eh, you just went through the motions, it seemed like. I knew that my draft board had indicated that my name was coming up, and I had seen two of my classmates who had been drafted into the Army. One of them was in the Air Force; he was in Korea a bomb or something went off and his foot was blown off.

Another guy came back. His name was Leo Powinski. He was drafted in the Army and he was over there. "Bob, do you know what those Chinese are like? They are wild. We were camped out one night and here they came, blowing horns and yelling and screaming, and they overran us; I was shot through the arm with a machine gun." It shattered his arm. He said, "Luckily, I lived through it; they got me to the medics and we got out and I came back home, and I got…" I think he said some kind of a disability through the Army. I'd seen these two guys, and I thought, You know what? I think maybe I'd better think about joining something. (laughter) And not the Army or the Marines. (laughter)

DePue: Did you get any advice from your mother?

Bastas: Yes. I asked her, "What do you think I ought to do, Mom? Do you think I ought to join the Army, or join the Air Force or the Navy, or just wait and get drafted?" Her answer was, "I can't tell you what to do, because if I told you one thing and something would happen to you, then I'd have the guilt of knowing that I told you the wrong thing. So you're going to have to make up your own mind." My mother was very good, when I go back and I think about it, that here was a woman who was left as a widow and her thirteen-year-old son was going to have to finish up, go through high school and all that. She was very good. In fact, I have to report one incident which was very good, shows the, I don't know…

DePue: The character of your mother?

Bastas: …the character, and brilliance, really, when you think about it. You know, you talk about child psychology now. There used to be these little pornographic books that you could buy called eight-pagers—somebody of my age knows what I'm talking about—and they were drawings of pornographic material, people involved in acts. (laughter)

DePue: We don't need to go too much farther than that.

Bastas: Yeah, that's all I need to tell you. Anyway, I had one of those in my pocket, and this is while I was in high school. She found it, and of course she confronted me with it. She said, "You know what? I think it would be a good idea if you don't carry this kind of stuff around with you anymore. Because if somebody else found it, it would probably look pretty bad. So if I were you, Bob, I wouldn't do this anymore." That was the entire lecture. Nothing else ever after. That made a great impression on me never to do anything that stupid again.

DePue: Were you a church-going family?

Bastas: Yes. I was a member of the First Christian Church.

DePue: Was your dad?

Bastas: Okay, Dad was a Greek Orthodox. At night, he would say his prayer and he'd cross himself; of course the Orthodox religion is from right to left, not left to right in the cross. And he would say his prayers every night. But he was of the opinion that as long as you went to church where your mother went—because there were no Greek Orthodox churches in the area—that was all he cared about. That was fine with him. So he was very good friends with the Catholic priest because the guy used to come in and they would talk religious things. I remember that very well, yeah.

DePue: So your father had quite the intellectual streak in him, it sounds like.

Bastas: Yeah, I think so. Well, he tried. I don't know, when you say intellectual, you mean not being narrow-minded. Yes, yeah, he was definitely that way, yeah, and well-read too, yeah.

DePue: Let's go back to joining the Air Force. Somewhere along in the process, you decided, Okay, my mom says it's up to me. What led you to the Air Force?

Bastas: Well, I guess my brother's being in the Army Air Corps probably was a big influence on me, and I thought, "Well, that sounds like the place. That's what I should do."

DePue: When you talked to the recruiter, did you say, "This is what I want to do in the Air Force," or did you let him decide that?

Bastas: Well, to tell you the truth, I don't remember that much about it. I think I was just, you know, "Hey, let's get this done." There was a group of us that ended up going to St. Louis to the induction center. I don't remember how many, four or five, six guys from my area.

DePue: What happened after that? What happened in basic training then, when you went?

Bastas: Basic training was at Lackland Air Force Base. I left St. Louis, Missouri on the Sunshine Special out of Union Station; it took an overnight trip to get to San Antonio, Texas. Got off the train, and that was when I realized, You are now in the

military, when the guy says, "All right you -," what did he call us? I can't remember. Some derogatory thing. (laughter) All line up, and here we go. So then we were transported to Lackland Air Force Base in some kind of a six by six. I don't remember now. Who knows what it was? Or it could have even been a bus. I don't recall. That's where I spent eight weeks in basic training. In our basic training there were so many guys who joined up, we didn't have barracks. We were in tents. We had no mattresses. I mean, we had the mattresses but no sheets, no pillowcases. We had an Army blanket and we stayed in our fatigues because it was cold at night down in Texas at that time of year, in April, and all I remember was marching and marching and marching. We even had classes in tents because there were so many guys there that they just didn't have enough barracks for everybody.

DePue: What time was this, what month?

Bastas: This would have been April and May of 1951. Yeah, April/May of 1951.

DePue: Now at this time, I would think you're paying pretty close attention to what's going on in Korea.

Bastas: Yes.

DePue: What was the mood of the folks who were in basic training?

Bastas: Well, you know, we were all young, and everybody's trying to say, "Oh well. If we stay with these groups, we may end up not having to go to Korea." Because we weren't too happy about what was going on. None of us were. I think at that time, everybody was kind of upset with Truman's version of the police action. (laughter)

DePue: If I can get my timeline right, you're at basic training. The line had just finally stabilized, but no one could say the United States Military had been doing well up to this point.

Bastas: No, in fact that was about the time period when they were pushed all the way down to Pusan, and you know, they had a perimeter around Pusan.

DePue: Well, that would have been the middle of '50.

Bastas: Middle '50? Okay, well it seemed like everything was going on so fast then. That was probably why I thought about that.

DePue: That time frame, the spring of 1951, the Chinese did push the Americans, the UN forces south of Seoul again, and then they gradually were able to fight their way north of Seoul. But that took some time.

Bastas: Right.

DePue: Do you recall MacArthur being fired?

Bastas: Yes. Yes, I remember that.

DePue: Was that a topic of discussion in basic?

Bastas: Oh yeah. Yeah, I'm sure we all talked about that.

DePue: What was the opinion?

Bastas: Well, I don't know. I think it was kind of a mixed opinion. There were a lot of people who thought MacArthur was kind of a gung-ho type guy, although I don't think they were that thrilled with Truman either. So, you know.

DePue: What was your opinion of those two gentlemen?

Bastas: Truman and MacArthur?

DePue: Yeah.

Bastas: You know, at the time I was not too thrilled with Truman. But then on the other hand, I knew from what I had read about MacArthur, he was kind of a pushy guy too. So it was probably kind of a mixed feeling, and probably not really having a real strong opinion one way or the other.

DePue: When did you find out what your specific military specialty was going to be?

Bastas: I'm trying to think. There was something in here on this old discharge paper. Well, I don't know if I have it in there. I don't remember the papers now. Anyway, we had to take tests, proficiency tests. I scored, like, out of a ten, seven on most of them. Mechanical, I wasn't too good, or any of the other things. So I ended up with an assignment to go to a clerk typist school in Maryville, Missouri, Northwestern State Teacher's College.

DePue: Okay.

Bastas: You know, when you get to the details of this, I'm not exactly sure except after those proficiency tests—I guess that's what they call them. I can't remember now. That was when they decided, maybe this would be the best thing for you to do.

DePue: So your specialty then was clerk typist?

Bastas: Right. What was the designation? AFSC. Air Force Specialty Code.

DePue: We're looking at some of your records here.

Bastas: Yeah, some of these old orders. AFSC.

DePue: It was 70250.

Bastas: That's it, yeah. That's the—yeah, 7025—well, they have here 70230. This was from Continental Air Command at Mitchell Field, New York. This was to go there. And then they might have changed the number a little bit, but not that much.

DePue: That's just the kind of mysterious detail that makes all the civilians go mind numb, I think, after a while.

Bastas: Yeah, because you listen to all those different nomenclatures of different—that's another word I've always loved. Nomenclature. (laughter)

DePue: It's a military word for sure.

Bastas: Absolutely, absolutely.

DePue: Did you request to go to Korea?

Bastas: No. Well, okay, after I got through tech school at Northwestern State Teacher's College, Maryville, Missouri—which was really a great experience, a great group of guys, a great group of instructors that were there—we did basically typing and learning how to do work in the orderly rooms making up orders, that kind of thing, 201 files, the files that were on every—

DePue: Yeah, personnel files.

Bastas: Personnel files, right. Anything that had to do with being in a headquarters group or a squadron somewhere, including the officers and enlisted men's records, personnel records. After leaving there, they assigned me to the Continental Air Command in Mitchell Field, Long Island, New York.

DePue: So did you think that's where you were going to end up the war, then?

Bastas: I had no idea. When they said, "You're going to Mitchell Field, Long Island," I had no idea what the situation was going to be. There was a fellow named Eugene Marks that I went through this school with, and he was from Burnett, Texas. He had a 1949 or 1950 Ford robin egg blue convertible; he came up from Burnett, Texas and picked me up, and we went to New York in that vehicle. Here we are, here's a boy from Texas and a boy from southern Illinois, headed for the big city.

DePue: You're thinking, Man, this war isn't so bad after all.

Bastas: (laughter) No, no, it's not bad at all. We were just driving along, enjoying ourselves. We got to Manhattan, we crossed Manhattan and, let's see, we go through the Queens Midtown Tunnel. I still remember this to this day. We were in that convertible and in our uniforms; we're driving along, and we pay our toll and we go out on Long Island. Somehow we get turned around and we come back through the tunnel again; we pay a toll to go back through and then we turn around and we come back again. Well, we did this about three times. By the third time, the toll booth taker said, "What in the hell are you guys doing?" We said, "Well, we're

not sure. We're supposed to go to Mitchell Field in Hampstead, Long Island. And we seem to get turned around." He said, "Well, what you're doing is you're not taking this exit, you're taking the other exit, and what that does is it just turns you right around and you're coming back again." So Eugene was going to pay the toll, and the guy said, "Oh, forget it. You've been here about three or four times already." (laughter) So we finally got to the place where we were supposed to be.

DePue: You boys aren't from around here, are you? (laughter)

Bastas: No, no, no. You greenhorns.

DePue: I haven't asked you if there was a girl in your life by this time. Anybody—

Bastas: There had been in high school, you know.

DePue: But nobody you're writing to?

Bastas: Nobody I'm writing to at this time. I met a gal that I dated for quite a while when I was stationed at Mitchell Field. I can't remember her last name. All I remember was Gloria, and we dated for about a year. But it never went anywhere.

DePue: Well, my guess is you didn't stay at Mitchell Field for too long.

Bastas: Stayed there until, let's see, I'm trying to think, when did I get my orders to go, the Continental Air Command orders? Let me see. Is this it? Yes, I think this is it. Yes. Nope, that's not it. Let me see right quick. DePue: Well, tell us how you ended up in Korea, then.

Bastas: Okay. It was sometime in July or somewhere along in '52. Yeah. Our sergeant, the personnel sergeant of our squadron... I should say not our squadron, our communications, because I was with the Air Command, Air Material Command. In fact, I worked in an office there with mostly officers; Lieutenant Colonel Sansone, I remember him very well. A Major Bennett, I think, was the man's name. I remember him; he was a red-headed gentleman I worked for in the office. We were the headquarters of that Air Material Command, and we had all the different orders that were coming in and out of the offices, and the different logistics that were going on.

Anyway, then the staff sergeant or the first sergeant of our group called me in and said, "You've got an assignment for overseas." Well, this would have been in July. It probably was the first of July of '52. He said, "You're going to go overseas." I said, "Well, where am I going, Sarge?" He says, "Well, you're going to go to MATS Pacific." That's Military Air Transport Service Pacific. I said, "Well, where will that be?" He said, "Well hell, I don't know. That could be anywhere in the Pacific Ocean." I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "Well, it could be the Aleutian Islands, the Johnson Islands, Hawaii, the Philippines, Japan, or Korea." And I said to him, "Well, can I get out of this assignment?" He said, "Well, let's see, You know what? I can let you out of this assignment, but I'm telling you right

now, the next assignment for overseas that comes up, I don't give a damn where it is. You are going." I said, "On second thought, I think I'll take this." He said, "Okay." So I was on my way then.

DePue: He knew how to sell the deal, didn't he?

Bastas: Yes, he did. Very well. Because I had an idea that the next assignment could be a very bad assignment, I thought.

DePue: Thinking you could go anywhere in the Pacific, were your thoughts, Well, this is probably Korea?

Bastas: No. That really did not cross my mind then. I just didn't think about that. I thought, Well, the Pacific's a huge ocean. There's a lot of places out there. So I just figured that was the thing to do. I had a delay en route, came home for approximately thirty days, maybe a little less than that, I think, then I ended up at Camp Stoneman, California.

DePue: Okay, which is a port of debarkation, I believe.

Bastas: Right, it was. In fact, it was Camp Pendleton at that time, if my memory serves me right. It was actually a Marine base, but it was a repo depot at that time, a place for Army and Air Force and Marines; who else was there I have no idea. There were a lot of different branches of the service that went overseas.

DePue: Tell us about being shipped overseas.

Bastas: Well, I got the orders saying that you're going to go to—I know what it was! I remember I went in and there was another sergeant I talked to, because we were on the base there a couple of days before I was called in to talk to this processing sergeant, I guess you'd call it. He said, "Well, you're going to K-14." I said, "Well, Sarge, now just a minute. What is K-14, what's that stand for?" He said, "Well, it stands for Seoul, Korea." (laughter) I said, "Where?" He said, "Seoul, Korea." I said, "Oh, okay. when am I going?" Well," he said, "you're going to ship out on the morning of…" whatever date it was. It would have been, I assume by looking at this old card that I sent to my mother, would have been the nineteenth of September, 1952.

DePue: Tell us about the trip across the ocean then.

Bastas: All right. Well, I was put on a ferry boat. We had our duffle bag and the carry-on bag we had, and we all got on a ferry boat out of, I think it was Pittsburgh, California, where Camp Stoneman was located, and we went up a canal or something to the San Francisco Bay. There, we got on our ship, the USNS General Nelson M. Walker. Now, this was definitely a troop ship and there were probably around 4,000 of us on there: Air Force and Army, and also ROK troops, Korean troops. Those were ROK officers, I think, who were on this.

DePue: That had trained in the United States?

Bastas: That had trained in the United States and they were going back, yeah.

DePue: ROK standing for Republic of Korea.

Bastas: Right. I don't know how many of them. Probably about 500 or 400 of them. This ship was harbored in San Francisco Bay. I remember we left early in the morning and by the time it became light, we were passing Alcatraz and on our way to the debarkation area. Then we loaded on the ship that day, sometime either early morning or early afternoon, and we didn't leave until, I think, the next day. So that would have been the nineteenth of September, so it would have been like the twentieth of September, I think, that's when we left.

DePue: Did you have smooth sailing?

Bastas: (laughter) Yeah, it was smooth, all right. You've got 4,000 troops, and you've got bunks, either four or five stacked on top of each other all over the place. I was lucky that I got the top bunk and was not too far from where I had a ventilation system going, so it wasn't too bad. The ship itself had to be old enough that it transported guys in World War I, because they had wooden railings. On those wooden railings, they had carvings like JB, September, 1917. So we knew that we were on an old ship. There were probably 200 sailors, 300 sailors, and then of course the naval officers. I don't remember how many they had. Of course, we were in our enlisted men's area anyway. We didn't have the same area that the officers had. They were more up on topside and we were down. I was down probably in the first, I think, first or second level.

I remember going out of San Francisco at night, because yeah, we left maybe that next day late in the evening. As we left San Francisco, I was down on the fantail and there was an amusement park off on the left-hand side of the Bay as we were going out, and I could see all the lights. I'm thinking to myself, I wonder if I'll ever see this place again—that was first thing in my mind I was thinking—because I don't know where I'm going or what's going to happen. Of course then we were hitting the ground swells, and some of these poor guys right from then on were seasick. It was terrible.

DePue: Just leaving San Francisco?

Bastas: Just leaving San Francisco. I thought, "Oh, this is going to be a long trip." As I remember, we left San Francisco and we went a long way out, along the coast up towards the Aleutians and then down to Yokohama, Japan. It took about either thirteen or fifteen days. I remember crossing the International Date Line, and I remember the guys getting sick, throwing up all over the place. It was really a bad, bad scene. Luckily, I was not sick. I don't know how I stayed from not getting seasick. I remember we ate in the chow hall standing up; of course, you know, the ship goes back and forth. We were in pretty good weather most of the time. I remember getting near the Aleutian Islands when we saw some whales. Then

coming down that way, we ran into one day of a typhoon, which was a very scary experience because we just kind of sailed into the wind and it was up and down and up and down and up and down.

I remember this one fellow, his last name was Kirschoff. He was from Lombard, Illinois, and he was in one of the bunks right below me. He just couldn't even get out of his bunk, and I would go to chow and bring him back some Saltine crackers and maybe some kind of a juice or something so he would at least get up and go to the john and come back. It was a bad situation. But you know, you got so many troops. Then I had a job while I was on there. One of the jobs I had was to sweep down the fantail with the crew. (laughter) They'd blow the whistle, and "Man your brooms." I asked one of the sailors one time, I said, "How far are we from land?" And he, with his smart answer, said, "Seven miles." "Seven miles?" He said, "Yeah, straight down." (laughter) I said, "Thanks a lot."

DePue: That's reassuring, isn't it?

Bastas: Yeah, yeah, it was real reassuring. But then we sailed into Yokohama, Japan. I remember the trip into Yokohama, and that made a big impression on me because the ships that were sunk during World War II, some of them were still in the harbor.

DePue: Could you see them?

Bastas: Yeah, we could see their masts or the superstructure, and the pilot's ship would guide us around and through that harbor to where we got off the ship.

DePue: How long did you spend in Yokohama?

Bastas: Not very long. When we got off the ship, we went to these big metal roofed areas where trains pulled in, troop trains, and we got on those trains. They were bunk trains so that you had a bunk and that was your seat. We left from Yokohama and went all the way across the island of Honshu to an old Japanese air base called Iwakuni. During the war it was a Japanese air base. And that was where I was processed to go to Korea. I don't remember, I was only there like two days, three days. And by the way, on the way over I had a book, *Mister Roberts*. I still remember that to this day.

DePue: A fitting book to be reading.

Bastas: Yeah, really it was a great story, and I thought it was great. I really enjoyed that.

DePue: From Iwakuni Air Base I assume you got another troop ship to head to Korea?

Bastas: Got on a plane.

DePue: You flew in?

Bastas: Yeah, flew in to Seoul City Air Base. Let's see. I don't know the date, but you figure this was September. We left the next day or the day after that; it was 15 days over, so we're talking about September then. Anyway, we flew on a C54 box car. I think that's what they called it. I don't remember. There were a few, there were about forty of us on that plane.

DePue: Which would have been a late World War II plane.

Bastas: Yeah, double-wing cargo plane. I mean, double-tail cargo plane. Excuse me.

DePue: Tell me about your first impressions then, landing in Korea, walking off that aircraft.

Bastas: This would have probably been early October, like first or second, somewhere in there. I don't know. I got off the aircraft, and of course all of us are greenhorns and we're looking around and thinking, "What in the world are we doing here?" (laughter) You don't know where you are. We were taken from there to Eighth Army Headquarters, which was in Seoul, and that's where we got our orders then to go to wherever, whatever unit we were going to go to.

I remember going across the Han River Bridge from Seoul City Air Base into the town. We were in a personnel carrier, like there was only about six or eight guys in this smaller personnel carrier. As we were crossing the bridge we saw either—I don't remember whether it was one or two because I'd never seen anybody hanging—two bodies from the trestle right near the Han River vehicle bridge. This was a railroad trestle. They had either one or two guys hanging from there, I can't remember. I yelled up front to the guy, I think he could have been Air Force, could have been Army, I don't remember. I said, "What in the hell is that about?" He said, "Oh, those were infiltrators they caught and they tried them and hung them." I said, "Fast trial, wasn't it?" (laughter) I said to myself, "What in the hell am I doing here?" (laughter) It was a rude awakening. I'd never seen anything like that in my life.

DePue: What was the condition of Seoul?

Bastas: Seoul was a city that was a total wreck. It was bad. A lot of bombed out buildings, pock marks from bullet holes. I remember the streetcars and the buses; they all seemed to have warped frames or something, because they seemed like the dog that you see with his hind legs over here and his front legs over here walking.

DePue: A little lopsided?

Bastas: Loaded with people, and the windows were out because, you know, they'd probably been shot up.

DePue: Was there a lot of rubble still in the street?

Bastas: A lot of rubble, yeah, quite a bit of rubble. But they tried to clear it up as best they could. You could tell there had been a war going on, that's for sure. And the bridge itself, it was amazing. The history was, as I understand, that the bridge was built by the Japanese. They had hit that bridge at least once or twice and they had put planks and boards; the superstructure seemed to still be there even though they had tried to blow it up and it just—

DePue: They, in this case, could have been either the North Koreans or the Americans, or the Americans or the Chinese.

Bastas: Or the Chinese. I have no idea. Because they'd been back and forth across that bridge at least two or three times anyway.

DePue: Yes. Seoul changed hands four times.

Bastas: Four times. Well, it could have been four times then, I don't know.

DePue: The unit that you ended up with?

Bastas: I was assigned from there to the 1993rd AACS Mobile Communication Squadron, Kimpo Air Base.

DePue: Mobile Communication Squadron?

Bastas: Mm-hmm.

DePue: AACS?

Bastas: Yeah, it stood for Airways and Air Communications Squadron.

DePue: That's quite a mouthful.

Bastas: Isn't it, though? Yeah, that's why they said AACS.

DePue: Yeah. What did you end up doing?

Bastas: Well, I was in the orderly room working in the squadron's headquarters, which was at Kimpo. I ended up in security in the section where we had the safe with all the secret and confidential files. I worked with a chief warrant officer; he was my immediate supervisor.

DePue: Was he a crusty old World War II vet?

Bastas: He was a crusty old World War II vet. He always had a flask of whiskey in his pocket. Each morning it would be cold, and I can still remember him saying, "Well, Bastas, how about, I think you maybe need a little shot to warm you up." I said, "No, chief, that's okay. I'm fine, no thank you." (laughter) He'd have a little swig.

DePue: Do you remember his name?

Bastas: Gosh, I can't remember it now. That's a long time ago.

DePue: Was this the S2 section then? Or S1?

Bastas: Well, all I remember was, we had secret files and all the confidential files on all the guys who had real bad personnel records. The major, who was the commanding officer, I still remember him to this day saying to me, "All right, Bastas, let me tell you this. You're in a section where we either have secret or confidential files. If I hear any of the information in that section coming out anywhere that anybody else knows about it, you know whose ass it's going to be?" I said, "Yes sir, I understand." He was a very strict military man. No fooling around.

DePue: What did the Airways and Air Communications Squadron do?

Bastas: They were the command center for all the control towers, ground control approaches, and all the homer sites in South Korea on all the different air bases.

DePue: Homer sites?

Bastas: Homer sites meaning these were electronic—since I'm not technical enough to know exactly what—but they were the ones that sent out the signals that guided the planes to the base that they were headed for.

DePue: So the aircraft would home back in on those sites.

Bastas: Yeah, home on these homer sites, right; they would be out in the middle of nowhere in South Korea. I went to one of them one time, and it was only manned by about ten different guys; they had two German shepherd dogs, they had a barbed wire fence around the compound, and so they were pretty well isolated from anybody else.

DePue: And your specific duties were just to do paperwork and to maintain these documents?

Bastas: Right. The chief told me, he said, "Now, if we have to leave, you have to take that phosphorous grenade and throw it into that safe and burn these documents up." I said, "Well, I can do that very easily, as long as I don't have to carry the safe."

DePue: It sounds like your job was pretty safe compared to those Army and Marine grunts you were trying to avoid.

Bastas: Oh yeah. Those guys, yes. We were sixteen miles from the front. I never got up there. I was within maybe five miles of the front one time, but at night you could hear things going on. Even sixteen miles away you could hear artillery or the planes from Okinawa, B-29s coming in and bombing late at night.

DePue: Was your facility ever bombed? Were you ever under any kind of threat?

Bastas: Well, we were bombed by what they called Bedcheck Charlies. They said they were Russian Yaks, small propeller-driven planes. But either the Chinese or the North Koreans were pilots, and they had no accuracy. They had like, what, 200, 300-pound bombs they'd kick out. Our fighters, the F-86s, were based at Kimpo and they were in revetments where they had the sandbags piled up on each side so that if one plane would get hit, the other one wouldn't get hit. They would come over at night, and if we had lights on they would try to get to that area. But they were so inaccurate, it was pitiful. Of course the worst part of it was being in tents, that you're on a cot that sets up about this high, because that was the whole time…

DePue: About two, three feet high?

Bastas: Yeah, we were all in tents, all of our whole squadron was in tents. They had it fixed up so that they had a wooden frame, but the cover and everything were tents. If they'd hit in that area, my God, I don't know how many guys would have been killed. We had sandbag bunkers where we could jump into when we'd hear the air raid sirens go off, and they'd always come in, like, at two o'clock in the morning.

DePue: Bedcheck Charlies.

Bastas: Bedcheck Charlies, yup. And you would hear the siren go off. The Marines were around the perimeter of the base at Kimpo; they had quad-fifty-caliber machine guns mounted on half-tracks put up on mounds, dirt mounds, so that they'd be pointed into the air. You could hear those going off, the crack, crack, crack, crack, crack, crack, crack off in the distance; you could hear it. In back of us was either, I don't know if it was Army or Marines, one had a forty-millimeter cannon. Well, of course, all I could remember is whomp, whomp, whomp, whomp. They'd put another clip in. Whomp, whomp, whomp, whomp.

DePue: But I would guess that sounds pretty comforting to you.

Bastas: Yeah, that's right. Well, it did, because at least you knew somebody was trying to get these idiots out of the air. Like I said, they never really hit anything. One or two of the guys, I think, were killed at one time, and it was only by accident because they had no idea where they were dropping these things. So then they tried to send up the F-94-Fs, I think it was, to shoot these down. The F-94-Fs had radar. One of them crashed because they would come in at a low altitude and they would home in on one of these guys and then they couldn't pull up quick enough. So then the Marines sent down some old Corsairs from World War II.

DePue: Pretty nimble fighter.

Bastas: They had them fixed up with rockets and of course their machine guns, and towards the end they shot down two or three of them that way. They traced, they got them down to low altitudes and they shot them down.

DePue: Sounds like a pretty dangerous place to be having dogfights though, because a lot of those bullets are going to strike the ground.

Bastas: Yeah, yeah, I know. Well, of course they would be away from our base when they'd be doing this.

DePue: Okay. One of the things that fascinated me, you came in the other day and showed me all of this propaganda. Tell me about that propaganda, how you got your hands on it. What was it for?

Bastas: Okay, I'm not sure which base I was at. I was stationed at Kimpo and then another base south of there called Osan, and both of them had fighter groups and also transportation groups. I forgot to say, at Kimpo they also had either A-20s or B-26 modified planes that would fly over at night and take, I guess, infrared pictures of troop concentrations. I met a major who was a pilot on one of those planes at Kimpo and he was an old Benton boy. His name was Cavalli; his father was the Cook's Beer distributor for my dad. He was a major at that time in the Air Force and he flew one of these planes which would go over and take pictures of the troop concentrations. Then there was this other group that had either A-26s or B-26s, I can't remember what designation they were and I can't remember where. I think it was probably Osan when I saw this. They would load up bombs that were—I don't know how they detonated—but they would go over troop concentrations and drop these bombs from probably high altitude; they would blow open and they'd drop these leaflets on the North Korean and Chinese troops. And I was interested in that. I don't know why, but it just kind of intrigued me. So I went over and talked to some of the guys who were the crew members on the planes, and I said, "Have you got any of those leaflets? I'd like to look at them." The guy hauled out a whole bunch of them, so I just grabbed a handful of them. I don't know why, but I kept them all these years.

DePue: So we could have them? We can put them in our collection.

Bastas: Right.

DePue: What we're looking at here is propaganda leaflets. These are the things that would have been dropped over the North, either on the Chinese and/or North Koreans. I think I mentioned to you, Bob, I've seen ones that were delivered by the other side to our troops as well on the front lines.

Bastas: But you said you'd never seen these before?

DePue: No, no.

Bastas: I don't know why I kept them. I just thought they were very interesting. I was intrigued by them.

DePue: Do you know if they were effective at all?

Bastas: I remember towards the end of the war, sometime just about a week or two before the truce was signed at Panmunjom, that a North Korean pilot flew a Mig-15 into the Air Base and they escorted him in. The fighters went up.

DePue: He defected?

Bastas: He defected. In other words, he brought a whole plane with him.

DePue: How do you do that without getting shot down in the process?

Bastas: Well, I think what happened was they had communications with this pilot. He may have spoken English, or they had a translator and he told what his intentions were, what he wanted to do, and they sent up a couple of F-86s or more after him to escort him into the base.

DePue: So this was a North Korean or a Chinese?

Bastas: I don't know which it was. One of the two. He could have even been Chinese, I don't know.

DePue: Okay. What were your impressions of the Korean people and the countryside? It sounds like you got off base enough to see some of Seoul City and the countryside.

Bastas: Right. We went into Seoul. I think I told you this earlier, that we also sponsored an orphanage because there were a lot kids that were left without their mother or their dad. I don't know what happened. The war. I have no idea. Anyway, it was, I think, a church-affiliated group that was running it. I'm not exactly sure. But I know we helped sponsor it by putting money into it. We went to visit it one time and of course the kids were little guys. It was really a sad situation. They were all over us.

DePue: Was it kind of a hand-to-mouth existence they had?

Bastas: I'm sure it was, yeah. Well, the people in general, I remember them, you know, the water buffalo and planting rice. I could see them out in the field, because the fields were right next to Kimpo outside of the perimeter of the barbed wire fences.

DePue: Did the place have an aroma?

Bastas: Oh yeah. Yeah, because they fertilize their fields with human fecal matter, so you'd get the smell, especially when the spring came and they'd start their planting. I remember the one thing I saw that really impressed me was thinking that, "Boy, am I glad I'm in the service with the United States," when I saw a Korean soldier walking across a rice paddy. I could see him off in the distance, and I think the other was a Korean officer. When the soldier didn't salute him, the officer was carrying a rifle and hit him in the head with the gun butt, knocking him down. The guy got up and saluted and that was the end of that. But I was thinking, Boy, am I glad I'm in this service. I mean, at least if I don't salute an officer, I might get some kind of a penalty but I won't get bashed in the head.

DePue: What did you think of the Korean people then, the ones that you encountered?

Bastas: We went into Seoul City and I remember how impoverished everybody was. Nobody had any money, any means. I didn't have any problem with the people. The people were always very nice as far as I knew.

DePue: Were they friendly?

Bastas: Yeah, they seemed to be friendly to us.

DePue: Did you ever wonder whether, I'm talking to somebody who's sympathetic to the North, or a North Korean?

Bastas: Well, you didn't have that really close contact with the people very much. I never had any problem with anybody. Especially the people that I was in contact with more than anything would be the people that were working on the base; we had a lot of indigenous personnel that would come in and work. We had a house boy that worked in our tent. Everybody had a house boy, a young kid that would work for you. We'd all pitch in money to help them or we would give him food. We'd get like K rations and we'd eat some and some of it, we wouldn't. So we'd give him the cans and he'd take it with him. A lot of times when they'd go through the gate, they'd have a Korean soldier or Korean policeman there that would give him a rough time for bringing stuff off the base. I was really upset with that. These guys are trying to just get by in the world, and they give them a rough time. We had a Korean barber. I had a picture in there of a couple of guys, I think it was probably in Osan, that worked in the headquarters, that were such nice guys, just really genuinely good people.

DePue: How about some of the other United Nations forces? Did you see some of those folks?

Bastas: Yeah. Coming through Kimpo; a lot of forces came through there because they were headed for the front. They would eat at our chow hall. I was amazed at the Air Force cooks that manned our chow hall at Kimpo. They cooked on gasoline stoves. It was amazing what kind of food they cooked. They did such an excellent job. We would have Australians, Greek, Turks, British army troops would come through there and get their meals before they went up north, so we saw a lot of different United Nation troops coming through. I remember we went to town one time in Seoul with a couple of Australian soldiers. We had a lot of fun because I enjoyed their accent.

DePue: Any of the other guys, impressions that stuck with you? I would think you'd especially be paying attention to the Greeks and the Turks coming through.

Bastas: Well, I remember the Turks had these big curved knives in their boots. They had huge knives they carried in their boots. That's all I remember about the Turks, I remember them coming through.

DePue: Did some of the other UN forces have a reputation?

Bastas: The Turks had a reputation of slitting the Chinese throats. I heard that story from one of the GIs that came down from the front and knew a buddy who was in our group; he came down to stay all night with us. He said that they had the reputation, that the Chinese knew who these guys were because they would sneak in at night and catch the Chinese trying to sleep; they'd catch them and slit their throats with these knives that I probably saw. Kind of stealthy, in-the-night type of stuff.

DePue: A good reason not to grow up in Greece at the time, maybe.

Bastas: Yeah. (laughter) Probably so.

DePue: This was also the first war where the United States military was integrated. What's your impression of the integrated military?

Bastas: I had no problem with it; in fact, one of the guys in my tent was a guy named Benny. He was a big, black fellow from Georgia or somewhere like that. Benny got into an argument with some Detroit black fellows; they were calling him an Uncle Tom, a traitor, you know, "You're always hanging out with the white guys," and called him all kinds of names. Once Benny was going to go out from our tent; he had his bayonet with him, and he wanted to go after these guys. We all stopped him and said, "Benny, these guys are not worth that. Leave them alone. They're just antagonizers. They probably have done this all their life. This is not the first time. And they don't like it because you get along with us and we get along with you, so if that's the way it is, just leave the guys alone. All you'll do is end up killing one of them and you'll end up with a criminal record. For what? Nothing." So...

DePue: Benny was an enlisted man just like you were?

Bastas: Yeah, yeah, like I was.

DePue: Were these other guys Air Force?

Bastas: Yeah, they were Air Force. They were in some other unit around there. I don't know, who knows? Maybe they just liked to agitate. Who knows what the reason was? But actually, I'm just trying to think. There were a lot of guys. In fact, I've got some picture somewhere in there where I was in a control tower and two of the guys that were control tower operators were black. There were a lot of black guys in our unit. So I had no problem at all. I mean, I think everybody in our unit seemed to get along very well.

DePue: Okay. About the officers that you worked with, your impressions of them?

Bastas: Well, as I've said, the major who was the commanding officer was a West Point graduate, as you well know what those kind of people are like, since you are one. The guy that told me whose ass it was going to be if I let any of this information out. Because we had some real interesting people in our unit.

DePue: Interesting in what way, Bob?

Bastas: Well, interesting because of the fact that they had a real colorful life. This one guy was an officer who had been busted down to an enlisted man's rank; he had all kinds of sexual proclivities and different things that had happened in his life. And there were others who were just totally screw-ups, you know, who had their special 201 files on them.

DePue: Officers?

Bastas: Some officers and some enlisted men, yeah.

DePue: And you guys were the possessors of all of their secrets.

Bastas: Possessors of all those confidential files. And boy, I'll tell you, you just kept your mouth shut. You knew what was going to come if the major ever found out you let any of that out. The others were just secret tech files and other things about our communications organization.

DePue: This major was your commander, though?

Bastas: Right. He was my commanding officer.

DePue: Was he competent?

Bastas: Oh yeah, he was. I liked him. I remember one time when we were having payday; Wedidn't get regular money, we got military script. Sometimes, I would be there working with him on payroll. One day when I was not working but coming through to get paid, there was a guy in front of me who had these long sideburns. He came up in front of the major, and said "Airman So-and-So reporting for duty, sir, for pay" or however they did it. I can't remember how it was. The major looked up and he said, "Where in the hell do you think you are? In the goddamn Mexican Army? I want to see those damn sideburns off your face and you come back later when you've got them gone, and you can come here and get your pay." And the guy did it. He was very strict on how you should dress and how you should look. There was an adjutant who was a captain who was a nice guy, but the poor guy had an alcohol problem, very bad. I remember he was on one of his toots and was found in a ditch someplace around Kimpo. They got him to the hospital, got him sobered up, and then shipped him back to the United States very quickly. I don't know what happened after that.

DePue: His career was over, I suspect.

Bastas: His career was over, I'm sure. I'm sure he was court martialed. I don't know. I never got the details.

DePue: How about some of the NCOs you worked with? Do you have any recollections about them and their abilities?

Bastas: No. The sergeant who was in the regular orderly room seemed like a pretty nice guy. I helped do some of the orders from time to time, but my main contact was with the old chief warrant officer who was a very nice guy. He'd been in the service a long time. I don't know what happened to him, where he went after Korea. I told him one time when we had an alert that the Chinese were going to try to come down, and like I said, the front was only sixteen miles from there. We were told, "You'd better learn how to pack a field pack." Well, you know, being in the Air Force I didn't know how to pack a field pack, but boy, I learned damn quick. I learned how to put that roll together and how to make sure I had the shovel and all these things together, and had my M-30 caliber rifle all ready, had the clips all ready, made sure I had a change of socks, underwear, all that kind of stuff. I told the warrant officer, "Now listen, Chief, if the Chinese come, I know which way is south. Do you?" He said, "Yeah, I sure know where it is." I said, "Well, listen, I'll tell you what. I'm going to try to get on the first truck that's out of here." He kind of laughed at me. I told him, "Now, and another thing, Chief, I want to tell you this: If I get captured, I'm going to tell them everything I know, which I don't know a damn thing. But as my dad used to say, if a man holds you up with a gun, you give him all the money you've got, and if that's not enough offer to write him a check." So I could make up all kinds of stories, I figured, but luckily it never came to pass.

DePue: Did you understand, though, that Seoul was sitting right smack dab in the middle of the main avenue of approach?

Bastas: Yes, yeah.

DePue: That the main supply route ran right through town?

Bastas: Well, in Kimpo you had to come down an old… I remember this road. You came down this road to a little village called Young Dong Po.

DePue: Yup, right across the river from Seoul.

Bastas: That's right, exactly. That was also one of the places where a lot of the girls used to hang out on the street kind of waving at you as you went by, if you wanted to buy any of their services.

DePue: Boy, I'm tempted. (laughter) Well, did you have some liberties in Seoul, or...?

Bastas: Actually, where I went on a couple of R&Rs, to Japan. They'd just take about four days and they'd fly you over. The first one was in Nagoya, Japan. The last one was at Tokyo, off the Tachikawa Air Base. I'm trying to think where I boarded the ship coming back; it was somewhere in Tokyo or Yokohama.

DePue: Okay. You were there that last year of the war, so the line had stabilized, a lot was going on. The war certainly wasn't cooling off, not those last few months. Do you recall a lot of discussion between you and your buddies about the armistice talks going on?

Bastas: Right, yeah, we knew they were going on. We didn't know exactly what was going on, but we knew that they were talking and trying to get the thing settled.

DePue: Did you have an understanding of why the talks were going on as long as they were, the things that were holding agreements up?

Bastas: No, I didn't know all the details. I knew that they were having problems with probably trying to make sure they got all the prisoners repatriated. I'm sure that was some hang up there. I don't know the details.

DePue: Do you recall—I can't remember the specific day, I think this might have been April or May—when Syngman Rhee basically orchestrated the release of all of these prisoners in the south, North Koreans primarily, who wanted to stay in the South? He just opened up the gates of the prison camps and let these guys just slip into the night. Do you recall that incident?

Bastas: I don't recall that incident, but I do recall that Syngman Rhee was not well liked by a lot of South Koreans. The GIs had the feeling too—most of the guys that I talked to or knew—had the feeling that he wasn't much better than the North Korean president, whoever it was. I don't remember now.

DePue: Kim Il-Sung.

Bastas: Kim Il-Sung, okay. Because he was pretty much of a dictator in his own right. At least that was my impression from what everybody was saying. I didn't know about this. In fact, I don't know whether I've even heard that before until you just mentioned that, about releasing the prisoners.

DePue: It was July of 1953 when the armistice was signed. What was your reaction to that?

Bastas: Well, I was happy it was over. I mean, I thought it was great that they didn't have to… At Kimpo or even Osan where they had different fighters, these guys were going up on sorties every day, every day all day long. F-86s out of Kimpo would start in at first light in the morning, and they'd be going all day long it seemed like, coming back late in the afternoon.

DePue: Were you okay that the war basically ended in a draw, in an armistice no less, not a peace agreement?

Bastas: Yeah, I was just kind of glad that the thing was over. I mean, I probably was not that intelligent about what was going on. The GIs that were at the base were pretty well just glad the thing was maybe coming to an end and you might get to go home, that's all.

DePue: Now you mention that you had a slide, and I haven't seen it yet, but a picture of a helicopter bringing in some of the prisoners that were being exchanged.

Bastas: Right. I can't remember whether that was Osan or Kimpo. It doesn't really make any difference. They were bringing them in from all different bases. I remember it was like total chaos because they're bringing in the helicopters. I had my camera, and I didn't get a very good picture of that one where they got the guy off of the helicopter. He's in this white kimono-type outfit, and of course he was either injured or sick; he was one of the repatriated prisoners they were bringing back.

DePue: American or UN prisoner?

Bastas: American, yeah. I think this was a GI, yeah.

DePue: Okay.

Bastas: There were more of them that would come in. I just got that one picture and it was kind of faded, as I remember.

DePue: Do you have any other stories of your time in Korea that you'd like to share with us?

Bastas: Not that I know of. It was a good group of guys I served with. We all were young. I do remember this! We had a headquarters in—I don't know whether it was the Army or the Air Force Cryptographic Office—where we'd go get messages and bring them back to the major. I don't remember this kid's name. The major sent this kid and I in the jeep to go get a classified message. We drove around the end of, was it Kimpo or Osan? Jeez. Boy, it's so long ago. Anyway, it was the base where the cryptograph was. I know. It was Seoul City Air Base; we had to go around the end of the runway. [General Dwight] Eisenhower was there. Eisenhower had come for a visit.

DePue: President Eisenhower?

Bastas: Well, he was not president. President ready-to-be-elected Eisenhower. [President-elect, elected November 1952]

DePue: Okay, so this was in January of '53, somewhere around there.

Bastas: Yeah, I remember this incident, yeah, January, somewhere, whenever he came over there. So here we were down at the end of the runway, and we knew he was around because we saw all the MPs, APs, all the different Secret Service people all everywhere. We were a long way from where he was, but we knew he was going to take off sometime in that time period. We're down at the end of the runway, and each one of us had to go to the john. So there's nothing around there; we're just standing there doing our business off the end of the runway, and here comes this plane flying over. We both waved to Ike [Eisenhower's nickname] saying, you know, "Hey, nice to see you!" We picked our message up and came back to the headquarters after that.

DePue: Well, you don't think an old soldier would have been too shocked by that, do you?

Bastas: Probably not. I don't know if he saw anything. It was kind of late in the evening anyway.

DePue: Did you have an opportunity to see any entertainers that were coming overseas to entertain the troop?

Bastas: I think I saw Walter Pidgeon, the movie star. Yeah. And there were some singers but I can't remember who they were. Not very many. We didn't get that many on the base. They would probably try to go up pretty close to the front area, you know, where the guys were.

I've got to tell you the story about this guy. Basically I remember the fellow that came down was in the Army up on the front line and he came back to visit a buddy in our tent area. We were talking to him, and I said, "What's going on up there?" He said, "It's kind of crazy. You'll go for days and nothing happens. You can hear the Chinese over on the other side of that no-man's-land area playing basketball or volleyball or something over there. You can hear them yelling, and nobody fires, guns don't fire, nobody's firing at anybody. All at once, a rifle will go off or two rifles will go off," then all hell will break loose. They're firing mortars and everything back across the line The worst part of this whole war is, we're up there in, like, bunkers and the zigzag trenches just like in World War I; at night, you hear these gunshots going off." And he said, "You know what it is? It's not somebody firing at somebody else. We're killing rats. I'm telling you, the rats were almost as big as dogs. They'd come into your bunker trying to get into the area where you were." That was very impressive to me, thinking about, Oh man, that had to not be a very good experience.

DePue: Reminder that maybe you were happy to be in the Air Force?

Bastas: Yes, yeah, very much so. Yes.

DePue: When did you actually return to the States?

Bastas: I'm trying to think. It would have been, well, let me see if I can look through the orders here right quick.

DePue: If you got there in October—

Bastas: Yeah, we probably came back, I think it was in August, August or early September because it was about a year from the time I left to the year that I got back. So I was only there probably about a total of ten months, something like that.

DePue: Normal rotation policy, I would have thought, would have brought you back about a year later.

Bastas: Well, I don't know what effect the truce had. That could have been some effect on it. I don't know. Because, you know, then everybody kind of...

DePue: Does that mean that you rotated back sooner than you otherwise would have if you'd come back on points?

Bastas: Probably, yeah. I would assume that would have been the situation. It may have been because of—I don't know what the word would be—not decommissioned but slow down.

DePue: Draw back?

Bastas: Draw back, yeah, draw down. Because, as I've said, the guys that were in the fighter groups were always out on these missions, and then all of a sudden it's done.

DePue: Okay. I'm going to jump ahead a little bit here.

Bastas: Sure.

DePue: I want you to explain the reunion with your family, with your mother especially.

Bastas: Oh gosh. Let's see. Boy, that's really trying to pull a chestnut out of the fire.

DePue: You don't remember much about that?

Bastas: I remember being glad to be at home. I mean, I know that, get back home.

DePue: Did you have any intention, when you left Korea, of staying in the military?

Bastas: Well, when I came back I was on a thirty-day leave or something like that, I think. So I was home for a while, and then I got stationed at Griffiss Air Force Base in Rome, New York.

DePue: Griffith?

Bastas: Griffiss, G-r-i-f-f-i-s-s Air Force Base, Rome, New York. I was with the 27th Fighter Interceptor Squadron in the orderly room.

DePue: Where all the action occurred.

Bastas: Yeah, a lot of action. (laughter) Yeah, there was a lot of action. So that was pretty much where I spent the rest of my time in the service, was at Rome.

DePue: Did you know that last year what you wanted to do with your life??

Bastas: No. I really didn't think too much about it.

DePue: Did you make your way back to college?

Bastas: No. I went to business school, because I guess my brother influenced me when he became a court reporter. I went into court reporting and I stayed in that for about twenty years doing freelance Federal Court, and then the Industrial Commission the

last years that I stayed with that. In ‘81 or ‘79, I think it was, ‘79, somewhere in there, I decided I’d kind of got burned-out: twenty years of listening to all the lawyers. Then I ended up as a hearing officer with the Secretary of State, listening to the lawyers again.

DePue: Okay. Let’s kind of conclude here with some more general questions.

Bastas: Sure.

DePue: How did your experience in Korea change you? How’d your experience in the Air Force change you? Or did it?

Bastas: I remember being in Rome, New York; that was kind of a wind down after being in Korea for a year. I remember, I was in this fighter group and one of the guys that was in that group was a Sergeant Rowe, R-o-w-e. He was in supply, I think. He was a Bataan Death March survivor. I asked one of the officers, “Well now,”—I can’t remember whether he was, yes, he was still a sergeant or a staff sergeant. No, no, maybe he was a warrant officer. I think he was a warrant officer.

DePue: Rowe?

Bastas: Yeah, Rowe. He could have been a warrant officer, I’m not sure. But anyway, he could have been either a sergeant major or a warrant officer. I can’t remember now. But I remember asking one of the officers, “Well, how long is Sergeant Rowe or Chief Rowe going to be in the service?” The officer said, “The only way they can get him out of the service is by Congressional action because of his service record.” I said, “I just wondered.” The guy was a very nice guy. I liked him. I was asked if I would re-up and I told the chief, the sergeant “no.” I said, “You know, I had more time in service overseas, went through the promotion process the last time and I didn’t get promoted. I’m getting out. I’ve had it.”

DePue: The question though was did your time in the military change you in any way.

Bastas: Oh boy, that’s a difficult question. I don't know whether it changed me or not. I don’t think I really changed much. I was impressed with the way things went in the military. I met a lot of really very, very impressive people in the military, I thought. Also I met a lot of jerks. You know, it was just like anything else, really.

DePue: Do you have any regrets about being in the Air Force?

Bastas: No. No, I don’t have any regrets. I never regretted it. I just didn’t feel like I did that much. I guess probably what I’m thinking about is my brother, who was in real combat.

DePue: A tail gunner.

Bastas: Yeah, a tail gunner. I was just a paper jockey, so to speak. But I did a lot of things over there. I’ll tell you, the sergeant that we had when I was stationed there at

Kimpo, if we had things that needed to be done like hauling something somewhere, we would all get recruited for a lot of different activities to do things, like move barrels of oil or whatever. You weren't just always in the office, so to speak. One of the good friends I had was a staff sergeant who was a supply sergeant. Sometimes we'd be hungry at night. We already had been to the chow hall, didn't really get much or didn't like what was there, and he'd always be able to figure out some place he could get some K rations, have some spaghetti and meatballs or something like that. We had these little potbellied stoves that were kerosene stoves. That was what heated our tents. They were in boxes filled with sand, and they did a pretty good job actually. We stayed fairly warm.

DePue: Looking back at it, do you think the United States was in it for the right reasons?

Bastas: Well, at the time, I think we were. The way it ended, I'm not sure whether we, as a United Nations, I don't know whether we did the right thing, although on the other hand, we pretty much stayed the same in the boundaries of North and South Korea. I don't think probably if we had gone north and taken North Korea and changed the government setup up there it would have made that much difference. I don't know. I mean, it's very difficult when you think back at that time. Like I say, a lot of the GIs, as I remember didn't really hold Syngman Rhee in very high standing.

DePue: Well, you grew up in the World War II era when the nation was very much unified about what we were fighting for. Korea, you didn't have that same strong sense of justification for the war then?

Bastas: Not really. The thing was that when we came back, it was just kind of like everybody went wherever they were going to go, and nobody really paid any attention.

DePue: What do you think, looking back today, about the way the United States deals with the Korean War? Many people call it the Forgotten War. Do you have any issue with how Americans have overlooked that one?

Bastas: I don't know. I think the controversy wasn't as great then with the country. I don't think people were all upset as badly as they were with Vietnam. You know, the news media didn't blast everybody because you didn't do exactly what they thought we should be doing.

DePue: What do think about Vietnam?

Bastas: Vietnam? I thought we should have gone ahead with Vietnam and finished what we were supposed to be doing. I was very upset with the news media. Uncle Walter Cronkite constantly, night after night, telling about how we've lost the war, how we were losing the war. I don't think it was good for the country. I don't think it was good for the GIs that were there. I don't think they were treated right.

DePue: Do you think we were there for the right reasons?

Bastas: Well, I guess we were, and then on the other hand I don't know. Once we were there, I guess we should have finished what we were supposed to be doing, although now Vietnam's unified. I don't know. It's a very difficult thing to say. I thought at the time that we got into it in a nefarious sort of way; the Bay of Tonkin incident, I thought, was contrived. That was the thing. I don't know. Maybe manipulated. I don't know.

DePue: Well, comparisons are made about the Bay of Tonkin and also about how we ended up in Iraq right now too.

Bastas: Yes, absolutely, yeah. You mean how we got into the war?

DePue: Yeah, into Iraq, yes.

Bastas: Well, in Iraq, all I know is our intelligence supposedly told us that they had weapons of mass destruction. If Congress didn't think so, they should have voted against it. They didn't do it. They went right ahead with the president and they said it was okay. Then when everything didn't go exactly right, that's when they decide, "Well now, I think we'll change our mind. We should not have gone in." You know? Well, that's easy to do, but gee whiz, I mean, if you're not going to do what you set out to do, then you shouldn't even have started it.

DePue: Are you proud about your service in Korea?

Bastas: Yeah. I mean, I've spent four years of my life in the service of my country, and I'm pleased with what I did. I didn't do much. I don't really feel that I did anything.

DePue: Do you think Korea's better off because Americans were there?

Bastas: Well, I'm sure that if it had ended like Vietnam, the people in the south would not be in as good shape as they are now. They seem to be much better off than the north, by far.

DePue: Yeah. I don't know that there's any comparison, really.

Bastas: No. I mean, from what I've read, I can't really see any comparison. I remember, when you talk about the war itself, how devastated South Korea was and how devastated the people were. Knowing that the north is where they are right now, which bothers me when I hear about people starving, don't have food, and yet they have such a huge military machine. It's just ridiculous.

DePue: Well, you've lived a long life already. I know you've got plenty of years ahead of you. But you've lived through the Depression as a very young kid, through World War II and Korea. What wisdom would you want to pass on to anybody in the future?

Bastas: (laughter) Wisdom. I don't have any wisdom, Mark. Good grief. The only thing I can say is that I'm a patriot. I believe in this country, as you well know. You saw

the American flag flying in front of my house today and every night I take it down for retreat. I go kid Lonnie, my wife, about it. I said, "You know what? It's about time for retreat. I've got to take that flag down. I can't leave it up all night." I remember my dad, who was really, really a patriot. He really was an American. In the greatest sense of the word, he was an American. He loved this country, and it really upsets me when I think about the way some people talk about our country now, that we're hard-hearted, we're war mongers, we're—I don't know. We don't go along with the rest of the world. I mean, I feel that if it wasn't for America, there wouldn't be a lot of the freedom that is around the world. I don't think there would be.

DePue: Any advice for your kids or future generations then?

Bastas: Vote Republican. (laughter) No, no, I shouldn't say that. I just think that people should take pride in their country. Hey, listen. There's a lot of things bad about this country in many ways, but basically the good things far outweigh the bad things. The politicians get to be a bunch of jerks. I mean, they seem to, once they get into office, they seem to kind of grow like mushrooms. They sit there. I don't know what they do. I can't figure it out.

DePue: Well, this has been a wonderful interview, fun to share your recollections of growing up and what it was like as a young man during those important years of American history. So I appreciate you taking the opportunity to do this and allowing me to interview you, Bob.

Bastas: Thank you.

DePue: And with that, we'll close.

(end of interview)