

Nevada Test Site Oral History Project
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Interview with
Robert Curran

July 18, 2005
Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Suzanne Becker

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[00:00:00] Begin Track 2, Disc 1.

Suzanne Becker: *Go right ahead.*

Robert Curran: You need my name?

Yes.

My name is Robert Joseph Curran. I was born August 31, 1934 in St. Louis, Missouri.

OK. Talk a little bit about your childhood, some of the things that we've been talking about.

OK, well, I always considered myself a representative of the development of the middle class because when I was born, I was born in a four-family flat, rear entry, upper level, brick, no air conditioning, of course, no central heating, no hot water, in which my mother cooked on a coal stove. Not a gas stove, not an electric stove. *Coal.* You put coal in there. Which we had little coal heaters. And it was what you call a "shotgun house," which we could shoot a shotgun in the front door and it'd go out the back.

Right. It's one of those long houses.

Right, long. And we had an icebox, not a refrigerator. My father was a bellhop in a hotel. My mother was a hairdresser who ran away on July 4, 1925, Pontiac, Illinois, and got married. And I'm the youngest of three children.

OK. And what are your siblings' names?

My sibling Doris Elizabeth, who is better known as Sister Mary Denis, who is a nun. She is seven years older than I am. And my brother is Thomas Patrick, and he is a retired chief technical writer for Martin Marietta Corporation. But he's five years older than me and he's retired. I'm the baby. And that's it.

And did you grow up in St. Louis?

Lived my entire youth and life in St. Louis and I moved when I was like thirty-eight but I'm still in St. Louis, basically. I became the prosecutor of Jefferson County in 1973, which is the county south of St. Louis. It's a long story, but their prosecutor went full-time and I was an assistant prosecutor in St. Louis. I knew a number of the lawyers and judges, and even though it was an elective office, everybody agreed that they would file no lawsuits if I would take the job. And really turned the office from a part-time office to a professional. And I did it for two years and then I wound up going on the bench down there. I was judge down there for twenty years and I lived there. And recently we decided we didn't need the big home anymore and we sold it and moved back to St. Louis, where I can take a bus to work.

Very nice. I want to back up from that point because that takes us to the present, but I want to go back to when you were a kid because that's really interesting. A couple of things. I'm wondering if you could describe what it was like growing up in that time period.

Well, of course, I'm old enough to remember the beginning of World War II, because I would've been seven. I can identify that with the fact that in September of '41 Stan Musial, my favorite all-time baseball player, came up to the major leagues, and being left-handed and Stan's left-handed, was my idol. And I remember that vividly. My dad getting upset because I was seven, a little brat running around, and telling me to shut up because what was on the radio was so important, and we're talking about December 7, '41.

So he was trying to listen.

I think I gave you some of my American Legion oratory, and a lot of the—not pro-military, that's not exactly what I'm talking to, but the service-to-country type of thing. World War II was a lot different because, we always—these guys go over to Iraq for eight months, which is tough,

but those guys went over like for four years, and they were gone, their families grew, everything. And so I sort of grew up. I would've been seven when it started, eleven when it ended—

So you have a pretty good awareness of it.

Yeah, and about the same time my dad was founding the Hotel Workers' Union in St. Louis—

Talk about your dad a little bit. What did he do?

My dad started out—I love the fact they ran away and got married because your parents *never* do anything like that. You know that, don't you?

[00:05:00] *Right. That's pretty wild for that—*

Pretty wild. And nobody even knew they were married for two years, until my sister came along, and then they had to admit it. But anyhow, so they didn't get married because they had to get married.

Right, they were already married.

They were already married. My dad was born in Atlanta, Georgia, came to St. Louis when he was like eleven years old, and at sixteen he had to drop out of high school with my mother, got one semester of high school, which was a lot in those days. They were both born in '02 [1902]. My mother was very bright, but in those days the old German *kinder*, *küche*, *kirche*. Do you know what those are?

No.

OK. *Kinder* is children, *kirche* is church, *küche* is kitchen. That was the women. My father was Irish, so he was a little more liberated than the old Germans that I grew up with. But the richest kid we knew in our class in grade school was the one who owned their own house, because his father worked for the Post Office. My dad came along and founded the union and got into politics and in 1944 ran for state legislature and was elected.

Now, he was a bellhop at the hotel, is that what you said?

Before he founded the union, then he was president of the union and business agent for the union.

So that's pretty remarkable.

Yes. And if you look back, I've got the books about him, he was educated in parochial schools and then he went to labor college, not—never got at GED or anything—he just went there to take courses at St. Louis University, and he became an expert on labor law.

That's amazing.

And he gets elected to the '44 legislature and becomes a member of the commission that adopted the 1945 constitution for the State of Missouri.

Really. So he had a hand in that.

He had a hand in that. Because the joke always was, they made what was then justices of the peace, magistrate judges, and they had to be a lawyer. And they always said he was making a job for me, because I was Danny Curran's lawyer. Everybody called me that when I was a little boy. And you want to know what type of judge I was? I was an associate circuit judge, which was the one that evolved. So he *did* make a job for me, as it turned out.

Now, you used to spend a lot of time with him at the legislature?

Yeah, I was at the legislature.

When you were a kid?

Yes. And my dad was a professional boxer also when he was young.

Oh, really!

And so I used to go down to the gym with him when I was upper grade school, early high school. Dan O'Keefe, who was a fireman, used to teach me how to box. Now, the side story is that I used

to always play handball with a man whose name I thought was Tony Pip. He was an Italian guy, he liked to lose weight, because I made him run, I was [a] kid, and he used to buy me ice cream. In 1950 I'm sitting watching television and the Kefauver Committee on crime is there and they say, would Anthony La Pippararo take the stand? And this guy was the head of the St. Louis Mafia. I had no idea. If I'd known, I wouldn't have gone to have ice cream. I was liable to get blown up. But the joke always was, if somebody had ever touched me, they were in trouble with the Mob. But anyhow, yeah, I grew up a poor boy.

What was your mom's name?

Helen Eckhardt. She was German. I always said she's the only woman of German parentage that had three children that were 100 percent Irish. Yeah, and after my dad died, my mother went to work. She was probably the biggest baseball fan ever. And my mother and dad used to go—after we were all in college, I'm the youngest. I mean do you realize how rare it was in those days to have three kids and they're all college graduates?

[00:10:00] *Well, yes. I think part of that is what you were talking about earlier with the rise of the middle class, and you were part of that.*

My dad once said, if he could make \$100 a week for the rest of his life, he'd be satisfied. I make \$83 an hour. OK?

That's a pretty good job.

But you know what I'm saying.

Well, you've far exceeded—

I give myself in the context of what we were dealing with. It's just to get you in context of what we were dealing with there.

Absolutely. Well, different times.

Different times than what you are dealing with now. But, my parents never owned a home; lived in apartments, all their lives, and when my dad died at fifty-five, my mother had to go to work because she couldn't do it.

What year did your father—?

Fifty-seven. See, this is going to come into here because he was alive when I was out here.

So let's work up to that. So obviously you went to high school and college. Where'd you go to college?

I went to a Catholic boys' high school. And get it in context. My sister was number two in her class. My brother was number two in the class. Freshman year, I'm number one in my class.

So you guys are pretty good students.

So second year, I letter in three sports. I lettered in track, which I lettered in all four years. I lettered in baseball, and I lettered in boxing—which you remember I said I had done that—we had a boxing team. Now, my sophomore year, I was like number five in the class, but my junior year I'm number one and my senior [year] number one, and overall I'm number two because I had to show I wasn't a brain, if you know what I mean. Everybody [thinks] you're on this other planet. Now, I'm not ashamed of it. When you're a kid, fifteen years old, it's like you know everybody—and the weird thing, when I went to my fiftieth high school anniversary, everybody there thinks I was number one in the class, and I wasn't. I was number two.

Well, I'd say that's still pretty good standing.

And I think you've got like—you see a lot of what I did in high school.

It was pretty amazing.

I was extemporaneous speaker. I was a debater. I was American Legion oratory. I was Voice of Democracy. And I have a nice little medal from St. Mary's High School for all-around speech

performances. I could write a little bit at that time. Wrote an essay on religious vocations that won the State of Missouri when I was in high school. So I was a hot dog. I was a little bit of a hot dog. But I was, now you're not ashamed to say it, an *intellectual* hot dog.

Well that's not a bad thing.

No, not a bad thing. But, you know, maybe some of this macho stuff, Mary [Vincent Ward] and I were talking about it, about being out here at the blast and volunteering to jump out of airplanes and that, was a little hiding the intellectualism that was running around that background.

Keep it under wraps a little.

Keep it under wraps so nobody knew about it.

Now, you were ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps], correct?

Right.

And what inspired you to do that? Just good for college?

I think \$27.50 a month was part of it. When I graduated from high school in '52, four guys out of my class went right into the military and were killed within four months in Korea, which gives you an indication of the times. And anyhow, I wanted to go to college. I was the youngest of three. My sister was already going to college. My brother was already going to college. The question of my family to me is, where are you going to college and what are you going to study?

Right. So you were going to college.

I was younger. My girls, my daughters had the same thing. Nobody ever asked them if they were going.

They just went.

They went. And so by the time they got to me, it was a given, and a good little Catholic boy went to "Mizzou," the University of Missouri, which was *verboten* in those days because you were

supposed to go to a Catholic college, and I was sort of revolutionary. And the story I remember [00:15:00] on that was my senior year, I had written this essay that had won the state on the importance of religious vocations, and the Brothers of Mary were all trying to talk to me about what I should really do in this world; I said no, I want to be a lawyer. Anyhow, and I got in bad trouble because they had a panty raid at Mizzou about April of my senior year, and this one brother had really been talking to me, and I got the paper that morning, I threw it on his desk, about the panty raid, and I said, Now, I'm sure I'm going. And he wanted to throw me out. I was a little cocky.

Yeah. So you were in a fraternity?

Yeah. It was a Catholic fraternity which is now Phi Kappa Theta. It was Phi Kappa; it's now Phi Kappa Theta. But that's the only way my parents would let me go is that you join the Catholic fraternity where I was sure about you. You've got to remember, I have a sister that's a nun at this time, and that was it. And I really learned more about drinking beer than I did about going to church. But we won't talk about that.

College, I was a very average student. I didn't excel academically or anything like that, and I never have understood why. One semester, I didn't even buy any books.

All sorts of different things going on.

You know, why, just everything was going on, and I don't know. And about that time, I found I had an arrhythmic heart which people thought it was going to kill me by the time I'm thirty and I'm sitting here nearly seventy-one, so it didn't. But anyhow, I don't know, maybe that's where I started getting onto being Mr. Daring—

When you found out about the heart.

Because I didn't care.

So now, you're ROTC and you graduated college and you went into the military?

Yes.

And where did you first end up?

Went down to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, which was the artillery officers' training.

Fort Sill?

Yeah, Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Fort Bliss is going to come later. Fort Sill, Oklahoma is the artillery.

So you started there—

And I got there and I remember we all got our orders and some guys were going to Korea, even though the war was over officially. And I get Fort Lewis, Washington, which was at one time the port of embarkation to Korea, and I figured I was going over. I remember having a few drinks that night, because we all thought we were going over to Korea and I was, well, if I'm out the next morning, I wasn't. And I go up there. I'm assigned what they call a "bastard battalion." It wasn't assigned to a division artillery [battalion], field artillery battalion, 155 howitzer, it was assigned to Sixth Army. So I'm assigned to that and I have this wonderful winter in the rain up at Fort Lewis, out in the field doing all kinds of things, and we're a service battery, so basically we're transporting artillery rounds. We weren't really firing guns that much. And comes the spring and you—oh! And I met a colonel while I was there, Colonel Powell, and I can't think of his first name. I know where he's buried; I could take you to Arlington [National] Cemetery and show you his burial place, but I can't think of his first name, which I think is the first sign of old age. But anyhow, when I walked in and reported, I remember vividly being in Rawlins, Wyoming on the way, in a snowstorm, trying to get St. Louis radio to find out if my father had won the election. I mean it was the '56 election. And I get up there like a day or two later and Colonel Powell says, Lieutenant, do you have a car?

I said, Yeah, it's out there. I had a "Stevenson for President" sticker.

And he says to me, You picked the wrong man.

And I said, No, I picked the right man. The *people* picked the wrong man.

At which time he laughed and he said, Are you a lawyer?

And I said, No, I'm going to be one.

And he was a friend of Melvin Belli's, who is a very famous lawyer from San Francisco. Very famous lawyer from San Francisco. So he and I used to talk all the time. And his daughter came up one time for a dance and, eh, single lieutenant, she was little, I was little, take her out. I was the one he asked to escort her. He trusted me enough and I asked to escort her to the dance. And so he's the guy that was in charge and he's [00:20:00] sending people to [Las] Vegas. I had a captain who was an idiot. I was in a unit that was going to Germany, and I wasn't going with them.

So you wanted out of there.

I wanted out of there, and so I called Colonel Powell and he said, what job do you want?

And I said, Special Services sounds pretty good to me. In charge of a movie theater, bars, I mean this sounds good. And that's why I was a lieutenant and everybody else was—

So you no longer wanted to be in that unit, you were hating the weather?

Oh, yeah. Have you ever been to Fort Lewis?

No.

The saying is, "If you can see Mt. Rainier, it's going to rain. If you can't see it, it's raining." And you were at attention more than three minutes and moss grew up the side of you. So I hated it.

And I've got sinuses anyhow.

And so you wanted out, so the middle of the desert sounded like a good idea.

The whole thing sounded like a great idea.

And this is what he offered you. He gave you a choice of coming out to Nevada and being in charge of Special Services?

That's right.

So you're twenty-two and you come out to Nevada.

I get in my car April 4, 1957. Memories—I looked these orders up, you know. Nineteen fifty-seven, I drove down the highway and I stopped at the Presidio [San Francisco, California], which if you've ever been to the Presidio, it's gorgeous. Sixth Army, get all my orders and everything straightened out, and I drove to Los Angeles, to Palos Verdes Estates where my cousin lived, visit them, and hit the highway from Los Angeles. I got here around April 11 or 12, I would think. That's basically what I remember.

So what'd you think of the [Nevada] test site when you first saw it?

Well, the first thing I see is Vegas. I stopped in Vegas. And I pulled up to the Sahara Hotel, which winds up coming in out of this whole year. And there was a movie at the time, *Meet Me in Las Vegas* or something, with Dan Dailey, the dancer, in it, and the first person I ever saw in Vegas was Dan Dailey coming out of the Sahara to get in a car. And I thought this was the glamour spot of the rest of the world after seeing this movie. And so then you get on the highway north and you make the turn at Indian Springs.

It's a little different than the city.

It's a little different. And you know all of a sudden we're in this land of—I mean I was familiar with the wooden barracks-type thing. When I was at Mizzou, you still had some of the World War II buildings, so I was familiar with that temp building. And you know we're up there. Younger officers were in a barracks. We didn't have a BOQ [Bachelor Officers' Quarters] or a

private room. We were just in the barracks, and there was a parking lot outside the barracks that the coyotes used to run around in. You'd have to chase them off when you went to get your car, you know, get out of here, get out, doggie. They didn't bother anything but they were out there and they'd howl at night. It was really interesting. We were sort of on the, I want to think it would be north end of the camp. I'm not sure, but I recall that you went in toward Mercury and you go to the left to Desert Rock, and then you hooked another right once you got in Desert Rock, which would mean that street was running north and south.

So you were in there pretty far.

Oh, we were in the back. Yeah, we were in the back. And the theater and the two—when you see the picture with the two—with the concrete pads, there are two big concrete pads, and the one on the side towards Vegas is going to be the mess hall, and the one on the other side is going to be the theater, which I was in charge of, so I know where it was. Yeah. And the mess hall, we let the cooks come to the show free and we ate in the middle of the night. Yeah. A little do-for-do, you know what I mean? That's why I know where both of them were.

Did you know what the Nevada Test Site was prior to coming out? Were you familiar with it, and were you familiar with what was going on here?

I'm really trying to go back and I can't remember.

Because it's still fairly new at this point.

You talked to my wife yesterday and she said, knowing me, it was sort of the controlled danger type thing. That I tried to jump out of airplanes and I only weighed 118 pounds and you had to be 135 to pull the [para]chute. So I needed something else to do whatever I wanted to prove my [00:25:00] manhood or whatever you want to call it. Still sort of a little cocky, swaggering.

So talk about a little bit what your job was specifically with the test site, because it sounds like you did a variety of things but one of your main jobs was to coordinate the entertainment.

I was in charge of the theater, the sports program. My office was in the library, which will be on the other side of the mess hall. It's right there. That was where we had the library for the troops, and we had a sports program. We had tours to—we didn't do much of that. We did that early and we didn't do that later on, because we had groups of people come in. But my main job was to be sort of the liaison between Vegas, and really more than Vegas, the entertainment group, the variety club. Are you familiar with the variety club?

Yeah, but explain what it is in your—

It was the charitable arm of the entertainment people. And part of their thing that they contributed was to entertain the troops who were at Camp Desert Rock.

Now, you're in the Army, correct? I don't think we stated—

Oh, yeah. Artillery. Field artillery. I wasn't a lawyer.

Not yet.

No, not even close.

So you're now out at the test site and you're coordinating between the variety club, you're bringing entertainment out to Camp Desert Rock, yes?

That was part of it. And my wife loves the story, the one sergeant who hated the captain as bad as I did and wanted to get out of Fort Lewis, I got him out of there, and the captain who was an idiot didn't know it, and he came and reported to me. He was my sponsor. He said, Lieutenant, Sergeant Little reporting for duty, and he started laughing and he said, Captain said, "Where'd you get these orders from? Do you know anything about it?" And he said, You swore me to secrecy. And that was our captain. And he [Little] was single. He was from L.A. He loved coming down. Anyhow he said, You ought to have

heard the names he called you, Lieutenant. There wasn't a thing he could do about it because you had the colonel's signature on it. Anyhow, so Bob Little and I used to drive in—

Bob Little?

That was the sergeant, yeah, and I used to drive in, and there were two '56 staff cars on post. Everything else was '52 because of the desert and everything. And we had one because we came into Vegas, and the general had the other. But both of them, if there was a general on post, I lost it because they had general's plates on them. And of course they were covered. And we used to pull in and we'd come into Vegas and we'd drive about the first sixty miles and I'd sit in the front seat and we're talking, and then we'd come into Vegas and I'd get in the back seat, and we'd wheel to mainly the Desert Inn or the Sahara, the two places we went, and he'd wheel that car in there and pull it up, the general's plate cover was on there, and he'd get out and he'd go around to the back and snap that door open and salute, and everybody's waiting for some general or something and here was a second lieutenant. We used to laugh. We thought it was funny. We did it all the time. Really impressed people. But Bob was like a year older than I am.

So you guys were having a ball doing that.

Yeah.

So what kinds of entertainment did you bring out there?

We started the first few weeks, we had a stage out there, sound system. In fact, I think that one thing says I was building the—

That's really interesting.

I was in charge of it. I wasn't building it.

I didn't know that there was a stage out there till I saw that.

There was a stage out there and we had a sound system. We had dressing rooms for the people. I know we can't go out there because of the weather, but I could probably find it.

Where was it, do you remember?

It was back in that back part where we were, because that was where it was open where the parking lots were and everything. It was the north end. It was pretty well open. As I recall, it was over there.

Anyhow, the first one we had was Jeanette MacDonald, who was a singer. Johnny Puleo, the little midget in Harmonica Gang? Yes, a bunch of little midgets played in Harmonica. I remember that. I don't know. I get a little lost on which one. Then we had Ming & Ling, the Chinese Hillbillies. It was father and son, and they were filthy, dirty Chinese comics [00:30:00] known as the Chinese Hillbillies. And the China Doll Review, which was eight of the cutest little Oriental girls you ever saw in your life. And they came up. I remember that. And then the third one was supposed to be Teresa Brewer. And she was at the Sahara. And she gets sick. And they tried to get Louis Prima to come out because he was there. Louis was afraid of the bomb. I'm serious.

So he didn't want to come out.

So he didn't want to come out. And there was a mimic in there and I want to think it was Rich Little. I want to think so. And he is old enough. He was real young at the time. But I don't remember exactly who it was, but that name rings [a bell]. So anyhow, and they replaced Teresa Brewer with a girl by the name of Kay Brown, who was at El Rancho Vegas, which is going to burn down three or four years later, and she was a twenty-two-year-old girl singer, could do Teresa Brewer's songs. And she is the girl that made the movie *The Strip* and introduced the song "Give Me a Kiss to Build a Dream On." And then got gypped out of it because at the end of

the movie, Louis Armstrong sings it. But she sang it at the Academy Awards. Make a long story short, she fell asleep right on this [my] shoulder on the way back in. And there was all kinds of people, because I was in that car and Colonel Dan Gilmer was on the left—I was on the right side, Gilmer was on the left, and Kay was in the center. I didn't wash my shoulder for about three or four months. No, seriously, she was an adorable girl. If you ever see the movie, you'll understand. She invited me to come in and see the show, which we did. The star was Lili St. Cyr who was the stripper, and I got to see that show several times from backstage. And Joe E. Lewis, who was Pal Joey, the guy that got his throat slit by the Mob, was the comedian. She was the singer. And the headliner was Lili St. Cyr. Which is the way those shows used to run in those days. You always had a singer, comedian, and then you had the show.

Anyhow, we became friends. Nothing more.

You guys were just good friends.

Good friends. We were the same age. Talked. I was making \$222 a month and I could eat free because she worked for El Rancho.

That's a good deal.

And we wrote back and forth, and then as things would be—I would say she was probably—she was a year older than I am, actually. But she probably got remarried or something; and I'm going to law school. You know how it is. Things go on.

Yeah, life just—

Life goes on. And very nice. Very nice person. *I* think a great singer, although my wife says, I don't think she sings that well. But anyhow.

So you brought entertainment out.

Yes, and so those were shows that we did out there.

OK. And you also took troops in to the city, correct?

Then it got too hot.

So your stage was outside.

Yes.

At the test site.

Now we're getting into the end of June. Because I know she was there at the end of June, and I know her birthday's July 2, and one of the first times they came in was her birthday, I know that.

My memory's not bad, is it?

It's pretty good.

Anyhow, so then we could no longer do that, and the hotels would give us on a Sunday afternoon *the room.*

Which is?

The showroom. And the soft drink companies of Las Vegas, we varied it, would donate two sodas per soldier we brought in. We couldn't have liquor because a lot of the people were under twenty-one. And we used to bring them in the buses because we had all the buses to go out to the desert, to go out to the site. And we used to bring them in, and then we'd stage them coming back, so if somebody wanted to stay, you know—

They could stay longer or leave earlier.

Yeah, leave earlier or whatever they wanted to do. First show I remember was George Gobel, and what I remember was not George Gobel, it was the DeCastro Sisters singing "Teach Me Tonight." I mean this for some reason stands out in my mind. We had Jack Benny, Gisele

[00:35:00] McKenzie. My great moment in time, I was announcing when the buses were leaving and Jack Benny walked out on the stage, and I was a ham, and I crossed my arms and looked at

him and said, well. You don't remember Jack Benny? That was his famous line. I couldn't resist. We had Carol Channing, which was what the Tropicana opened—it was the opening show. No, I think Eddie Fisher was the opening show, and she was the second show.

So did you guys go to the Tropicana? Did you go to—?

Went to the Tropicana. We went to the Desert Inn, which was where Jack Benny was. We had Peter Lynn Hayes and Mary Healey, George Gobel. I'm trying to think. We had a bunch of shows. I mean it was, I'll be very frank, I worked my butt off, because I was going out on shots, I was running the library, I—you know.

Right. So you did a lot.

I did a lot, yeah.

So a couple questions. How often did you guys come into town for the shows?

Oh, like every other week or so.

OK. I'm just curious how frequent that was.

Things started to peter out out there, as far as above-ground testing, after Smoky, which is August 31 [1957]. September and October, one of the things, maybe I'm wrong, you can look it up, I think most of those were underground. I mean you have a list, don't you?

Well, they definitely started going underground in 1962.

We went underground for a lot of those.

But it probably started before then. The official moratorium came in '62 [LTBT 1963].

In '62. But aren't we, in '57, the last actual—where they brought in troops and that?

I know the military presence wasn't out there for that long a time. It was very early on. So that is something that we can look up.

I think we may have been the last military presence. There may have been, I don't know. But I mean I'm coming back here, I'm working forty hours a week, going to night law school. I'm not catching up on the news from Las Vegas, no.

Well, OK, now, tell me about the other part of your job. You were out there for some of the shots.

Yeah. Ones I can specifically recall by name: Hood, Priscilla, Diablo, Smoky, that by name go boom, boom, boom. I was out for more than that.

OK, right, but those are the ones that stand out.

Those are ones that I can tell you things that happened with them.

So I'm curious, here you are, you're twenty-two years old and you hadn't really been out to the desert before—

Never left St. Louis before.

And you're working for, at the time, the Nevada Test Site. It's a pretty, I don't want to say glamorous, but it's a big deal. It's a big deal.

I don't know we looked at it that big a deal, I really don't—

Well, that's my question. Did you realize what you were involved in?

No. You want an honest answer? That's about as honest as I can get you, really. No, no, I don't think so.

Right. Were you aware of the atomic testing that was going on?

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, we were all—when we were oriented when we first came down here, we were aware of everything that was going on.

What did they talk to you about? What did they tell you? How was your introduction to the site?

Well, of course, in those days, they really didn't know what the heck was going on. We had a few courses. In fact, that article that I've got is really backwards, because that was before I got

here that I was in the class with the guy from Hawaii who said—he was in Hiroshima. His family got caught in Japan in World War II. He lived through Hiroshima. He was in the Army with me.

And that was before I was here.

That was before you got here.

Yeah. So I *did* know somebody who had been through—had a little bit of the thing. But we had no idea if the chain reaction was going to stop, or where it was going to stop. I mean, were we going to be part of it? We really didn't know. But you're twenty-two.

You're not thinking of these things.

You're Teflon. You're foolproof. Nobody can do anything to you at twenty-two, I don't think, can they? I don't think so.

Well, now, I'm just curious if you remember what that first experience was like when they told you you were going to be going out on a test. What was that like? What were some of the things you were thinking about?

Well, you've got to get us all into context. One of the stories I just thought of last night and I was [00:40:00] telling my wife was one of the guys was in G-4, which was Services and all this kind of stuff. We had in the unit a doctor that was bitching about dust control, which you know the desert, the dust always—

It's dusty.

And when those clouds came over and dropped about three foot of water right into their camp, and him calling up and saying, Did you like our solution to your dust control? I mean, I remember that. So we were a little loopy-goopy. Anything. I'm not sure if the first one I went out on was Hood. I want to think it was. You know Hood's the biggest one ever, blown up

[largest atmospheric test at NTS, 74kt]. It was a balloon. I want to think it was. And I remember they had the pigs out there, where they were testing like sunscreen?

The animal pigs.

Yeah, animal pigs. Right. And I want to think that's the one where we got up out of the trenches and looked back and there was a rabbit who had been running across the desert who was frozen and fried in mid-air. We always figured, well, I guess if we had stuck our head out of the trench, we would've been frozen in mid-air and fried, too. We learned it as we went along. Part of the reason we couldn't be too afraid was we were in charge. We had like thirty-five people. I was a second lieutenant but they may have been majors and colonels and everything. But I was in charge. They did what I said.

And what did you do? What were you in charge of?

OK, the afternoon before, we usually went out. We showed them where the trenches were. We showed them the tower.

The soldiers. The other soldiers.

Yeah, the ones we were training. We had our bus full, thirty-five people. And we basically explained to them all the safety precautions and what we expected them to do and what we were going to do. We had the shovel in case the trench came in. We told them if you get up and somebody's buried, you yell, we'll come. And basically taught them how to cover their eyes and turn and to protect themselves. And we had been out there, you know, trained to do that. And there was always a little ramp that went down in the trench. Then the trenches went out to the side. We were in that little ramp. We had to be the first ones out, and we counted. We counted to the blast, and when the blast went over, we knew the—because the speed of sound is where the

light's coming. No, excuse me, the speed of light's where the light's coming. The speed of sound to the blast. And so we knew when the blast went over, we could look at the cloud.

So like lightning. When you see it go and you count?

That's right. But we knew you could look up at the cloud by the time the blast went over. Right away, if you'd looked at, you'd have been blind. But we knew you could. So when we ran out of the thing, our first reaction was everybody up, everybody out! Look at the cloud!

What did you think the first time you actually saw the cloud? You saw the blast happen and—

I figured it was like you look at the big, tall building, it looks like it's falling on you, I thought, uh oh, it's coming back. We're going to get all that tower rained on us. And we used to joke about it. After a while, we used to joke about it. One day, it did it. They had to burn our uniforms. Take a shower. You know, I think, we took a shower, big deal, with the radiation.

What shot was that, do you remember?

I have no idea. I can't remember. I could give you a name but I'm not sure. I'm not going to tell you something I don't know.

Now, what—so many questions. I guess first of all I'm curious as to what your reaction was.

There are so few people in the world that have seen an actual atmospheric nuclear test, atomic test. You see in the pictures the enormous, brilliantly-colored clouds.

Well, you could tell by how dark the color, from violet to purple, how dirty it was, because it was how much dirt went up in there. And, of course, the biggest thing that always fascinated me is you realize it's not a mushroom. It's a circle and the mushroom stem comes from the vacuum that's pulling up the dirt. And that's what gave it the dirt and the color. And we could tell how dirty you were—out by St. George, Utah and Enterprise and those babies were [00:45:00] going to get—by how dark it was. And we used to refer to it as a “purple onion” because it darkened

into a purple when the dust got up in there. It was really a little lighter than that when we first looked at it.

Yeah. But as more dust went into it, the darker it got?

Yeah. I'm trying to think, my first reaction to it, I really—you know, you get sort of jaded because you went through it so many times.

But were you nervous at all?

What do you mean by “nervous”? I've been a judge for thirty years. Every time I take the bench, I'm nervous.

But then.

But it's a controlled nervousness, yeah. I think probably because I was responsible for these other people and everything, that my reaction was more to make sure they were all right—

OK, so you're concentrating on the—

—than to just sit there and, oh, isn't it pretty. I mean there was a little more—I think later on you maybe looked a little calmer at, hey, isn't that pretty. It was. It was beautiful. It was gorgeous.

Awesome. Awesome!

Did you realize the power of it?

Oh, sure. Well, you just had that blast go. What do you think went over your head in that trench?

You don't think it was quiet, do you?

No. Tell me what it was like being in the trench when that happened.

Well, I was a little bit claustrophobic. But I had the exit, didn't I, I guess. OK.

Yeah, you were on the exit.

I was on the exit, which was lucky. I don't know. I think the trench itself was just like any other hunk of ground out in the middle of the desert. It was dirty. A lot of it was sort of insecure.

Unstable.

You always check and make sure that you weren't in the place that might fall in when you—.

Did they ever fall in? Did they ever collapse?

I never had it. But we used to carry trenching tools in case it did. That was our job.

And you said they're what, about six feet deep?

Well, I know exactly. They were six foot deep and they were two foot wide. And you had about three foot of space per person. I can tell you that, because there was always a thirty-five-man bus. I was number thirty-five, which meant there were seventeen on one side of me and seventeen on the other side. And those trenches were fifty foot long. You want to divide it up?

It's going to come out three foot—

Three feet a person.

That's right.

So what are the procedures? You said that you trained them in this. What types of procedures did you guys have?

Well, we were also the last ones down.

First ones out, last ones in.

That's right. What was that, FIFO, first in, first out. I know that's not dealing with the trenches but that may give you the picture. So you went up and down that trench, and you had told them the day before that you kneel or bend. You had to be low because this stuff's flying over, and even the two-foot trench, some of it's going to hit the back of that trench. You know that, right?

Yeah.

And we had metal pots, metal helmets on. We had gas masks on. And other than that, you had on fatigues and there was no special clothing or anything. And basically you'd get them out there.

We had been out there the afternoon, we'd put them in the trench, we'd told them what to do, and then basically when I got them out there that night, right before—well, no, I probably wasn't in the trench till like fifteen seconds before. And you'd make sure everybody was doing what you said, you know, and don't anybody dare get up till I tell you. And then you'd go down and you'd do your—what you were—

Cover your eyes.

Cover your eyes. Because all you had there was, of course, you had gas masks. You just had the small thing.

No goggles, just the mask?

No, when you're above ground you've got goggles. OK, this is when we're in the trench. We'll talk about above ground later. But did you have them? No, you didn't have goggles because you were down and you were in the shade from the heat and the light. And you were the last one **[00:50:00]** down there. And I really think sort of, to a certain extent, you were so busy making sure, you know, because I mean above—one of those guys, gotten them blown away, I don't know what the heck would've happened. We never had that, but I don't know.

So you're concentrating on making sure everybody's OK.

And I want to think Hood, but I don't remember. There were two big ones right in the beginning. One I was in the field for, and I want to think it was Hood. And the other one I was back, and all I remember, these were at 4:30 in the morning, I was in the theater, I wasn't at the BOQ. I was in the theater, and the blast put a dent in the side of the theater. The theater was one of those old metal buildings. And one of the sides, and I thought, oh my God, is this thing going to come in? I remember that. And of course I was in the theater. I wasn't down or anything. I was what, fifteen, twenty miles away, I guess.

That's pretty significant.

Yeah, but it definitely dented, I remember. And I'm confused as to—I want to think I was out for it. I want to think that was the famous rabbit that got killed across the back. It could've been Hood I was back there. It could've been another one early. But there was another big one early that's with it.

Not Smoky or—?

No, Smoky was what, forty-four kilotons? No, Smoky was completely different. There was nobody in the trench for Smoky that I know of. I don't think there was anybody in there, because of what they were doing and what they were testing. You know, a lot of what they were testing now, as I said, they had the pigs out there.

Yeah, tell me about that a little bit.

See, you could defend yourself against the light and the heat—

And that's what they used the pigs for, to see what would happen to them?

Yeah. We probably had them for lunch at the mess—no, I don't think so. I shouldn't say a thing like that because they're not true.

Well, you know, you hear stories. I've heard about the pigs but I was just wondering what you remember about them and what they were used for.

Well, I wasn't involved in that.

You just remember being out there.

I remember being out there, and they were using such stuff, like we used to talk about sunscreen, to see if that protected your skin.

So they were putting stuff on the pigs to see if it would—

Yeah, see how you could protect a human being from the thing. You got to get this all in context. You got the light and the heat, number one, the speed of sound. The speed of light, excuse me. I keep on doing that. You had the blast, speed of sound, and third, you have radiation. So if you're defending yourself, you go shade—

So you don't want to look at the light. You don't want to be by the light.

Well, you don't want the light to burn you either. Not like the sun, my God, you know, it's hot. And I mean you could feel that in the trench, by the way. You could feel the heat. You could feel the heat, even though you were under. Yeah, I mean it probably—you think it's hot out, what is it? Probably out there right now it's 126. Of course, we're 4:30 in the morning, which meant it was about 55. It probably went up to 126.

Yeah. But it was hot.

It was hot. You could feel it. You could definitely feel it. But no, and when you covered, you could see your bones. It X-rayed and you definitely could see your hands, or a lot of times you would have your elbow up, you know, over your eyes, and you could see those—I know what those bones in there look like. They weren't broke so. But anyhow, you could see those. But first reaction. Impressed, yeah. Scared, never. Never. I really can't say I was ever afraid. I think you have the momentary thing right before it goes off where I hope the chain reaction stops. I hope these idiots know what they're talking about. But true *fear* fear, no, no, no. No, I can't say that. There was probably that momentary—which I think in my letter you get a little bit of that, not really from me but from somebody else's—[see Robert Curran letter of July 1957 regarding witnessing 17 kt atmospheric atomic detonation, Diablo, from trench at NTS]

Well, I'm guessing there's just that, like you were saying, that moment of just we really don't know what's going to happen.

And we're here and there's *no* way to get out because if you were to decide you were going to run, that baby's going to catch up with you.

So it's better to stay in the trenches. So you mentioned being out in the field, too. [00:55:00]

What was that like?

What do you mean, what—? I'm sorry, I don't—

Well, as opposed to being in the trenches. I mean—

Oh, that was—you were ten miles back.

So you weren't nearly as close.

They had those. In fact, they got a really good thing at the [Atomic Testing] museum where they have these benches, and they were there. They were there. And that's where we were. Now, when I was there, I had Canadians, on Smoky. Smoky's famous, you know that, don't you?

Yeah.

It was the dirtiest one in history, and we're not going to talk *why* it was dirtiest one in history, but it was the dirtiest one in history, and I had a bus full of Canadians.

Soldiers?

Queen's Own Rifles, which were sort of like our Special Forces. These guys didn't have summer uniforms. They double-timed everywhere in winter uniforms. They were the toughest human beings I have ever known. Two paratroopers in the NCO [Noncommissioned Officers'] Club one night decided to pick on one of those guys. Called him a pansy or something because he had to wear a uniform a lot, and they took a punch at him and they both wound up in the hospital. These were the toughest human beings I have ever seen. But you'd go over—I remember there was a guard at the bank in Vegas where we took the money for the theater who was Canadian. And he asked me to go out and talk to the Canadians about coming in and he had a barbeque for them at

his house and that. And so you'd go over to where the Canadians were, and I want to think it was a colonel, a lieutenant colonel, and you'd walk in and a sergeant would greet you, and I mean they would right away, if you wanted a gin-and-tonic, you can have it. I never did. My father was an alcoholic. I've had a few drinks in my life but I don't even drink anymore. That's nothing with me or anything, it's just I don't. But anyhow, they would offer you iced tea or whatever, you know, and before you went in to see the colonel, they sat that down and you talked to him. Great people. Really great. Very polite. Wonderful.

And the weather was terrible, coming up to Smoky. I mean it was bad.

Was it just raining or windy or—?

A little bit of everything. Well, the monsoon, you're talking late August, right, I mean—

Yeah, and you think the desert, people don't realize—

You've lived in the desert long enough to realize that in late August or around in there, you get bad weather. So we're talking August 31 is when the shot—it was supposed to run from like about the 25th.

So we'd come into town sometime in the evening, and I can't remember where AEC [Atomic Energy Commission] headquarters was.

Downtown.

And it had a light on there. And we'd sneak out and look at the light. And if it was red, we just stayed in town and partied. And that night I recall it going green and we said, we'd better go. It was my birthday August 31, so what were we doing in town on Friday night? We were celebrating my birthday, right? And I remember flying that highway out there to get there. We did. We got there in time. I was driving. That highway was [makes a sound indicating the highway was clear]. And I was sober. But it was still—

Oh, it's still a good hour's drive.

We did it in about fifty-two minutes or something. I was going 106, I remember. Anyhow, but you know how flying it was. But anyhow, we got out there and walked on the bus about 12:30, my twenty-third birthday, and the Canadians break out with "Happy Birthday, Lieutenant." And then they were all kidding me about, You wanted this big birthday candle for your birthday, didn't you? You're the reason we've been here all week, you know, and all this kind of stuff. That I remember vividly.

And then we go out. We're back now. We're above ground. Now, we've got the glasses. Even with glasses, you're still not supposed to look directly at the blast. But again, I'm the one that's got to tell them when to take off the glasses because if you got the glasses on, you can't see the cloud. And so now we're ten miles back. We're not talking eight, ten seconds from [01:00:00] blast anymore, are we? We're talking forty-five, fifty seconds, something like that. And you told them to watch the road because the blast is going to kick up the dirt. And of course, about half of them listen to you. And when the blast hit, about half of them wound up flat on their butts because the blast hit them and knocked them down.

Shock wave?

Yeah, the shock wave, whatever word. See, I use different terminology sometimes. See, we've now sophisticated some of this. We just said "the blast." But when it hit them, you know. But I remember we were standing back there, what you had to do is get down and sort of turn your head because you had the helmet on. Because the missiling, you know, the major deaths in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, everything else, was missiling, where the blast takes and throws things and turns them into bullets or some kind—

Debris. Flying objects.

That's the main cause of death in Hiroshima, and that's what you had to be careful of. And we knew that. But anyhow, when it went up, that baby was purple. We *knew* it was dirty. We knew it was dirty. And the reason for it is they backed it into a hill. I don't know if they'll even admit this today, but they backed it into a hill because when you have a blast, you create a vacuum. We've already talked about the stem of the mushroom. OK, so when it bounces off the ground, the face is round, and when the beginning edge of the shock wave, or blast, bounces off the ground, it bounces back up into the vacuum, right? And then it comes out—I'm trying to think of how to express it properly. It comes out and it catches up with the one that's against the atmosphere. Because it's in a vacuum, right? It catches up with it and presents what they call a mach-Y stem which intensifies the blast. Because you have two blasts—

Right. It's double the—

OK, the reason they backed it up in the hill was that they wanted to create what they called a triple mach-Y stem, not only when it bounces off the ground but when it bounced off the hill, it came and intensified that shock wave. That's why it's backed up against the hill. What did it do? It got in part of that hill. What causes it to be dirty? The dirt that's radiation and takes everything out. And that's why that was the one that was so famous and that's the one where people died of leukemia. That's the one where they contacted people like me from CDC, Centers for Disease Control—

Now, I just want to stop for one second. I need to pause to make a CD identification, and then just go on.

[01:03:20] End Track 2, Disc 1.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 2, Disc 2.

OK. So speaking of dirty blasts, now is this something that you ever thought about when you were out there? Did they ever talk to you about it?

I don't remember. We knew how to defend ourselves. And I remember they had shot one in Frenchman's Flat. We were at Yucca. I don't think we had anything in Frenchman's. They had used up Frenchman's earlier where they had fired one underground and they had a robot that they sent down underneath there and took pictures of the interior, and of course what causes jewelry, what causes gems? Heat and pressure. So what do you have underneath that ground?
Heat and pressure.

What do you have covering the walls of where that came? Gems. Why can't you go down and mine them? Because I give my wife that diamond and I kill her in about a half an hour. It's all radioactive down in there. I'm sure that they can take you out here right now and show you some of those caverns because they have robots that they can send in there where those things were and they will be gorgeous, beautiful. Well, diamonds, emeralds, rubies, whatever the composition of the soil was that they heated and pressurized.

But you can't get to them. You can't use them.

No way. So where was I at? You got me lost. No, I got me lost.

Well, I was just curious if you ever thought to yourself, wow, this may not be so good, or there's a possibility of contamination, or if they ever mentioned it, or if it just wasn't even an issue.

I don't remember. I really don't. In fact, everybody asks me, have you ever had any aftereffects? And for years, if I went swimming and didn't put on a T-shirt, I'd get a rash on my back. One doctor one day said, where were you exposed to radiation? He said, You have radiation burns on your back. Did you know that? And it only comes out if I'm in the sun. If I have this shirt on like I do today, it's not going to come out, but if I'm in the sun, it's

coming out. It's going to come out. Do I have some memorabilia from the fact that it was radiation? Yeah. Did I get that the day the tower backed up?

Yeah, what happened with that?

Well, we're joking as we always were about the cloud backing up on us, right? And all of a sudden, you hear this stuff on your steel pot going *tink, tink*.

So the tower, basically after the shot goes off, disintegrates.

The tower wasn't steel. I'm trying to think, what was the stuff we had in chemistry? My wife told me last night, and I can't remember, that burned real quickly, because they wanted something that dissolved.

Because it goes with the blast. It just dissolves with the blast.

Yeah. I remember walking out after the blast was over, this is how casual we were, to ground zero within an hour or two of the blast, and standing on the concrete pad with the parts of the tower that showed you the curvature of the blast, but it didn't quite hit the ground because they didn't want it to hit the ground. Those towers were basically 500 foot high. I don't want to get too scientific, but a 20-kiloton blast will not cover 500 feet, and that's why they were that high. We had one or two balloons, but most of them were towers. And I'll think of the name of that metal, but they weren't really steel. They were—I don't remember. I'll think of it. I'll have you call one of these people over at the Chemistry Department and they'll tell you what it was. But yeah, you got the little dings. And then on the way back in, because we came through Mercury. We went back to the highway and up from Mercury to go out because the road went out from Mercury, even though we were further in. And I think we stopped in Mercury and they gave us new uniforms.

And had to shower off?

In fact, I think this is part of the reason, the letter I wrote from the trenches in pencil? The reason [00:05:00] for that, we didn't have our wallets with us, we didn't have—I couldn't have had a watch on, I couldn't have had a ring on, because if we had come back that time, we would've lost all that. See, we used to lock them up before we went out.

So you couldn't wear anything out there.

And that's why I didn't have a pen. I had a pencil.

Sure, that makes sense.

But they took our uniforms. We all had a little badge-like thing which you can see over at the [museum], and I know somebody that has one. A little badge-like thing [dosimeter] that you put the film thing in there, and they measured the radiation by how much the film developed, and if you got a certain level of radiation, you went home. I never got there, obviously.

Now, they have your radiation records? Do you have—?

I have no idea. All I know is in St. Louis, where I'm from, they had a big records center fire back a few years ago, and the records that were destroyed were from 1912 to 1960. And I know some of mine were in there because they've asked me for orders and stuff. You know, when the CDC, they wanted orders, too, I could tell them who was there and things like that. So are they gone? I don't know. But that would have to be the records center, and I really have never—what I have, you've seen a lot. I have some other ones that just say "orders" and I was doing this or I was doing that, but I didn't think they affected what you particularly wanted.

So as far as you know, your radiation level is minimal? You've got no adverse effects other than some radiation exposure on your back?

Never. And I've been checked a couple of times. My cholesterol is only 54. Maybe it radiated that. I don't know. Maybe that's a good thing.

Do you think that there was exposure out there?

Oh, yeah! I know there were! Why did people die? A lot of leukemia out of there.

Well, I mean there's a lot of people that say no, that's impossible, it couldn't have happened out there.

If you were that close? Yeah. I would think that probably St. George, Utah got more than we did.

We got backed-up on one time; St. George, Utah, or Enterprise, whichever one you want, the sheep ranch, you're familiar with the sheep ranch in between there and Utah. They lost a lot of sheep out there. The old joke is, a friend of mine is a lawyer who was a pilot. And he used to fly through the clouds. And he was at Bikini. Flew through the clouds. And the joke was, when he was in my courtroom, that if the lights went out, nobody would know the difference because we both glowed. We didn't, of course, but I mean that was always the joke, if Greg O'Shea and myself were in the room together, that the whole thing would glow. He would have had nothing to do with this. He was on the big ones.

Right, over in the Pacific.

The Pacific. He was a pilot and he flew right through the clouds, picked up samples.

Those were big, though. Those were some of probably biggest ones.

Oh, those were megatons. We're talking kilotons. They were megatons. Yeah. Those guys had more than we did.

Now, I don't really know how to phrase this. Did you have any opinion on nuclear testing when you were out there? Now, obviously, it grew into this very subversive issue, but you were out there pretty early on in the beginning of the program.

No. I went to the museum and they wanted to talk about we were the heroes of the Cold War.

There was an article in the *New York Times* that somebody sent me that said, we were the heroes

because we were the sacrificial—we're the guinea pigs of the era. I'm sorry, I don't feel that way. I was out there, I was doing a job. I'm not altruistic about it, but I'm also not [a] condemnation person about it. It was something we did. And if you read some of my stuff like when I wrote when I was a kid, it was not completely "my country, right or wrong." It was close to it. We're coming out of the Second World War. We still have that gung-ho. Even when [00:10:00] you take Korea, there was still that we-were-defending-the-world-for-democracy-type of—that's World War I, that's Wilsonian. But you know, there was still this—you sort of did what you did. I know guys who were in World War II, fought in these big battles and things like that. I never did anything like that. That was what you did. And I got this thing that I want to check on, the colonel that wrote the letter of commendation on me, and he's known as Standing-Dan-the-Ring-Mountain Man, and the way I gather it, in Korea he was commander of the Seventh Cav[alry]. Do you know anything about the Korean War?

A little bit.

OK, the North Koreans attacked South Korea.

That much I know.

American forces from Japan rush into Pusan and establish what's known as the Pusan Perimeter. This was the Seventh Cav. They were completely outmanned; I mean this was, hey, get over there. It's June 2, get over there February the—two weeks, they get them up from Japan and send them over. And they broke out of the Pusan Perimeter. And I want to think that's where the Dan-the-Ring-Mountain Man, the way I understand, he got in the Ring Mountain with a Jeep and said, Follow me, men. And they broke out of there. About the same time, [General Douglas] MacArthur's coming over the Inchon [River] on the other side of the peninsula and they put the pincers on the Koreans and they drove them all the way up to the 38th Parallel. The question is,

do we go into China? And about that time, China comes in and pushes us back to the 38th Parallel, and then we have the armistice. That is a simplified, very quick, one-minute description of the Korean War. Now, go read the book and you'll learn a lot more.

So I want to think that that's where that was. I know he was a hero in the Korean War. I know he was Eisenhower's—he was the guy that wrote the orders for D-Day. He was SHAEF, Strategic Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, which is Normandy. And he was the guy that wrote the orders. Eisenhower gave them; he wrote them.

Somebody's got to do it. It's a good team.

Well, if you look in those letters, he keeps on saying, If you're coming to Washington—. *I saw that.*

You know what he was talking about introducing me to, don't you? Who was the president?

Get you a good job.

I was busy going to law school. Now, maybe I should've. I could've become a big Republican and become a neo-conservative or something and been—no, I'm just joking. I say that. But you know, I do respect Eisenhower because he's the guy that said beware of the military-industrial complex, and I do respect—

Yes. He had some good foresight.

He had some good foresight. And he was a good man, but he was not—and got pushed around a little bit by the military-industrial complex.

That's why beware.

Yeah, beware. So, go ahead. I'm sorry I got you strung off on something else.

No, that's fine. No, it's all part of the story. So you're out there through October, you say?

Yeah, beginning of October. I don't remember the exact date. I know it was football season. I got up at six. I left here at one o'clock in the afternoon. I wanted to get back to Columbia [Missouri] for a football game on Saturday. And I drove from here nonstop to Dodge City, Kansas, which is 1,200 miles, twenty-four hours. In those days, 50 miles an hour was going. Twenty-four hours flat. I stopped about one or two o'clock in the afternoon, went to bed, got up at midnight, drove to Columbia, and went to the football game that afternoon.

You had a goal.

I was twenty-three years old. I had a goal. But I remember getting to Columbia about three in the morning, and then going to the football game, and then driving home.

Now, did you choose to leave? Were you just done? Was your time at the test site only like—?

If you look at it, [Operation] Plumbbob was over.

OK. So you were just out there for Plumbbob.

Yes. We closed everything up. I'm sure if you look at the records, everything's going to be closed up about that time. I don't think I was the last guy out but, you know. I'm sure there [00:15:00] were other guys. I mean the theater was not the end-all of what they were—I'm sure there was other equipment people. You had also asked me about the racial makeup.

Yeah. Yeah.

Basically we had a black transportation unit. That's why we gave them '52 Chevrolets rather than—now, it's not nice to say, but you know. But yes, we had the '52 Chevrolets because we were in the middle of the desert. But they drove all the trucks. They drove the buses, you know. I had one sergeant of mine was a black guy who had been a RIF-ed major. Reduction in force. Remember, we're right after Korea. So they had all these guys who were permanent-ranked

sergeants who then were upped to officers because they had to beef up the Army to go in Korea, and here they are, they're reduced back.

What do you do? Yeah.

Yeah, and these two guys—one guy was white, one guy was black—were majors, and they had been at Fort Ord, Camp Ord, in California, and they wanted to get them out of there, and then they had the option whether they wanted to stay in the military as a sergeant and be transferred elsewhere. But they had to have a safe place to put them. So, I'll be very frank, I was a little shavetail second lieutenant. They were majors. As far as I was concerned, these guys knew more about the Army than I did. I just left them alone. That's why I probably don't remember their names.

I remember Bob Little's name, because he was with me from the beginning. And I remember Franklin Delano Farley's [sp] name, who was a private who couldn't get in the Army now because he was borderline retarded. And I was on every board, and they were going to 208 Farley out of the service, unfit. And there was somebody that was in his command that didn't understand. And I remember, I was on the board and I said, Give him to me. He's only got like three or four months to go. I'll have him sweep up the theater. I'll give him things he can do. And I remember Bob Little and myself, we got him through, taking him down to the bus terminal and sending him back to Minnesota with written instructions where he changed the bus. And we got him out. And we got him an honorable discharge. And he was very loyal. Because one day some guys from Fort Lewis come down and were standing in front of the theater and somebody comes up, and these are young guys joking, looks at me and said, Hey, you rotten son-of-a—you know. And Farley was going to take him on because he called me a son-of-a-bitch. We didn't mean anything or, you know, nobody was excited, but Farley was—I mean he was borderline. He didn't understand it. We had a dog

that we had picked up in the desert called Flicker, who lived in the theater. Flicker. Flick. Lived in the theater. And Farley took care of the dog. He slept in the theater. He swept the theater. He swept my office. Once a week on a Saturday when there was no traffic, we allowed him to drive my Jeep down to pick up the mail, which was the highlight of Farley's week. And he thought I was a genius because I knew he was born in 1936, because his name was Franklin Delano and it would've been an election year, presidential candidate, and he said, How did you know that, Lieutenant? Like, you know, I was some kind of a brilliant—[and I said], well, pretty obvious, Farley. But you know. But I mean my floor in my theater or my floor in my office *sparkled*. Because he knew enough to know we saved him. Know we saved him.

You want to know about suicide? One suicide while we were out there, a captain, Finance. We talked about RIF. This wasn't—and I was on that board. I wound up in all that. Now that I think about that, they worked my *butt* off out there. And we looked at the finances. Everything was—his family, his wife and family were all intact. The only thing we could ever find, it's the day before he committed suicide, he had gotten a RIF notice. He was going back. And that Wednesday afternoon was R&R, rest and recreation. And we used to play bridge at the **[00:20:00]** Officers' Club, and one of the guys was a doctor, and he was in the group, and he was talking to the doctor about if you get shot in the head, you know, and how bad it'd feel. The doctor said no, the way you could go right away is if the bullet goes right through your heart. And the next morning, Thursday morning—he was right. I heard the shot. I recall it. He'd unbuttoned his shirt and he pulled it up, put his .45 in there, and put himself away. And we investigated it.

We had one court-martial. A guy who stole the laundry money and went to Vegas. Got caught and he charged him and then they put him back in charge of the laundry money, and

guess what he did? He went AWOL [absent without official leave]. So you used to have an officer that when he was—well, he was at Fort Ord, too, which he was going to go back for his court-martial at Fort Ord. And I was in charge of protecting his rights while we had him. That was me. And so he went back to Fort Ord, and in those days you could request any officer in the military to come defend you. So I get this thing, we're flying you over to Fort Ord to defend this guy. Flew into San Francisco to defend this guy in a court-martial. And I get over there and he said, Hi, Lieutenant, I want to plead guilty.

I said, what the hell? You got me all the way over here.

And he said, Well, you did a good job and I thought you needed a little vacation.

So I wind up over there, and he's got two charges, a theft and an AWOL, which would've been ten-and-a-half years and a dishonorable discharge. And I think I did my job because he got six months and a bad conduct discharge. And then I told him how, after he got out of the Army, to have the bad conduct discharge changed into a general discharge. But he was a hero in Korea. That was my theory. Well, first thing, I got the whole second part knocked out because I said, who was the idiot that put him back in charge of the money?

Starting your law training then, too.

Yeah, that's the first case I ever defended. Pled him guilty. But everybody knew. I wasn't a lawyer, but everybody—

You were just headed that way.

Everybody knew what I was wanting to do. And so I wound up on all these stupid boards.

Well, it sounds like you had a full—you were 110 percent involved.

Oh, yeah, when I think of it, well, that one letter that I sent to my mother, not the one from the trench, the other one, it says, This is the first weekend I've had off in, you know,

because I was doing things on the weekend. Let's be honest, I don't tell my mother everything because what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. I didn't tell her about drinking at the Sahara or anything of that nature, yeah. But basically, yes, you figure what I was doing. I mean in the evenings, what was going on? The theater. And the story of the theater I remember is we got the musical *Oklahoma!*, which I thought, oh great. They booed because they thought it was going to be a Western, and when he starts singing—

Oh, no! That's right. That's funny.

The troops didn't like it. I remember that because I sort of wondered what I had. I've had this college class on the history of musical comedy. I got *Oklahoma!* But I wasn't the one they were playing it for. So I remember that vividly. These guys, they wanted their money back. [They said], we didn't come to hear that gal sing. We wanted to see some gunfights.

Yeah, so much for the musical.

That's right. Which, of course, was, as we discussed yesterday, part of the reason. They wanted to see some gunfighting because we were out here in Nevada.

Well, yeah, there's a whole attitude.

Whole attitude.

And a whole reputation.

But I didn't. You gathered if I wanted the other thing, that I didn't really 100 percent have that attitude. I'm the world's worst shot. I was in the Army and I never—the only reason I got a marksmanship medal is my Jeep driver pulled the target for me. He said, we take care of you, Lieutenant? I can't shoot and I still can't shoot worth a darn. But I have a [00:25:00] marksmanship medal. Joe Lapinski, my driver, took care of that at Fort Lewis.

Well, it's good you've never had to enter a competition or something.

Well, I thank God I never had to—I don't know if I could kill anybody or not. I really don't. I have no idea.

I don't think you know till you get there.

I would think when my girls were small, to protect them, I'd probably do it. But personally, could I? Probably not. I'm the lawyer that got the death penalty, and the reason I got death penalty in a trial is because I didn't believe in it, and when I went to the jury I said, Here are your options. You can either give him life imprisonment or death, and I'm not going to tell you which one to do. And they gave him death, and the only reason the guy wasn't killed was that was before the Supreme Court overturned it. And I was so happy when the guy wound up with life imprisonment because I was worried I was going to have to go to Jeff[erson] City and watch the guy die. I really didn't want to do that. But could I try the case and get it? Yes. My job. Could I go with the bomb and do it? Yes. If I was embarking it, yes. That make sense?

It does. I mean because you mentioned sort of a dichotomous resistance before.

The ultimate dichotomy, yeah.

Yeah. And I mean you seem to be a very gentle kind of person with a good, nonviolent attitude, yet—

I think the two most important phrases in the English language are “please” and “thank you.”

But yet, here you are out at the Nevada Test Site with the atomic bomb, which is possibly the most awesomely, staggeringly powerful—

Remember my telling you, that's why you get it in context?

Yeah. I mean that had to be very interesting for you.

You know, and really as time went by, until I got back out here in February, this sort of fades into being a judge for thirty years and raising a family, all the things that have been important to me.

Well, I'm sure it's some, a part of your—

You know I had to dig to find those things, don't you? They weren't just right there. They are now because I found them, yeah.

Right. So that's interesting, revisiting that whole aspect, that whole era, I bet.

Yeah. The era is a dichotomy. I talk about the era as a dichotomy. I said to you yesterday, so many things that we see today, the George Wilson saying what's good for General Motors is good for the country, the ultimate—if it's business and profit, it's the ultimate. OK. The realization of Eisenhower about the military-industrial complex. The running against Stevenson on the anti-intellectual. The Joe McCarthy. This comes in my time. *Rock and roll* comes in my time. *Brown vs. the School Board* [*Brown vs. Board of Education*]. I start college in '52, Mizzou, not *one* black student. I graduated '56. Fifty-four is *Brown*—eleven out of 7,700. We really improved! OK? But hey, black people didn't go to school in those days. They were working for my dad's union. When I go back and I think when I was a little kid, my dad used to take me with him up in North St. Louis and we'd go—I know, I'm a great expert on barbeque because we'd be taking checks like to—in black neighborhoods, which were completely safe, I'm sorry, in those days, completely safe. And you'd go into the alleys and these people would be selling barbeque out of their garages. So somebody says, You really know barbeque! I was a little kid. I was exposed to these things. I guess I was just—oh, my wife always says that— when I was a prosecutor, we had a sixteen-year-old girl that did not know what her father did for a living.

Now, you remember, I'm a prosecutor in '77 and '75, so my oldest daughter is five. All

[00:30:00] right. And I always made up my mind when I grew up—

Sixty-seven to seventy-five?

Well, I was actually a prosecutor from '65 to '75, but they had a prosecutor '73, '74, '75. I was assistant before then. And I said my girls will always know what I do. Of course, I was in the paper a lot, too. And I used to take my kids out to the courtroom. I used to always joke. I said they were like the lawyers. They had their Crayons and sat at the counsel table. And my oldest daughter, when she was in kindergarten, they had J-words. You know, you had A-words and B-words and J-words, and she put a bunch of bars and she put a guy in black in back of a desk. And a teacher said, Kasey Curran, what are your J-words?

And she said, Judge and jail.

And the teacher said, why?

And she said, My daddy's a judge and he sends people to jail.

And the teacher said, what does a judge do?

She's five. And she looked at her and she said, when people can't make up their minds, they come to him and he makes up their minds for them.

That is a good answer.

I remember that to this day because that's what I do. The five-year-old was right. But you knew she had some insight or whatever for doing it. And I've always believed that because, you know, they needed to know who I was and who they were and where they were coming from.

Now, did you ever talk to them about your days out in the test site?

I doubt it. I mean I probably mentioned it, but as I said, when this all came up, most of this stuff was buried. I had to dig to find—I had to go through boxes to find some of this stuff. And of course my big find was *the letter*.

Yes, well, that's a great find.

It was a great find, and as a history major I think that's a great find. And somehow I'm going to make sure it winds up over at this—

Oh, they could definitely use a copy.

I think that when they're talking about the soldiers out there, *that is it.*

Well, that's the ultimate first-hand experience.

That's it. This old man remembers what happened forty-eight years ago. That young kid was right there. I always come with these little conclusions, don't I? You can tell I'm a speaker. The young kid lived it and he knew it. There's no history or glamorization, although it is pretty definitive.

And at the time I think it was pretty glamorous.

Well, my wife said, You wrote better then than you do now.

Well, you're in the moment, too, you know, a lot of stuff going on.

Yeah. But you read some of my stuff I did write—

Well, you're a very good writer.

At that time. Well, my sister's an English teacher and my brother was the chief technical writer for Martin Marietta Corporation. My wife was a business and English teacher. My daughters are a book editor, a lawyer, and paralegal. Do you want to play Wheel of Fortune in our house? It's like vicious. First one that knows the answer just yells it out and ruins it for everybody else. We call it Full Contact Wheel of Fortune. My middle daughter makes us all look bad. You put up two letters and she says, you know. I think I'm getting real good.

So you've had some practice.

Yeah. Ah, go to hell. But yeah.

So what did your family think about you being out at the test site, your mom, your dad, your sister—?

Well, you can tell [by] the tenor of the letters that they were worried. They were scared. They were worried. Because I'm trying to tell them in the one letter, that part of it which was the trench part is over. We're going to be fifteen (we weren't fifteen, we were about ten miles) but we're going to be fifteen miles back, so there's nothing to worry about. And, you know, that's a little bravado.

Sure. And you don't want them to worry.

Yeah, you don't want them to worry. But the little bravado is to make them not worry. Yeah, but **[00:35:00]** like, hey, I'm fifteen miles back, no big deal. But if you read the letter, this was—because I've read all this stuff trying to say, where was I? What was I doing? I was in a hurry, if you read from that letter, to get out of the Army because I wanted to go to law school.

That's what you were saying.

I'm one of the few people that you know that at age five wanted to be like a lawyer, and did it, and at age seventy-one still loves it and still cares about it.

It's great. You have a passion. So as soon as you got out of the military—well, you were in the military for a while, but after you left the test site is when you went back to law school.

No. I go to Fort Lewis from October till the next April. And I get back up to the Fourth Infantry Division and the colonel says, Oh, I see you're a Special Forces lieutenant. We want to beat the Twelfth Infantry Division, which I referred to, too, being down there, in some sport. Would you take over as the athletics and recreation officer for the Fourth Infantry Division and see if you can do that? And he said, You've got all the backing I [you] want. So I did that, and I boxed. I got to the

finals of the Sixth Army tournament, 112-pound class. Hey. Got knocked out in that. But I got that far. I got that far. So I found a sergeant who was a professional boxer and we trained the boxing team and we beat the Twelfth Infantry. It all came down to basketball. The Twelfth Infantry had a guy by the name of Roger Byrd who was an All-American out of Kentucky, and another All-American out of the University of San Francisco, who was a black guy, by the way. The other guy was a white guy. He was a black guy. It only becomes important later when I tell you who he was. Yeah, he was coaching that team and I was coaching our team. And we had a guy by the name of Bruce Palmer who was a lieutenant and became one of the first black generals in the Army. And Bruce was a great basketball player. He was about six-three. But he wouldn't play because he was—we got him to play one game. We beat the Twelfth, I think it was 45-42, and Bruce had forty-three points. He played in one game. The next time I coached a team, it was my daughter's eighth-grade Sacred Heart team. The next time the other guy coached a team, it was the Boston Celtics, because his name was K.C. Jones, *The K.C. Jones*, All-American, nice guy, really nice guy. But I beat him and then I got the eighth-grade team and he got the pro team. Yeah. But it couldn't have had anything to do with—my coaching was give the ball to Bruce.

Yeah. Well, you know, if you got a strategy that works, go with it.

It worked. But anyhow, the colonel was thrilled to death. They beat the Twelfth Infantry. And then April, I—actually, it wasn't quite two years, I got out early because I wanted to get back and file for state representative, which I did, and I got beat. You know, because my dad was dead and I was not, I was only twenty-four. People would look at me and say, *You're too damn young.*

But you had high aspirations.

Yeah, and there was a lot of that politically. Later on I became the state vice-president of the Young Democrats. I was about thirty-three, thirty-four. My good friend who we went to college together and to this day have lunch at least once a month, he was the president of the state Young Democrats and everything, and he's a lawyer, too, and we've been friends forever and a day. And he got to name—and the key thing is I had that program and I was the chairman of the convention. He nominated the chairman of the convention. Then the guy who was the Young Democrat of the Year was a fellow by the name of Mel Carnahan, who was the governor of the State of Missouri, who was running against [Senator John] Ashcroft and was killed in the plane crash.

Right. Yeah. And still won.

And still won. And I mean that was my good friend.

Really.

My wife was out of town. She called me up and said, Are you OK? Because that was somebody I knew really well. But you know, it's sort of funny because I showed her the book and I said, Here's a picture of me, and in '68 I didn't win the election for state representative and Mel did. Wonder where our paths would've gone.

Yeah, no kidding.

And I wouldn't have gotten married if I'd won that, because that's when I met my wife.

And your wife's name is?

[00:40:00] Mary. I would've never called her back if I'd have won that election. I'd have been the hotshot up in the state. Nearly pulled it off but didn't quite. Didn't quite. Then every time I ever ran as prosecutor or judge, I won all the time. I've won like ten elections, so I've been through—

Interesting how things work.

And where were you determined or designed to do or what are—? How are the big things? My three daughters. Somebody's going to do something of some consequence? Don't know. What are you designed to do? I was always joking. There was a little girl that ran track for us who got in trouble one time. She was a white girl who was dating a black boy, and a girl yelled at her, and anyhow she took her on. And the principal, who had no sense at all, suspended her for the rest of the track meet. And Amy came crying to me and says, what do I do? what do I do, Mr. Curran? It wasn't "Judge," it was "Mr. Curran." And I said, Amy, we go out here on Good Friday and you run this two-mile like you've never run it. Get mad. Get mad, Amy. And so she did, and then she wound up second in the state. She ran it. Anyhow, the thing was, my daughter really was the one who—Beth, my lawyer daughter, picked her up as a freshman – Beth was a junior – and I mean Amy was arrested for smoking pot and all this kind of stuff. The girl had scoliosis and asthma, you know, I mean—Beth said, Dad, she can run. Dad, she can run. Anyhow, so she's a coach today. But she's also a paramedic. And I said, You know, Amy could've been in jail, but she's a paramedic. And was it that time where I said, You don't care if you are, you know, *illegitimum non factum est*, which means "Don't let the bastards grind you down." And I said, Amy, that means you are your own person. You make your own decisions. You don't let the principal of the high school or that girl call you names. You don't let that bother you. You're Amy. So Amy someday may save somebody on the road. Who knows? And she's a teacher.

Yeah, I mean that's just a great example of you just don't know where the paths are going to go or what to do.

Everybody you run into in this world, you influence them in some way. It can be bad. It can be good. It can be indifferent. But you try to do it the good way. You know I'm trying to influence you, don't you?

I think so.

I think your potential, you're going to be a doctorate, you're probably going to be a teacher, I imagine.

Probably so.

And so all this goes. Everything you do. I could've been mean to you but I wouldn't.

Well, I appreciate that.

No, you know I'm kidding. No, I'm kidding.

Well, listen, we're just about 12:15 or so and I think we were going to do lunch at 12:30, so why don't we break here?

Have I tired you out especially?

No, but I'm going to break here.

Are you learning anything?

Oh, yes, I've learned quite a bit.

[0:43:47] End Track 2, Disc 2.

[End of interview]

