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

Interview with Ernest Williams

March 26, 2004
Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Christopher Nowicki

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

Christopher Nowicki: *For the record, would you please state your full name, your date of birth, and the city and state of your birth.*

Ernest Williams: I'm Ernest Benjamin Williams. I was born December 20, 1930 in a small town, Naponee, Nebraska, in the month of December.

If you would be so kind, would you please talk a little bit about your life growing up in Nebraska.

Growing up in Nebraska in the early 1930s, as you well probably realize, it was the Depression years. There weren't many jobs available. I can remember my father and my mother being relatively poor people, not having very fancy clothes. I remember the dust storms at the age of three-and-a-half to four, when it was just like walking into the fog in the state of California off the coast. You could hardly see anything, and the drifts of dust would just come across the roads like snowdrifts. I remember one evening, I had to be somewheres around four to five years old, we went to a woody schoolhouse to attend the PTA which is held by the schools. It was a small play, and before the play was over everybody was telling us that the winds were blowing bad and not to try to go the east-west roads because they were blocked as if they were like snowdrifts. The dust was blowing so bad we had to take the north-south roads to get down to the river bottom, which was protected by trees and the river, in order to get east and west. When we got to the river bottom, we had a 1929 Dodge there was so much static electricity in the air, the car wouldn't run. Had we had just sense enough to put the tire chains on the bumper and let them drag on the ground, why, the car would've ran. But we got to there and we stayed with the

Godekin family all night because we didn't know any better. We had no idea what the problem was.

[00:05:00] The dust storms were bad. I can remember one afternoon we were at our house—we lived three miles south of Naponee—and the dust storm came up. My third brother—there's only four of us; I'm the youngest— my third brother came, probably a couple hundred feet from the house out by the chicken house [where] I was playing, and he came and got me because I was not able to get back to the house because the dust was blowing bad. He had a pair of goggles on, they were glass with just a canvas goggles in those days, and came and got me and brought me back to the house. That evening the dust storm was so bad, and my mother had spaghetti and meatballs and a couple other items. It was coming in so bad into the house that my mother actually put tea towels—my mother would take sugar sacks and make them into tea towels—and she laid those over the top of all the food to keep the dust from getting down into the food. When you wanted some food, you lifted up the tea towel and you got the food out of it.

And of course naturally my time comes to start school and at the age of seven I started elementary school, the first grade, at Red Top School. It just so happened that my mother had graduated from that school. She went to that school. All four of us boys all went to that school also.

In 1942 my father and mother had the opportunity to move from one farm, which was south of Naponee by three miles, to move three miles *east* of Naponee. The farm was owned by some of our relatives and it was much better land to cultivate and of course we're now in the beginning of World War II.

Did your father work the farm as a farmer?

Yes, my dad was a farmer for fifty-two years.

And what did you grow?

Basically grew alfalfa, corn, wheat, milo, pigs, and raised cattle.

And raised cattle.

And we moved to the new farm in late 1942. And during the war we got a lot more rain and we had excellent crops. You got to remember, we didn't have any irrigation in those days. We depended upon Mother Nature to give us the moisture that we need for our crops. We had some *excellent* crops in those years. And I remember most of the farmers—from discussion, how much truth there is in it I don't know—but they always kept saying, `All the gunpowder that's being fired, we're getting a lot of good rain`. Whether that had anything to do with it or not, I have no idea, but we had excellent crops.

My oldest brother Warren enlisted into the U.S. Air Corps at age twenty-seven and went into the service and served during the entire war. Came home honorably discharged in early 1946. My other two brothers [were] Walter and Orville. Walter was a mechanic but unfortunately during his small age, probably four, he stuck his hand into some equipment and lost some of his fingers, and so he was put in 4-F. In other words, he wasn't able to handle a rifle properly because of the missing of his fingers. He continued to be a farm hand because all the young men have left now to go to the war and he's in great demand to help the farmers. He worked many hours trying to help two or three different farmers get their crops done because they couldn't hire anybody. There wasn't anybody to be hired.

My third brother had went to Oregon in Springfield and was in a logging mill. In those days we didn't have the computer world. All the logs as they were being cut, there was a carriage in front of them and a man rode that carriage, and that's how you slice off the logs into slabs. Most people couldn't take the carriage because it just goes back and forth, back and forth, and

they would just get deathly sick. My brother was out in the pond with hobnail boots on feeding the logs into the mill, and he said, I'd sure like a chance at that. **[00:10:00]** Well, he got that opportunity. He rode the carriage and never got sick, and so he was given a deferment because he was cutting a lot of oak and the oak was being prepared into stocks for army rifles, so he was deferred because he was doing something for the defense of his country.

We all came home, back together, in about 1946. He returned back from Oregon, and shortly after that, why, my oldest brother which was in World War II had a pilot's license and unfortunately a sad accident happened. They were flying a private airplane and he got killed in an airplane accident in November 1947.

My father wasn't very well at this time. He had injured his back and basically was down in his back, I'll call it a rocking chair—we didn't have big lounge chairs in those days—and not able to do much. Well, my brother and I were basically doing the farming, because my oldest brother and I are both single—of course I'm not out of school yet—and we're doing most of the farming. Well now it's down to me. I'm at the level now being almost sixteen years of age, a junior in high school.

So that would be 1947.

That's right, and I had entered into high school in the fall of 1945. And in late 1946, early 1947 my father took sick, and of course my brother got killed in November of 1947. And so I continued then to not only farm two hundred acres of cultivated land [and] take care of a hundred head of hogs and a hundred head of cattle. My mother had probably around two hundred head of chickens. And I continued to do the farm and go to high school for my junior and senior year and graduated in May 1949. By this time my father is back on his feet to where he can begin to get

back on the tractor and able to do work, but I kept the farm going for two years and went to high school, and I got to tell you, it taught me one good thing: responsibility.

Sounds like you were a very busy young man.

I never participated much in athletics. I did play a little bit of basketball. I wasn't big enough to play football so, you know, when I graduated out of high school I only weighed a whole sum of eighty-eight pounds, so I wasn't big enough to play football. I did play some baseball. I was the catcher for our team in Naponee, and we had a great time at that.

I graduated out of high school, Naponee High School, in May 1949. And my father, being back on his feet, recognizing I've graduated, now I need to get out and make a living also to get a little spending money. I applied to—just about seven miles from us was the Republican River, and it had been talked about for many years that they would start building a dam on the Republican River. I hired in with the Harlan County Construction Company and immediately was put in to the survey crew, and I started out as a chainman and then I became a rodman. I was relatively good in math in high school, and immediately I was just accepted into the survey crew. In that next two years I became instrument man—not chief of party, but instrument man—and I'm setting all the points for all the construction workers to build the forms to a 1,940-foot concrete spillway, with all the sluice gates and floodgate to release water from the dam.

And then late 1950, we had to shut down in the fall because the winter months get so cold and it freezes, so you can't pour concrete. And so as I remember, we shut down in early November 1950 and in December, just before Christmas, I got my draft notice.

Well, Mr. Williams, if I may, before we discuss your entrance into the military, I'd like to ask you a little bit about some of your thoughts about World War II as you were going through [it]as a young man in rural Nebraska. Obviously the entire country was caught up in the production and

[00:15:00] *all the men were away fighting. Did you have any thoughts that you remember as a young man thinking about the war, how you thought it would turn out? Did you think that perhaps you would have a chance to participate?*

Yes, I was very interested in World War II, and only because my dad's sister, which would be my aunt, but she's older than my father, was very instrumental in my life. She used to be a school teacher and my dad and her would visit quite a bit about the war and she got me introduced to reading the Ernie Pyle column in the newspaper. I have to admit I really got enthused about World War II. There was no doubt in my mind and in my entire family that America should win. We recognized that it wasn't going to be a short-term thing. It did have a major impact in the community. As I mentioned earlier, there wasn't a lot of manpower around, so it meant a lot of the farmers basically were working fourteen, sixteen, seventeen hours on their own to get the crop done.

But I've always had a great feeling for our country. I thought that as a young boy, maybe someday I will have my opportunity to serve my country. You have to remember, the beginning of World War II I was only eleven years old, so it's quite a ways down the stream yet. but I've always taken an interest in the history of our country.

Quite obviously. Do you recall where you were and when it was that you heard that the war in the Pacific was over because of the dropping of the bomb on Nagasaki?

Yes I do. We were together, my father as well as my mother and my aunt, and we were listening to the radio at my aunt's house. We heard that a few days before that, that they had dropped the bomb, but I don't think *any* of us recognized how awesome the bomb was. I think we all recognized it was in some ways, I think, kind of like another bomb, but we also had that inkling that it was something greatly different. We had the feeling from the first one that was dropped

and we had that message on the radio that yes, it did a lot of destruction and that there was a lot of people killed. Please bear in mind, we didn't have television yet. We had our ears glued to the radios. We heard that the second one had been dropped and that General Douglas MacArthur would be meeting on the USS *Missouri* to finalize the papers for bringing the war to an end. Not only my family but lots of my first cousins were in the service, and all of the families, the phone was ringing from one family to another, Gee, Harry, Warren, Robert and George all's going to be coming home pretty soon, you know, and that's just a few of my relatives that was in the service. But Gee, we're going to get them home pretty soon.

So eventually then what? You went on to work a little construction after working on the farm?

I worked two years in the Harlan County Construction Company in the engineering section, basically in the survey crew, and as I said I got my draft notice and I then went up and enlisted because I didn't want to be drafted. My oldest brother had enlisted in World War II. Chances are my brother, if he hadn't enlisted, he probably wouldn't have went to serve because he was almost twenty-seven years old when he enlisted, and the draft was nineteen through twenty-six. They normally didn't draft anybody over twenty-six. If you were twenty-seven years old, they didn't bother you.

Was that a personal choice, that you felt you wanted to contribute, or what was the thinking behind enlisting after you got your draft notice?

After I got my draft notice—and again no offense against the Army—I just felt that I wanted to serve because my brother had been in the service and I felt very loyal. **[00:20:00]** And I wanted to support my country. I went down to the Air Force and enlisted because I thought I really wanted to be an airplane mechanic and could do something that eventually, when I got back out of the service, that would give me a profession. Instead of being just an ordinary laboring

gentleman on a farm, why, I thought, gee, you know, if I could be an airplane mechanic, eventually hopefully maybe I could get into the airline industry, which was a good goal to look forward to.

Well, we arrived in Omaha, Nebraska on the tenth of January and we were sworn in to the service and we got a train and went to San Anton', Texas to Lackland Air Force Base which we though was going to be basic training. When we arrived there, there was such an influx of enlistees into the United States Air Force, and of course Lackland one of a few training centers, when we arrived down there they had accepted a lot of enlistees and so when we arrived we soon realized that there were probably at least ten thousand or more of us that they didn't have facilities for us. They had put up tents for us to live in and unfortunately San Anton', Texas in the middle part of January started getting cold and we didn't have any heat. We had fourteen beds to a tent and there were canvas cots and we had two blankets, and that was basically it. And I have to tell you, when the temperatures get to twenty degrees, two blankets don't hardly cut the mustard. So the first night we were pretty cold. A fellow by the name of John Hoback, which had a bachelor's degree but also had enlisted in the Air Force, and he was from Omaha, Nebraska. And of course naturally I'm from Nebraska, and we set up and talked quite a bit of the night because it was cold, both recognizing that if it gets too cold and you're asleep, that's a good way to go to sleep and you freeze to death. Not that we were going to freeze to death but it crossed our minds, and so we chit-chatted quite a bit all night. The next night we slept very comfortable because we raided all the garbage cans and we got all the newspapers . We put the newspapers on top of the canvas of the cot, and then we put one blanket on top of that and then the second blanket we folded in half and put newspapers in the middle, We slept very comfortable the next night, you know, because it was insulation. Kept that cold from coming in.

As time went on, we recognized we weren't doing anything. They were asking us to march down to eat, and we did a little marching out on the quadrangle, but I kept thinking, you know, what are we going to train to do here? And then the sergeant would come in and he'd say, Well, you know, we just don't have the facilities to do anything with you people yet.

One afternoon the sergeant came in and he said, We're going to give you a test. I think most of us wondered, What's this all about? A lot of us had—because of our brothers or sisters that had been in the service—had kind of led us to believe that you don't volunteer because it won't be what you think you're getting into. The gentleman said, We want you to take a test. I thought, gee, what can I do to go wrong on this? So I held up my hand and sure enough the gentleman was very honest with us, and it really turned out to be an aptitude test, in my humble feeling, mechanical and electrical and math. And of course any farm boy that was involved in this—and not that the children from larger cities couldn't be sharp in that field—but I think the farm boys and particularly of my age had helped their fathers during World War II you couldn't just go down to the local store and buy another part--basically you had to go to the welding shop and get that part welded —and we'd repair the machinery. Well, I think that really enhanced all of us typical farm boys and helped us out in the mechanical area. Well, we scored high, and a couple days later **[00:25:00]** the sergeant came in and he said, Here are the scores, and all you, here's the results, and started naming us off. He said, Four hours from now, you're going to [have] your duffle bag packed and you're headed for Albuquerque, New Mexico.

And did you have any idea at that point why you were going to Albuquerque, what was going on in Albuquerque at the time?

When the sergeant explained to us that we were going to Albuquerque we asked him, What are we getting into? And [he] said, I'm not at liberty to tell you. He said, You'll find

out when you get there. So we had no knowledge of what we were getting into. And when we arrived by buses at Sandia base, we were immediately taken to some real nice quarters. We were allowed to have three men to a room, and boy, what a pleasure that was!

And again, we fell out in the quadrangle a couple days later, early in the morning, probably like seven o'clock, and a lieutenant colonel came out in front of us. There was about 180 of us enlisted people, and he explained to us that we had some sheets of paper here that he wanted us to fill out. He was not at liberty to tell us what kind of a program it was going to be yet, but [they] needed to do a background investigation. And if your background was clean and you hadn't been in jail and you wasn't an alcoholic prior to enlisting in the service, why, you probably didn't have anything to worry about. And of course this long three-page documentation basically asked a lot of questions about your personal life, where you were born, and had you been in jail or had you been given any automobile tickets, and did you drink a lot, just typical questions that goes to make sure that your background is legitimate, that you mean well for your country. We filled all this out, and in my case I recognized that I hadn't traveled any. I had been out of my hometown of Naponee to Denver and that was it. The gentleman said, If you haven't traveled much, your clearance will probably come through quite rapidly.

And sure enough my clearance came pretty rapidly. I received it and they called me in in the afternoon, and this is probably now March 1951, and he said, Your clearance has come through, Airman Williams. He said, Tomorrow morning you need to meet us and we'll take you over to a special place. And so we met the next morning this civilian which was a civilian employee working for Sandia Corporation. We marched over with the sergeant and we went into an auditorium and he explained to us that, You gentlemen, you're going to go to school here. It's going to be for security and also

assembly and disassembly of nuclear weapons. I have to say my jaw probably dropped, because I had no idea. It's six years since World War II. Having been greatly watching World War II and how it came to an end, recognizing that the nuclear industry is pretty high on the defense program, I just couldn't believe that here's a lot of us typical farm boys, we're now going to [have] a great change in our life because we're going to be dealing with weapons that, in our humble feeling, was high on the priority list for the defense of our country. He said to us that we would be going to school not only to be a security guard but we'd also learn assembly and disassembly of nuclear weapons.

Can you explain a little bit about some of the security aspects? I don't know if there's anything that you would be unable to tell us at this point.

No, the security aspects basically was, the first thing he said to us was, We're going to start training you in this field, and please bear in mind that you will not discuss this with anyone. **[00:30:00]** Amongst you—as enlistees, as servicemen, you can come back to the compound. We were given special badges which allowed us to get in to special areas, and he said, Then you can discuss whatever your training, what you were taught yesterday, if you wish to discuss that with your fellow worker, you may do so, but outside of the compound it's a no-no. We were instructed that we would be going basically to school ten to twelve hours a day, six days a week, and we could take all the notes we wanted, but the notes would have to be left within the classified area.

So we began the training of the Mark V, the Mark VI, and the Mark VII nuclear devices as to how to disassemble and also put them together, and with the intent that later on we might be asked to be in different squadrons if the president would ask for nuclear devices to be used in a war.

Wow. So that was at Sandia in Albuquerque, New Mexico and you were there for four months, and after the four months of training was over, your next assignment was what?

The next assignment we had after we completed our training and we had been told that we had passed—I scored a 93—with the understanding that when we went into this training, that at the end of the four months if we didn't score 90 and above, we probably wouldn't stay in the program. I scored 93, and I have to admit there was quite a few boys that didn't pass. They just didn't make it. But then we completed that and then we didn't have any particular place for us to go immediately, and so we were asked then to participate with another army unit at Sandia base. Within the Sandia base compound, which is a large area, there is a storage facility, and they said,

That's run by the Army and since we've been teaching you how to be security guards as well, the army hasn't had a chance to get their people on annual leave to go home and see their families. For the next four or five months we're going to take half of their organization and we're going to take over half of their responsibilities.

And so then we worked in the storage facility, and the storage facility. I make no bones about it, it has the storage of nuclear units. There's a lot of bunkers around and there are four individual cyclone fences.

What is a "cyclone fence"?

A cyclone fence would be like you would have around any playground, or like you see along various highway—

A kind of chain link fence.

Just a chain link, basically a chain link fence. But the third fence in the middle—coming from the outside coming in, the first fence is a protective fence, the second fence is another protective fence, the third fence has got a 120,000 volts into it, and the fourth fence on the inside is to

protect you from the inside of getting next to the fence. We recognized by this time that this is pretty serious business. We were asked to pull security work up there and relieve the Army, because they had to guard the various facilities where nuclear devices were being stored and worked on. We continued to do that through the end of 1951 and we came up in early 1952. The Army said, All of our troops have had adequate time to spend time home with their families and so we're going to relieve you of that. By this time we'd been told that we were now being assigned to the 1st Tactical Support Squadron and we will be preparing to put you together as a unit of 280 people, and about forty of those will be officers and the rest of you will be enlisted people. We're going **[00:35:00]** to be putting all of the equipment together, vehicles, and whatever we need for this squadron, and you're going to be helping us do that. And early February 1952, sure enough, we were all loaded onto C-119 aircraft and we went to Langley Air Force [Base], Virginia.

What was your rank at this time?

At this time I have two stripes on my shoulders.

So that makes you a—?

I'm now a corporal, airman second class.

A corporal. Do you recall when you got your promotion to corporal?

I got promoted to corporal, as I remember, in November 1951. I got rank pretty quickly in the service, if I may use that word "quickly." A lot of guys didn't get to be corporals. I think what I see after the fact, that us gentlemen, young boys, that had came from the farm, we all realized what responsibility was. I think the service people above us in rank realized that here are the boys that know what responsibility is. I think that had a lot of input to it. And as I said, I became a corporal a lot earlier than some of my friends did. And I thought they were just as sharp as I

was, except I think the ranking people above us realized that some of us knew how to handle responsibility.

And we arrived at Langley Air Force Base and we were told we were only going to be there like two to three months. We had our own—by this time we have now six training nuclear units with us. They're basically not a nuclear unit but they're a training unit of like kind.

A model.

A model. And we have a special building that we—out of the 180 of us there's a number of us that are being just plain security guards. And then there's a group of us that were working assembly and disassembly. Basically we're trained in both areas. Not everybody that was a security guard was trained in both areas though. A group of us was cross-trained, and then there were some enlisted people that were strictly just assembly and disassembly. I just happened to be one of them that got cross-trained in both areas, and I sort of enjoyed that. It broke up the monotony. You know, security work, standing at a post, guarding to make sure that the right people get into the facility, it's a responsibility; it's not the most exciting job but yes, it has to be done.

Was there any extra security training that would've been over and above general military security training because you were working with such important weapons?

I would say yes. We were trained particularly in the security area that, you know, if people don't have the proper identification—and please bear in mind the badges in those days, a badge, and as you looked at the picture it had a gold braid across the picture, and it was kind of like cat and mouse, you know, two stripes up and down and across, parallel—and they said, you know, `If that badge doesn't have that gold band and braid into it, you're not allowed to let anybody in this building.` And of course there were also special numbers on the badges that you also had to pay attention to also. And we were trained to make sure that, I guess

I'd have to say, [to] watch out for the counterfeit badges. I will also tell you that yes, I think they pulled a few tricks on us once in a while. They'd send in a dummy, particularly if I was on post. I was on post one afternoon when this gentleman come through and I said, I'm sorry, sir, you don't have the right numbers on your badge and secondly, you have a badge that doesn't have gold braid in it, and I said, so you're going to be detained right here. And we detained him and called for the sergeant and he came down and relieved us of an unauthorized person, and he took **[00:40:00]** him and said, You're reassigned back to your post and proceed on with your guarding of your post. We had no idea what happened to him. There's no doubt in my mind he was an implant. But it was to test the system. And we were all explained to that no matter when we went home to visit our mother and dad or our girlfriend, we were specifically told we would *not* discuss *any*thing that we had trained for, even as being a security guard. That we were told to specifically explain to our parents that we were assigned to the Air Force Special Weapons Project and end of conversation.

And that must have given you a certain amount of young man's bravado, sounding so important and so secretive.

When I went home my father said, What are you doing? And I said, Dad, you have to recognize that there are things that are being done within our country, within our service people, and within our government, and as you well know, Dad, within the government political people there's certain things that doesn't get discussed. And I said, I happen to be just on the military side now, and I said, Dad, I'm assigned to the United States Air Force Special Weapons Project out of Albuquerque, New Mexico I'm not able to discuss with you what I do. I said, The only thing I will say to you is that our training, in my humble feeling, is pretty high on the defense of our country.

And how did your father feel about that? How did your family in general feel about the secrecy and—?

My father looked at me and he said, `Ernie, I recognize that you must be in something pretty important.` He said, `There's no sense in me even trying to talk to you about it because you're not going to tell me anything anyway.` He said, `But I'm so proud that you must be in something that's extremely important to our country.` He said, `It's a great pleasure to see some of our farm boys get involved in some of those activities.` He never questioned me after that, you know, he just accepted it.

We were a close-knit family. We had a lot of picnics. Usually when one of our servicemen come home, the family and the uncles and the aunts all got together and we'd have a big old picnic at the river bed. We'd always have fried chicken and potato salad, and everybody enjoyed having the servicemen present because they were so proud of their servicemen in the service. My mother was very proud of the fact that during World War II you could have a flag—and the flag, it wasn't the American flag; it was a red, white, and blue flag but it had a star on it—and you could either have one, two, three, or four, or five stars, all depended on how many members of your family was in the service. My mother had one star when my brother was in the service and she very proudly hung that thing back up in the window again because she had one more son in the service again.

You may wonder when we were at home on leave, what did we do? I came from a small community where there wasn't a lot of girls, and so I really never dated much because I come from a community that there were more boys than there was girls. And of course until I went to the service, and shortly before I went to the service, I didn't have a car. I borrowed my dad's car to go to construction work. And I didn't misuse my dad's car because I knew if I disabused the

car my privileges were going to be gone. And so when I came home on leave I had a 1936 Ford Club Coupe, what they called a five-window coupe; only had two doors but it had five windows. I owned that before I went to the service and I had left **[00:45:00]** it in my dad's—my dad had a great big old barn and so we parked the car in the barn, and when I'd come home I'd use that car. But I was only allowed to come home twice, from the time I got into the service until I left for overseas.

So between the years 1951 and 1952 you made it home twice.

Yes, I was home twice up through 1952, and then we left in May 1952 out of Newport News, Virginia aboard ship. We loaded all of our six-by-six trucks and Jeeps and also we had six real nuclear devices on board. And so aboard ship we guarded our certain section of the ship because we didn't allow people to be around where these were parked. I have to admit I don't have sea legs and so [laughter] I was sick as a dog for seven days going over and I missed twenty-one meals. But we still tried to do our job. It wasn't the most easy thing to do but—

Were you pulling security detail on board the ship?

I was pulling security duties on board ship, and I pulled security duties off and on the entire time that I was in the program, including up through November 1953.

As time went on aboard ship, we arrived in England. I have to laugh about it now because when we arrived in England, I don't think any of us realized that in England you're not allowed to carry a weapon. Even the policemen don't carry a weapon. Please bear in mind, this is 1952-days. And so when we got off from aboard ship and we got down on the dock, and the first thing the dock master told us, he said, `All you servicemen with weapons on, you're going to have to go back and put your weapons aboard ship. You're not allowed to wear them. Or you put them in a box and it's sealed and—`

How were you armed at the time when you were working security detail?

We were all issued an M-1 carbine rifle and we also had a .45 revolver. And so when we arrived on dock, we took all the rifles back, and we had them over our shoulders. And we went back aboard the ship. A gentleman by the name of Major Davies, he happened to be an enlisted man that became a battlefield-commissioned officer during World War II, and he got to be know as the enlisted man's officer. He said, Don't worry about it, guys. He was in charge of security and he said, Don't worry about it, guys. Tell you what you do. Unblouse your boots, let your pant legs down, stick your .45 underneath, into the top end of your parachute boot. We'll keep the rifles; we'll put them into a box and we'll seal them up and they'll come down off the ship with the crane. He said, What the Bobbies don't know won't hurt them. So we then unloaded our units off the ship and put them on a lowboy and Major Davies—

And a "lowboy" is—?

A lowboy is a flat trailer behind a big tractor. And we put two units to a lowboy. And then Major Davies come over and he said, One of my drivers is sick. He said, Ernie—we got to the point where we were on a first-name basis—he said, Ernie, you're an old farm boy. He said, I want you to drive this tractor and take these nuclear units.

We got a hundred miles to drive on the streets now. And lo and behold, the first thing we realize is that we now have to drive on the left-hand side of the road. As a young man, you know, I'm twenty-one going on twenty-two, I said, Oh my. I'm on the wrong side of the cab in order to see the center of the line.

The Bobbies, they had been forewarned by other military people that knew we were **[00:50:00]** coming—they had a specific route that we were to take. Well lo and behold, these streets are not very wide, and in order to get around one corner we not only had the tires and the bumper up against one edge of the one building on the opposite side, we're hoping to get the tail

end of the trailer around on the right-hand side without hitting the building, and we're on the sidewalks on *both* sides of the street.

But we made it. And we traveled one hundred miles and we get up to Sculthorpe Royal Air Force Base which is about a hundred miles north of London, and we drove basically all night. We got there early that morning. It was daylight. We were told that there was a compound that we could use to put our equipment in. They didn't make any reference to what we had. And again it was a cyclone fence, and there was a building. I would call it an old hangar from World War II probably, of Great Britain. And so it had some big doors and you could open the big doors and we rolled our units inside the building, and we kept them there, and then pretty soon we were told that there was a storage area a couple of miles away, and they also had some concrete bunkers that we could put our equipment in. The Great Britain people that was in the service, uniformed people of Great Britain, as well as their civilians, never made any reference to what we had. They always just referred to your "equipment." To this day, I often wonder if they really knew what we were doing or not, because once we took control of the area we never saw these British people and never saw these civilians again.

Does it seem strange to you [and]—perhaps is part of the reason why you suspected they didn't know—the fact that they expected you to be unarmed as you were transporting this—?

Yes, I think they expected us to be unarmed. The military side of the house, and I would have to say probably by this time, the Atomic Energy Commission has been established in 1947, so it's my understanding that when you're transporting nuclear units, that you will have armed guards. In fact the people that worked in those days, which was the Atomic Energy Commission, they had security guards that did nothing but transport nuclear weapons from one place to another. They were always armed, and [it was]not uncommon to see what we would call a Carryall today,

or a Suburban. Wasn't uncommon to see fifty caliber machine guns involved, as well as the rifles. You'd see .45s and you'd see .38 Smith and Wesson specials. Even later in life after I got out of the service, I recognized that these people were transporting these things across country. They're very well guarded, you know.

But let's go back to being in England. As I said, they never bothered us. The biggest problem we had in England was next to our compound where we stored all of our units, we had a British farmer. He actually had plants that he was cultivating next to our fences, and so we had asked him if he came in after dark, to please come to our gate and let us know that he was nearby. We could see the tractor and everything but we just wanted to make sure it was him. Because the rule was that if anybody got within fifty feet of our fence, you were to get their attention. They were to be stopped. And we had roving patrols around. We didn't have a completely lighted compound—we had a few lights but it's not like walking down the street with lots of lights; it was relatively dim. And we never had any problems except for the farmer. Occasionally he would come in and he would forget to tell us and he'd be down there at the far end of our compound, and the compound probably with **[00:55:00]** cyclone fence around it was, well, I would guess it was two hundred by three hundred. And we'd jump in the Jeep and we'd run down to make sure it was him. But unfortunately one night—and in the middle of the compound we have a wooden tower and the wooden tower has a roof on it. There are four corners which are basically four-by-fours, but in the center of the tower is a fifty caliber machine gun with a 360 degree circle capability. And the kid—you got to remember, there are some young boys that—I don't want to call them "boys," they're good grown men but some get fidgety pretty quick and they're not as levelheaded maybe as they should be. He saw the lights of this tractor, and he had a big PA system and he hollered at the farmer to stop, and no doubt in my

mind, the farmer heard him and he didn't. He cut down on him with a fifty caliber machine gun. I got the call. I had a field phone in my room. I've now been more or less put on the security administrative side of the house. By this time I'm realizing that I got this phone call and I said, Oh my. Does anybody know whether he's alive or not? And he said, No. Well, I'm getting dressed and in the meantime I pick up my public telephone that's in my room and I call the major and I said, Major, you need to get out of bed and I need to see you at the compound immediately. The sentry that's on the guard tower has cut down with the fifty caliber machine gun. I think you and I both know what the results are, but we won't know until we get there. Sure enough, the farmer was deceased. We relieved the gentleman of his post. I looked at the major and I said, Major, this is pretty serious now.

And he said, Why don't I see you back at the provost marshal's office in about twenty minutes?

And I said, I will be there, Major.

By this time, please bear in mind I have three stripes; I'm an airman first class. I've completed the assignment of that evening. We went back to the provost marshal's office and when I arrived there the major was coming in right behind me. He said, We got to arrange for a court-martial. And so immediately I'm getting people called and the wing headquarters so that we can set up a military court, and by six o'clock in the morning we have had court. The young gentleman has been found guilty, fined him one dollar, and reassigned him from his squadron, and he's aboard an airplane headed for the United States at nine o'clock in the morning. That's the last I ever saw of the gentleman.

Basically a slap on the wrist.

Slap on the wrist, yes. He had done his job. He hadn't done anything that he hadn't been told to do. He had cautioned the farmer properly, and he had every right to do what he did.

I completed working more or less then in the administrative security area from probably March 1953 through November 1953. That's when I was transferred out of England and was transferred to Nellis Air Force Base. When I arrived at Nellis Air Force Base, which is here in Las Vegas, Nevada, I reported in, in late 1953. First thing I asked for was where was the tech area? The tech area, in those of us that's been in the nuclear field, is the assembly and disassembly area where we train and put our units together for training or whatever. And the gentleman looked at me, the major, and he said, Major Kell, he said, **[01:00:00]** What do you mean, "tech area?"

I said, Please look at my AFSC [Air Force Specialty Code]. I said, I'm a specialized trained individual.

He said, Doesn't make any difference. He said, We're in the midst of the Korean War. You're going to have to change your field. He says, I don't know what a "tech area" is.

And I said, Well, putting it mildly, I have a Q-clearance. I've also been trained in the nuclear field.

And he said, There is no nuclear field here, so you're going to change your field.

That was kind of a shock to me. I have another year yet to do in the service. I had great thoughts of gee, you know, I've been trained in this field now. I didn't get to be an airplane mechanic. Gee, this could really be a great asset for me when I get out of the service.

You wanted to continue working in that particular field.

I would like to have continued in it. It didn't necessarily mean I had to be completely in assembly and disassembly every day. I was wanting to be in the security as well as the tech area of working conditions. I realized that wasn't going to happen. He said, We're going to put you over in personnel department for a few days. He said, We'll see how you do in personnel.

Well, the personnel department was basically reviewing the officers' records before they were leaving the base to wherever they were being assigned for reassignment, whether it was overseas to go into the Korean War or what. I was only in there about four or five days when Major Kell come in and he said, Airman Williams, I have a new assignment for you. He said, We've had a young gentleman down in the 3595th Fighter Training Squadron that has decided he could cash other people's bonds. He said, He's no longer available to work.

I said, I believe I understand that. I said, I'm sure he's going to get more action than what he wants. And of course he had cashed people's bonds without their permission and so we all knew where he was going.

And where was that?

We knew he was going to get court-martialed and he was going to the brig. And so he said, I want you to take over the financial responsibilities. This happens to be the squadron down on the flight line. I don't remember the organization that the pilots were assigned to, but the 3595th Squadron only had about fifteen people in it. We were responsible for all of the administrative actions for 600 officers that are going to school at Nellis to be fighter pilots, their final stage of their fighter pilots [training]. Out of the six hundred officers on a given Friday—which is every two weeks, on Friday—sixty officers go out. On Monday sixty officers come in. So it's a turnover of a 120 people and that happens every two weeks. He said, Your

responsibility will be to pay these officers. And so I have now six hundred officers to pay. I had not been in the financial field. I had been enough into the administrative field, that I was up to my ears in paperwork. I can handle it, you know. Math was simple for me in high school and I said, Gee, I ought to be able to cut this without any problem, and I did. I worked paying these officers for the next four months, and I made staff sergeant. The colonel that was down on the flight line that was getting all the flying hours under these pilots before they leave to go to the Korean War come in one day and he said, You'll never know how much I appreciate you. He said, My officers are very happy with all your work. He said, You're always right there when they need it. You're trying to help them. And these officers as they get ready to leave for the Korean War, in many cases their wife and maybe a child or two are either going to go back home and live with Dad and Mom or they're going to have to find a residential home off the base someplace. Most of them went home to be **[01:05:00]** with their mom and dad while the pilot was away in Korea fighting the war. And so I'd work with them: You need one month? Do you need two months' advance so you can have enough money to ship your family home? And I had to have all of that up to the finance office three days prior to their departure. I was able to accomplish that. I received two or three different letters of commendations for that, personal letters written by the officers saying they were very pleased.

As time went on, December 1954 is arriving and my four years is going to be completed on January 10, 1955.It was not completely at the end of the Korean War but it's winding down. At the same time, there's been such an influx of uniformed people coming in in 1951 that enlisted and now there's an outgoing flux of military Air Force people leaving the service. General Stevenson was the gentleman in charge at Nellis at the time. He indicated to me that he had put out a memorandum that if you didn't reenlist you would be asked to come before

General Stevenson to understand why you didn't want to reenlist. I had made no indications that I was going to reenlist. Fifteen days prior to my departure from the Air Force, I've been relieved of my job. I've been told that my paperwork will be commencing for departure from the service or reenlistment, and if I was to reenlist that I would probably go back to my old job. They said, We need to know your decision.

I said, I have my decision made. I will finish my four years in the air force very proudly, and I have no regrets, but I believe that I can make a better salary on the outside. Please bear in mind, I'm getting $128 a month.

And that was a staff sergeant's salary at the time.

That was a staff sergeant's salary. And in the meantime I had been down to 1235 South Main Street where the Atomic Energy Commission has an office.

Here in Las Vegas.

Here in Las Vegas. And I had went in and explained to them that I was interested in getting a job. I recognized that they were doing nuclear testing at the Nevada Test Site I had also been reading the papers that there was an upcoming series of tests to be conducted at Nevada Test Site and that would be called Operation Teapot.

The lady that was in the office, she said, Well, you know, we won't be able to hire you because, she said, you have to have a Q-clearance.

And I said, Ma'am, I have a Q-clearance.

And I can see her yet. She stopped for a second and she said, You what?

I said, Yes, I have a Q-clearance. It may be deactivated right at the present time because I haven't been in the field for eleven months, I said, But it shouldn't be a problem to reactivate it because I've been at Nellis Air Force Base.

She said, Could you be here tomorrow morning?

I said, Yes, I can be back here tomorrow morning.

And I came back the following morning and Mr. Jack Coffee interviewed me and he said, We are in need of someone to help me in feeding and housing and the motor pool and maintenance of buildings and the roads at the test site. He said, I particularly need somebody in the feeding and housing area. He said, I've been told by security already that they confirm that you have had a Q-clearance. It's just a matter of reactivating it, and you need to fill out some paperwork, and as far as I'm concerned, you're hired.

If I may interrupt quickly, you were in Las Vegas at Nellis Air Force Base for how long?

One year.

One year. So that would be the year of 1954.

That's correct.

During that year, there were no tests at the NTS, is that correct? To your knowledge?

[01:10:00] To my knowledge I believe that's correct, because I think they were doing the testing out at Enewetak.

On the Bikini Island.

And Bikini.

Bikini and Enewetak, according to my information.

I don't think there were any tests conducted in 1954, as my memory serves me, at NTS.

I believe that is correct. That would be Operation Upshot-Knothole, would be the last testing at the NTS, completed on June 4 of 1953, and Operation Teapot commenced on February 18, 1955.

That's correct.

And so did you have a sense that there was testing going on at the NTS?

Well, I knew there was testing—I had read enough about the Nevada Test Site, better known as the Nevada Proving Grounds in those days—I had read enough about it. And of course people at Nellis which I had worked with, being there in 1953, would talk about the flash in the sky, and I knew what that was. I didn't have to be told what that was. And so I thought gee, you know, this is a great opportunity for me to continue in this field if I can just get my foot in the door.

Now at this time had you ever seen an explosion before, or as it's called, a "drop," is that correct?

I had never seen a real test of an atmospheric test or of a nuclear unit being fired. I had worked on them. I had seen a few pictures of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I had not seen any pictures of any kind of the tests which had been going on from 1946 through 1953, either between Enewetak, Bikini Atoll, and the Nevada Test Site. I had not seen any of those pictures. And so when Jack Coffee hired me in, I thought gee, you know, I'm going to get my first opportunity to see a real atmospheric shot.

I was discharged on the tenth of January; I got the word that my clearance had been reactivated on the seventeenth of January. I couldn't go to work until my clearance was reactivated. I got the word on the seventeenth that I could go to work—and that was on a Monday—and I reported for work and I went to the test site. And of course that's in early January now, and I knew that there was an upcoming series of tests because Mr. Coffee, being a typical gentleman from Nebraska—it just so happened that he was from Nebraska; he'd went to school at Marquette—he took me over and he said, `I want to introduce you to somebody that you're going to see in my office quite a bit.`

And he took me over and he introduced me and he said, `This is Mr. James Reeves. He is the test manager.` He also happens to be from Nebraska. And you know there's just something that I think all of us within our life, if somebody is from your state there's a little bit

of camaraderie that goes with that. I thought, gee, you know, I lucked out here. I've got three guys, including myself, here I'm working with three gentlemen that was all from Nebraska. Jack Coffee, a man of fifty—I'm the sole sum of age twenty-four—he really took a liking to me and it didn't take him long to realize that I knew what responsibilities was. He said, I really want you to take over feeding and housing at the test site.

And I said, I'll do my best for you.

Well, as time went on, another two or three weeks passes by. We're working six nines now at the test site.

What was your job title when you first were hired with the Atomic Energy Commission?

As I remember it, I was given nothing but a clerical title. I was in the engineering department but I was given, as I remember, just a clerical position, kind of like a typist, only he explained to me, There's not going to be much typing. You're going to basically be doing feeding and housing, he said, but we don't want another title to put with you.

[laughter]

May I ask, what was the starting salary in those days, do you recall?

Oh my. My memory serves me something like $2,700 a year.

Twenty-seven hundred a year.

[01:15:00] But that was a lot more than I had been making. And he said, you know, You're going to get overtime because we're working six nines, and he said, Where are you going to live? And I said, I don't have any place to live, sir. I'm going to live at the test site.

What was at the test site at the time when you arrived as far as housing and feeding?

Housing was available. There were permanent structures for us to live in.

In the city of Mercury, Nevada.

In the city of Mercury, yes, there was. There was probably capabilities of sleeping, I would say, somewheres in the vicinity of about eight hundred to a thousand people. When I arrived to go to work, at the same time Camp Desert Rock was just off the test site as you start to go in to Mercury. There are six thousand military troops down at Camp Desert Rock. He said, You'll have to do a lot of interfacing with military people. Then he took me up the street on the street called Teapot and he took me into the DoD [Department of Defense] compound and he introduced me to a couple of generals and some colonels. He said, This young man is going to work for me. He said, He'll be interfacing with you on your feeding and housing requirements.

Most of the military people—only the officers got to live up in Mercury; all of what I will call the enlisted people and not all of the officers, a lot of them lived at Camp Desert Rock in tents. It was at tent city and as my memory serves me there was probably twenty-nine or thirty old corrugated Quonset huts, which is basically what we used in World War II as we walked across the various nations in winning the war.

Immediately I didn't have a problem. Olympic Commissary Company is the contractor that's in charge of feeding and housing. The biggest problem that I had at the time was we had turnstiles. Just like you would be counting the people going into a museum, you go through the turnstile and it tells you that 125 people come through. Well, in this case these turnstiles were nothing but a turnstile that you drop one silver dollar into it and you walked into the cafeteria and you ate whatever you wanted. There usually was a selection of two to three different items and entrees, and no matter if you wanted three platesful, you went back and got three platesful. I mean you ate for a dollar. But the biggest problem was trying to keep enough silver dollars so that when people come up with a ten-dollar bill or a twenty-dollar bill, that you could give them

change. I finally convinced the Olympic Commissary Company to go downtown and specifically get $10,000 worth of silver dollars.

Jack Coffee come over to me and he said, `Did I hear that right?`

And I said, `Yes.`

He said, `I was talking to old Mr. Sullivan of Olympic Commissary Company and he told me that you had told him to get $10,000 worth of silver dollars.`

I said, `Yes, because, you know, half the people that are working here, we give them twenty dollars' worth of silver dollars but we don't get all of them back in the cafeteria because they've taken the rest of them and went to town and spent them someplace.`

Well, why don't we pause here and we'll pick up on the next tape with a little bit about Operation Teapot.

Thank you very much.

Thank you, sir.

[01:18:49] End Track 2, Disk 1.

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

UNLV Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, interview with Ernest Williams, conducted by Christopher Nowicki on March 26, 2004 at the Atomic Test Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada. This is disk number two.

[00:00:17] End Track 1, Disk 2.

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

So, Mr. Williams, where we left off on the last disk, we were discussing your entrance into working with the Atomic Energy Commission and you were doing administrative work with feeding and housing in January and February of 1955, which brings us up to Operation Teapot

which was weapons effects tests at the Nevada Test Site, and the first was code named Wasp on February 18, 1955. Were you present for that shot?

Yes, I was. I was present for that shot, and Mr. Coffee had explained to me that we were going to be viewing most all the shots that was going to be shot during Operation Teapot. He said, I want you to be at the benches, either at Frenchman Flat or at Yucca Flat.

And what are the "benches"?

The benches are a group of wooden benches like you would go to the park and sit on a bench, only there's a series of about fifteen or twenty of them and they're probably thirty, forty, fifty feet long. That's just where all of the people working at the test site, if they had a proper badge to get into the forward area, could view a real atmospheric shot being conducted. He made sure that I had a pair of 4.2 density goggles. They're a lot darker than an arc welder's helmet, because you cannot view an atmospheric shot with the human eye looking straight forward. If you do you're going to get a retina burn. There's two things you got to do: you either got to have a set of goggles or you got to turn your back and close your eyes. When you turn your back and close your eyes, even with your eyelids closed, the world lights up bright light even with your eyelids closed. I mean it just gets *bright* as a light, and it's white. And secondly, when you have the 4.2 density goggles on, you see the very beginning of the detonation And just as soon as the white light starts to decay, and I use the word "decay" or "come down in flash", in other words, it's on the decline. And that's just a few seconds. That flash is seen as far away as Los Angeles, Phoenix, Salt Lake City. It's a huge flash. It's very prominent when you're on Fremont Street. People would stand on Fremont Street just to see the flash in the sky. And as soon as that starts to deteriorate, you can pull your goggles off because the intense bright white light has now dissipated and you will no longer get a retina burn. So by the time you get your goggles off you can still see the outlining of the mountains very clear. It's not dusk but it's still quite light. And

then finally it dissipates until finally the white light, you can't see the mountains. It's dark now. Most of the shots were fired at 4:30 in the morning. In those days a lot of the measurements was because of photography, and we got our best photography while things were really dark yet, instead of being daylight.

And so, you know, we proceeded up to the benches just outside of Mercury called Frenchman's Flat and Jack explained to me that I needed the goggles on and I said, OK. And I looked at Jack and I said, This is going to be my first one.

He said, Well, you won't be any different than the rest of us. And, you know, we heard the countdown and we saw the flash. Immediately Jack says, You can take your goggles off. And it's just a huge—the whiteness is now dying down, the stem of the mushroom is coming, and the fireball is dissipating and the mushroom is now rising and oh, what an awesome thing, it really is. It's a spectacular scene. **[00:05:00]** If there's such a thing as a good scene within the nuclear testing business, I want to say "spectacular." It's very unique. It's something that you probably won't get to see only a few times in your lifetime as a participant. If you leave the program, why, you won't never see another one probably. I was fortunate to be able to remain in the program.

But let's go back just a second. As I got the goggles off and were watching the mushroom rise and Jack Coffee looks at me and he said, Ernie, why all the sweat beads?

They're just rolling off my forehead, you know. And I have to say to you that here I'd been in the military, I'd been in assembly and disassembly, and I'd been in the administrative and the security side of the house, and recognizing that yes, this is how we brought World War II to an end and yes, it's a very awesome piece of equipment. But I guess in my humble feeling you don't realize *how* awesome it is until you really see the first one. When you see a fireball, it

depends on the kilotons, but when you begin—the first one that I saw, the fireball, you know, I'd have to say it was probably at least 250 feet in diameter, and it's just awesome. I mean you're now watching something that, once we pull the trigger, there is no backing off, it's going to happen.

That was a one kiloton weapon.

No.

Wasp?

Wasp? Is it a one kiloton?

One kiloton.

I would guess it was—I might be overstating it a little bit but it was huge.

According to the Department of Energy.

Yes. Yes, a one kiloton. That's correct, yes. And anyway, it's a huge fireball, and let's go back a second, you know, Jack looks at me, `Why the sweat beads?`

And I said, `Jack, you know, I've been working with these things over the years and I have to say that I knew they were awesome but I really didn't realize how awesome they were. I said, It's a great tool for the defense of our country, isn't it?`

And he said, `Yes, it is.`

And, you know, we proceeded on. We watched the mushroom go up, and we usually would stay around for twenty minutes or so. You're beginning to see the people that are in the RADSAFE [radiological safety] department, which in those days was still in the hands of the military. You'd begin to see the vehicles starting to get organized and make the reentry, going down into Frenchman's Flat.

And that would be military personnel that would go down to take scientific reading or—?

That would be military. Well, they were going in to get the animals. Please bear in mind, as I remember it in Teapot and also in Redwing—Redwing? No, Plumbbob. It had to be Plumbbob. Beyond the benches, going down the hill into Frenchman's Flat on the left-hand side of the road, there was tent city. Walter Reed Institute had a number of doctors present and a number of veterinarians present, and they were all waiting for the military to reenter into the program and pick up those animals, and some of the veterinarians were going with them. They're now on their way down into Frenchman's Flat and of course they have the radiological people with them to make sure that yes, it has deteriorated to a certain point that it's within reason that you can enter into the area. They are in proper attire. They've got the booties on; they've got the coveralls on; they've got the gloves on; And so they're preparing to go down to the forward area and start looking for the animals.

And of course Jack and I then would normally depart and go back into Mercury and we would start preparing for whatever it was for the next level of effort of whenever the next event was coming. Please bear in mind that working with Jack in feeding and housing, it's not only just the feeding and housing for the troops for breakfast, lunch, and evening meal; it's also making sure that I have all the appropriate number of sandwiches and whatever food is needed in the **[00:10:00]** forward area for the people that are preparing from midnight up till like 2:30 or three o'clock in the morning. The event's going to happen at 4:30 and these people are out there working all night, and so you got to have some sandwiches available for them, I'd make sure that I would be in the forward area making sure that, `Hey, contractor, have you got all these sandwiches down at ground zero for these people to eat?`

And he'd say, `Yes, you gave me the list.` I always had a list given to him by four o'clock in the afternoon, what the requirements were for that evening's activity, which is basically all night.

I also have to say to you, you've worked all day now and you're going to work most of the night too; you're not going to get much sleep. We would attend the weather briefing at about 7:30 or eight o'clock at night in Mercury. The weather bureau and the test manager and the test director of the laboratory, we'd all meet at the auditorium, which was Building 102. And Jack and I'd sit back in the back and listen to the weather report. Not always was the weather in our favor. Sometimes it would just get scrubbed, say, No, not tonight. Not tomorrow. The wind's in the wrong direction. We tried to keep the winds in a northeasterly direction, in a very narrow wedge of a "pie", if I may use that word, which is in a northeasterly direction, the least populated area off the test site. If the winds didn't blow in that narrow wedge, the shot got scrubbed. We just can't afford to let it get outside of the wedge, because if it gets outside of the wedge, then you're going to go over some cities such as St. George or whatever, going in the state of Utah.

And so we would just listen to the weather bureau people give their weather. [If] everything looked good, Jim Reeves would say, We're on. Prepare for the test.

And you'd see everybody leave the [room] and I'd make sure that I'd get a hold of the contractor and say, Have you got all your stuff at the cafeteria ready to roll? And they'd say, Yes, we have. And so the food would start rolling out in the forward area, because there's a lot of workers that's trying to get all of their animals in place, their instrumentation in place, everything's getting prepared for when we conduct the test. And particularly all the animals have got to be put in place. Of course I have nothing to do with that but this is just part of all of the program that has to be accomplished before we have the test. Jack and I would basically be up most of the night. We probably would sleep from ten o'clock until about midnight, and then back up at it, and we would then be there until the shot went at 4:30 in

the morning. We'd get back, oh, usually around 5:15, 5:30 in the morning at our office, and in most cases Jack and I, we just kind of moved things off to one side of the desk and stretch out on top of the desk [to] get another forty-five, fifty minutes of sleep, and back up and head for the cafeteria and eat breakfast and start the whole day over again.

And the thing that I have to say to you is that not all shots go off the first day. [If] the weather doesn't cooperate, the winds aren't in the right direction, I'm here to tell you I've seen *a* shot get postponed till the fourteenth day. And I have to tell you we do this day in and day out for fourteen days. Even at the age of twenty-four and thirty-one, it gets old pretty quick. You're beginning to drag but it's just part of the game and everybody just accepts it. I mean you don't never hear anybody [say], `Oh gosh, you know, I got to do this again.` You never heard those kind of words, you know. Everybody's really enthused that we're in the process of doing nuclear testing, and there's a—I don't know any other word to tell you, that the **[00:15:00]** *core* is there, and everybody was just willing to do their thing, no matter what it took. If you had to lose a little sleep, everybody was very cooperative, and it's been that way particularly all through during the atmospheric test days. That also carried over into when we went into the underground testing in the middle of 1963 or late 1963, going underground. And that particularly, you know, I guess the best words I can put to that everybody had a "can do" attitude. There wasn't any negative attitude, Basically everybody said, `Hey, we got to get this done,` and everybody was willing to cooperate.

And as I said, you know, my job was the feeding and housing, and I'd help out on, you know, guys would call in to Jack's office and I'd answer the phone and they'd say, `Yes, we got a bunch of potholes in the road down here. What can you do to get them fixed?` And I would call up some of the other people that worked for Ed Althaus in the engineering. We all worked for Ed Althaus, but Ed had a group of people that was in a branch for the engineering

side, making sure that whatever was needed to be built for the upcoming test was properly built. So they basically were the construction-type engineers. But I would call up and I'd say, Ed, you know, we need some work done on the road coming out of Mercury going down to Frenchman's Flat. It's got some potholes in it. Can we get the maintenance crew to fix that? And he'd say, Sure.

One of the things that Jack Coffee and I had—well, I should say Jack and then I adhered to it also—was we had a tablet; it was plain bond paper on one and then you had a carbon paper and then you had a second one underneath. No matter what we did and what we asked people to do, we always wrote it down on the log. And so that if there was ever any question, you could go back and look at your log and say Yes, this is who I talked to; yes, this is who I called. Yes, I got the feeding requirements. There was supposed to be food for 150 people at two a.m. this morning. And so Jack was a stickler about that, and that really taught me a good lesson. That was a good learning curve. I've used that over the years, even in the other remaining tests as I got into them later on downstream. It was just the thing to do. It doesn't leave any doubt in your mind who you talked to, and if it ain't in the log book, Yeah, I blew it, I didn't do it, you know.

And as Operation Teapot continues on and, you know, we do a number of shots in Operation Teapot. I was present for all of those shots. I continued to live in Mercury. As you well know, I just came out of the service, I didn't have any residential home in town, so I just rented a room at the test site. There were eight of us to a room. Most of them were married guys, naturally would go home during the week and also the weekend to see their families, and I would just continue to live in Mercury. I was trying to get arranged to have a car bought. I didn't have wheels yet and I didn't go home to get my old 1936 Ford; it was still sitting back there but I knew it wasn't in good enough shape to drive it from there to Nevada. And so I'm just trying to

save my money to—I'd had all my mustering-out money and I have good intentions of getting a car within a couple of months.

And so I continued just to stay at the test site. Saturday evening or Saturday afternoon—we were working six nines—Saturday afternoon would come, five o'clock, and Seth Woodruff, which was the manager of the test site at the time for the Las Vegas field office, which in turn he worked for Jim Reeves, he would come over and he'd say, `Ernie, all of us AEC guys are going to town. You mind being the duty officer?` Now you got to remember, I'm just two **[00:20:00]** months in the system now and here I am, I'm being asked to be the duty officer for the entire test site, for the AEC.

What does the duty officer do?

The duty officer's responsibility basically is if there's a crisis comes about, you know, if there's a fire comes about or if some criminal effect happens at the test site internally, or some sort of an incident may have happened, you know. There's been a big fight, you know, you as the duty officer, you go look into that to make sure, or—you don't look for these things to happen but various incidents do happen, you know, and so—

So you're temporarily in charge of the facility.

That's correct.

And you're twenty-four.

And I'm twenty-four years old. And you have a log book and you log in for the duty officer. You log in what activities happened and—for instance, early in my career a gentleman was on his way from Las Vegas to Reno with a load of frozen chickens. And a gentleman was coming to the test site. He failed to give a right-hand signal and he didn't turn off to come in to the test site, to the right, and of course the trucker didn't realize he was turning off, and unfortunately the rear

bumper of the car caught the bands of the fuel tank on the truck and the fuel tank dropped, and of course I got a call and said, Hey, we got a trucker in a car accident, or in a vehicle accident. Nobody's hurt but you need to go out there and see what we can do. So I get in my car and I drive out to the highway and sure enough here's a participant that works at the test site and he said, I just failed to give a signal. Nobody's hurt, and basically the cars are not hurt. There's no damage; it was just a fluke incident. And, you know, I had the sheriff come out with me and the sheriff said, Well, I'm not going to issue any tickets. And the guy says, But I've got a load of chickens, you know, and they're frozen and, he says, I need to move.

I said, OK, fine, we can handle that. I said, Just give me a few minutes. I'll go back into Mercury. I know there's some guys that work in the motor pool that didn't go to town because I saw them at the cafeteria. And I said, So I'll round them up. I know where they're sleeping. I round a couple of mechanics up and we'll be back out and we'll have a couple of jacks and things and we'll get your tank. It's full of diesel fuel. And so we go out there and we get him fixed up and get him on the road and he's happy, I'm happy. But I record all this. This is part of the duty officer's responsibilities.

And then of course as the duty officer you make sure that, you know, that you log in that you ate breakfast and how did you rate the food and, you know, would it be excellent or not so good or, you know, was the eggs too runny or what, you know. But that's just part of being a duty officer, you know.

And I would be there all day Sunday and of course I had a radio in the vehicle, had a hand-held radio. And I had asked Jack Coffee and Seth, I said, May I have the privilege on Sundays to roam around a little bit on the test site? They said, Sure. You're

available on the radio, he said, long as we can get a hold of you. So I'd eat early Sunday morning, being an early bird—I've always been an early bird—and I would get in the vehicle and go roaming around on the test site. I had to do a little bit of homework first because I had to make sure I knew where the shots had been fired before and basically, you know, where we were preparing to do an event, or where we have just conducted an event. But it gave me the opportunity to roam around on the test site, to get—you know, it's larger than the state of Rhode Island, it's 1,375 square miles and, you know, that's something like *comme çi, comme ça*, that's fifty miles by seventy-five miles, and there's just a lot of history out there. And I went up to Cane Springs. It's one of the old watering holes for the 1849 people that came across, the Forty-Niners that came across, basically from Salt Lake City headed to the southwest. It's a nice watering hole. It's a **[00:25:00]** spring. There's another one at Tippipah. And got around to see all these things, you know. It was not a work day for me, even though I was the duty officer. Occasionally I would get a couple hours overtime for doing that, you know, because I really wasn't a very high-salaried person at the time. And Seth would say, Aw, give him a couple extra in overtime hours, he said, you know, He's been here all weekend, you know. I didn't go to town until April. I came out in January and I didn't go to town until April.

A young man in his mid-twenties with a little change in his pocket, I'm surprised you didn't make it down to Las Vegas more often. Was there a reason for that?

Oh, please bear in mind that, you know, I've spent 1954 in uniform at Nellis so Las Vegas is not new to me.

Not new any longer.

And secondly, I have failed to tell you that in probably June 1954 to about October 1954 I didn't have a car but the kid in the same dormitory that I was in, or barracks I should say, he also

worked downtown in the gaming industry, and he got me hired in at the Westerner Club. And I would work from eight o'clock on Friday night until about two or three o'clock on Saturday morning, one day a week, and I'd work as a shill for the house.

A "shill"?

A shill. You're a person that you basically go to the table to make it look like there's more people gambling, but you're working for the house and, you know, and particularly if you're on the gaming tables, the crap tables. You either bet the "come" line or the "no come" line; you don't bet anything else. And you check in with fifty dollars' worth of silver and the stick man is watching you, but as soon as the table—and you make some commotion, say, somebody makes a few bucks you kind of yell and Hey! and you're getting everybody's attention to come to the table and as soon as the table gets to be warm with a lot more bodies, the shill backs out. You're basically trying to encourage people to gamble, you know, is what it's all about. And so I did that. And so I had no reason to come downtown and gamble. I've never been a gambling man—I never will be a gambling man—because to me my hard-earned dollar bill comes too hard just to give it away. Don't misunderstand me, I will play the tables some when we have visitors in town, but I'm not going to lose a lot of money. I'm just not going to do it, you know. It's just not going to happen. Because I know the odds. You know, the odds are not good in my favor. And I never was a lucky person. I could go to the Rendezvous Club out on the Strip and I could play blackjack at two bits, and two bits is a quarter, and I could make money. The minute I'd up that to fifty cents to a dollar, I always lost, and I could just never understand that.

This was the Rendezvous Club?

Yes, it was called the Rendezvous Club.

Where was that? Was that—?

It was out on the Strip, probably in the vicinity—

Which would be downtown we call now, the Fremont area?

No, no. The Westerner Club was basically almost in the middle of where the Golden Nugget is now, and the Rendezvous Club would be probably somewheres in the vicinity south of the old Desert Inn and it was on the east side of the street as you go down the Strip.

On Las Vegas Boulevard.

Las Vegas Boulevard. And I'd go out there occasionally. There was a bus system while I was in the service. There was a bus system. It wasn't the best. It went from the Strip all the way to Nellis Air Force Base. and typical servicemen, you know, we would go downtown. You got to remember, as a serviceman in uniform you could go to any show on the Strip for two dollars. **[00:30:00]** For instance, Frankie Laine. Frankie Laine played a lot on the Strip. Kay Starr. Frankie Laine had a policy that all servicemen that came to see his show got the front row seats. And of course you couldn't see a show but you had to order at least two dollars' worth of drinks. Now you got to remember, two dollars was not big money but it wasn't small change in the 1950s either.

That's a lot when you're only making twenty-seven hundred a year.

And so we would see the show and we'd go out on the Strip and we would see, you know, some of the entertainers that we wanted to see. We'd always go in uniform. If you didn't go in uniform, then yes, you had to pay the maitre d' and a few other tips here and there to get in. And I didn't have any bones about it, I wasn't ashamed to wear my uniform downtown, you know. A lot of guys didn't.

And why wouldn't they? It would seem to me that at the time everyone would be more proud of their service.

They were proud. They just didn't want to be—you could pretty well tell who was a serviceman because most service guys had pretty well a GI haircut. If they didn't wear a hat, you knew who they were anyway even though they were in civilian clothes. I never did wear a GI haircut. I always had a full head of hair and combed it just like I do today.

And so I had no incentive to go downtown, even staying at the test site at Mercury. I had a couple goals in mind. First of all, I was a temporary hire, wasn't sure how long I was going to be there. I knew that I needed a car. And so the main goal was to get some dollars in my pocket to be able to buy a car.

Operation Teapot proceeds on. Finally it comes to an end, as my memory serves me, in July 1955, I believe. And the last test, I believe, was—

May 15, 1955 according to my information.

And so early August I was told that they no longer needed me because the next series of tests would be in the islands. And I said, `Oh my, you mean I'm not going to be able to continue to work here?` And he said, `Well, that's true but, Jim Reeves wants to see you.` And so that evening in Jack Coffee's office, Jim Reeves showed up and he said, `Ernie, Jack recommends you highly. He said that You're a good worker,` and he said, `You're a temporary hire and we don't have any place for you.` And so he said, `We're going to have to let you go but,` he said, `I've also looked around in Albuquerque.` He said, `If you're willing to travel to Albuquerque,` and he said, `I know you're a good typist. If you don't mind staying in the clerical field just a little bit longer,` he said, `we'll get you into Albuquerque. There's a lady in finance that wants to take maternity leave for three or four months.` And he said, `If you're willing to go over to Albuquerque, and basically you're`

going to be typing, we can get you the job. And I said, OK, that's fine. By this time I have bought a brand-new 1955 Plymouth Belvedere car and so—

What did the Belvedere look like?

Just an ordinary-looking sedan. It was not real boxy but it was four-door. I never bought anything but four-door cars. I don't like two-door cars. And it was a six-cylinder car with an overdrive and got pretty good mileage onto it.

And again I'm not one that's really interested in dating. I'm not against it but I've got other goals in mind that I want to accomplish, and I make no bones about it, yes, I dated a few ladies that I got to know on the Strip from when I was in the service, but nothing serious, you **[00:35:00]** know, just as a friend.

And so I left for Albuquerque and got into Albuquerque and I got into the finance division and I met Frank, which he was in charge of that section, and he said, Ernie—it's called a CR-9 report—he said, If you can think of eight by fourteen sheets of paper, we double that in half, and so when you break the book you fold both sides out, and there's twenty-seven columns and the lines are a quarter of an inch apart. And I said, OK. In the meantime I've checked in with personnel. Wanda Cotton was the personnel lady. She said, You know you have to take a typing test. And I said, Yes, I can. She said, If you pass this typing test, we'll make you a permanent employee. And of course the cogs are turning in my mind: permanent employee. Now I've got my foot in the door, you know. And so—

A permanent AEC employee.

Yes. I'd become a permanent AEC employee. And so I said, Sure, I can do the typing test, and I shuffled out about sixty-eight words a minute for her. I never will forget her because I won't use all the words here but you can imagine what she said. She said, Well, I got

ladies in this place that can't type that many words a minute. She says, You're hired. And got over and started the first month. It's called "ditto." That's a purple type of reproduction but it's like the carbon on the back side of the carbon paper, and putting it mildly, it's *filthy*. It just gets all over you. And when you make a mistake, you got to scratch the purple off and you scratch some other purple off from another edge and you get it back under there to change the figures so it'll come out properly, and it's a mess, it really is.

Well, I did that the first month and I worked with a white shirt and oh my, it was just purple, you know. After doing that the first month—we do this report once a month—so I went downtown on Saturday and I went to a printing company and I said, Where do you buy your equipment? By this time, multilith is coming into the system. Multilith is a nice way of printing. We still have multilith yet today. You type it on it and you can then put that sheet onto the drum and it prints, you know, and you can correct it by erasing it with a rubber eraser. So I said, Tell me where the equipment place was. And so I rolled on over to the place that sold the equipment and I said, Tell me a little bit about multilith. I want to tell my boss about this stuff. I've seen it before and he doesn't know what I'm talking about. And I said, I'd really like to arrange for you to come to Sandia base but, you know, Frank'll have to make that call because I'm not high enough in the system. I had the guy make some stuff on the equipment, like a letter, and he printed it, and I took that back, and I had some prices for the equipment. And I took it back on Monday and I told Frank.

I said, Frank, there's a better way of doing this report. It's called multilith. And I showed him, and I said, This is what the product is. It's like looking at a sheet of paper that you and I would look at today, very nice, neatly printed.

He said, You're kidding.

I said, No. I said, You know, I'd like this representative from the company downtown which I was at Saturday, I'd like you to invite them to come here and show them what you got. The CR-9 report is not classified. And I said, Show him what it is and then let him explain to you what we could do to improve this.

And he said, When do you think the guy can come?

And I said, Well, here's the number. Call him. You've been talking to me. So Frank calls downtown and the guy answers and a couple days later they show up and they explain to Frank what all they could do and the gentleman said, Why don't you and Ernie come down to our office tomorrow. Let us show you the equipment and everything, what we can do. **[00:40:00]** And so we did. Well, I'm here to tell you, before the end of the next month we had all new printing equipment in and a new typewriter and multilith capability, and we made out the new CR-9 report which is twenty-seven columns and it looked just like a neat letter that you see today. It was nice. Didn't smudge, didn't smear.

And I proceeded to do that for October, November. In late November Frank comes to me and he said, Ernie, the lady's going to return from her maternity leave. And he said, We got to find you another job. He said, You're now a permanent employee so, he said, we got to do something. And—

And that's of 1955.

That's of 1955. And so I said, Well, let me walk over to the test division, which is the next building over. I said, I'll go see Jim Reeves first and see what he's got. Well lo and behold, Jim Reeves comes to my rescue.

He said, Yes, Ernie, we're getting ready to do Operation Redwing at Enewetak and, he said, we need an office manager for all of the administrative effort at Enewetak. And he said, Are you willing to go?

And I said, `Yes, I'm willing to do that.`

He said, `Well, we've been told that we can't have contractor employees in there so we got to have some federal employees in there.` And so he said, `But we'll put you on a rotation basis to where you're not out there constantly.` And so there was two office managers hired, I being one of them and Dick Rostentoski [sp] was the other one, and so we sort of alternated. When Dick's in the States, I'm in the islands, and when he's in the islands I'm in the States. And each time I come back I always go back to work for Jack Coffee at the Las Vegas field office here. But please bear in mind, during that series of tests, which is roughly Operation Redwing and Operation Plumbbob, which is basically twenty-four months, out of twenty-six months of that time frame I've spent nineteen of it out in the islands and rest of it at the test site. But I was able to participate and see during Redwing and Plumbbob, which was basically at the test site, and normally I would wind up wherever the shots was being fired. That's basically where I was at because I have to say again, there's a little bit of camaraderie, the fact that Reeves and Jack Coffee and I were all typical Nebraska guys. Jim would say, `Gee, I'd really like you here when the shots are going.` And of course Dick then would have to do the off-season stuff, and so I guess I'll call that a little bit of a privilege but—

Absolutely. So you left Albuquerque in November—

December—

December 1955?

Yes, December 1955. I was at Christmas Island on the twenty-second of December—

Or Enewetak.

Beg your pardon. You're right. Not Christmas Island. I apologize.

Oh, that's quite all right.

Yes, you're right, Enewetak. And I—

The first shot was Lacrosse on May 4, 1956.

Yes. So we're preparing for the test now. A lot of administrative, you know, lots of letters are being written. I'm not only typing but I'm also making sure that the letters that are being received are appropriately documented and received and get to the appropriate people for action, and making sure that the mail is being prepared and goes out in the mail every day, and just typical operation of running an office, you know. No matter whether it was typing or what, I was not above and beyond typing letters. I *did* do a lot of typing of letters, as well as being the office manager, and then we finally hired a couple other clerks to come in and do typing, and they basically worked for Dick Rostentoski or I, whoever was present.

I arrived there in December 1955 at Enewetak, just a few days before Christmas. I had **[00:45:00]** arranged to take my car before I left. I had taken it to Nebraska and stored it with my brother. I knew I wasn't coming home for a while and I didn't have any place to leave it in Albuquerque, so I took it to Nebraska and come back to Albuquerque and flew out to Enewetak. Well, all the people at Enewetak, the AEC personnel, are wanting to go home for Christmas, except Leo Woodruff and I and Ray Emens. Ray Emens is an engineer up at Bikini, Leo Woodruff is an engineer at Enewetak, and I'm the office manager. And so Christmas Day is arriving and I told Leo, I said, You know, I don't know how you people operate, but I know one thing I'm going to do today as an AEC—and I'm a short-time AEC man—but I will be standing at the door of the cafeteria when it opens at ten o'clock and I will shake hands with every worker that comes in here to eat Christmas Day and welcome and wish them a Merry Christmas. I said, I think it needs to be done. We're a long ways from home. I think we need some personal touch into it.

And that was Christmas of 1955.

Christmas of1955. So I stood at the door and shook hands probably in the vicinity, my guess is about twenty-five hundred people and wished them all a Merry Christmas, and I have to tell you, that kind of PR will buy you a lot.

I'm sure it will.

People begin to realize that—I remember afterwards, you know, you got to remember, I'm *new* now at Enewetak. But you walk up and, you know, people recognize that you are now an AEC man and they say, `Hey, there's the guy that shook hands with us. By golly, they are concerned about us.` And I think it's just that personal touch that people like to have. And I think they recognized that—not that somebody else wasn't doing it, it's just good PR in my book. And to me, it's so much easier to put out sugar than it is salt.

Absolutely.

And people then begin to recognize if they have a problem and it's not happening and the contractor, then they would—it's not that they're bypassing their bosses. It's just things are not running right in the field and they would catch me at—

Have a certain level of comfort.

That's right. They would come in and they would say, `Ernie, you know, we saw some things today that we—you know, things could run better.` And I would in turn, I'd say, `OK, fine, please bear in mind, this discussion will never be revealed who I got it from because, you know, I don't want the contractor coming down on your head. We recognize that things happen and need to be corrected maybe occasionally and so I'll just never reveal where I got the data.` And I would go to the engineers and say, `Hey guys, you know, I picked up a few tidbits out here, talking to people, because they recognize me from Christmas Day when I shook`

hands with them, and I'd say, You need to take some action on that. And things would happen, you know. Well, it wasn't very long, I wasn't no longer known as Ernie. One gentleman came in one day and he said, You know, when we come to talk to you, he said, seems like most of the time, he said, things happen. Things get corrected. You're no longer going to be called Ernie; you're going to be called Tiger. And so that's where I picked up the word "Tiger." I was no longer referred to as Ernie Williams. People would say, Go see Tiger. And I only carry that nickname out in the islands.

Did it follow you back to the Nevada Test Site?

Never carried back to the Nevada Test Site. I've always been known as Ernie at the test site. But I've also been known at the test site, again, If you have a problem and it's not getting any action, go see Ernie. You know. I've kind of carried that hatchet all my life. It's not a bad **[00:50:00]** hatchet, it's a good hatchet. I will then make inquiries in to see why we can't do something about it. I always tried to get back to the employee that had chatted with me to say, Yes, you should see some changes, or No, you won't see some changes. Don't leave them hanging. Respond back to them and let them know, I can't do anything about it, or Yes, something's going to happen. And again, they begin to build that confidence between you and the workers. And they're the contractor people; I'm the Fed. If you have a problem with the contractor people, I'm a firm believer you don't chew a contractor employee out in front of his subordinates or in front of his fellow workers. Take him into a room, close the door, and have a discussion with him. Don't do it in front of his workers. And again, that buys you a lot, you know. You don't embarrass the man or the lady. Please bear in mind, in my day it was strictly all men working in the field.

And as time went on at Enewetak, [I] continued on in what I would call the administrative effort of the office. Then they finally hired an administrative officer, which then

the office manager reported to him. But he was a permanent employee that remained in the islands.

Let's make a long story, shorten it up, we've now did the series of tests in Redwing in 1956 and now all the tests have been completed. We're now winding down, we're getting all of the scientific trailers to be shipped back to the States for the upcoming events that's going to happen at the Nevada Test Site, and that's going to be Plumbbob. And so then I come in from Enewetak December of 1956 and spend a week or ten days on leave with my folks, and then I report to the test site and I work basically at the test site for the upcoming of Plumbbob.

Well actually, Mr. Williams, I think that would be a good place for us to stop for today. I'd like to thank you very much for all the time you've taken to make these interviews, and I'm hoping that we can continue very soon because I'd really like to hear about the rest of your career.

I would be glad to do that for you.

[00:53:32] End Track 2, Disk 2.

[End of interview]