

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JEROME ALTENBURG

FOR THE
VETERAN'S ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND SOCIETY
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INTERVIEWED BY
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AND
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KURT PIEHLER: Well, before getting into the interview I want to acknowledge, although you do have family reasons for being in Knoxville, I do appreciate you coming down to Knoxville for the interview and taking the time. I know you're leaving for Wisconsin today, so we definitely want to get you out before the sun goes down. (Laughs) I appreciate your generosity in saying you don't have to be out the door exactly at two o'clock.

JEROME C. ALTENBURG: I don't see how my story could be that long. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: I also want to thank on the record, your daughter for arranging the interview. And you daughter's name again was?

ALTENBURG: Jerrilyn, and I just explained how she got that name, it's not a derivative of Jerome.

PIEHLER: Well, let me now begin the formal part of the interview. This begins an interview with Jerome C. Altenburg, who is a native of Wisconsin, and this interview is with Kurt Piehler and ...

FRANCIS MOONEY: Francis Mooney.

PIEHLER: On September 26, 2006 at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee. And let me begin by a very open ended question. Could you tell me a little bit about your parents, particularly, you mentioned over lunch, your father for a while worked for the railroad and then became owner of a few of the restaurants in Wausau, Wisconsin ...

JEROME C. ALTENBURG: Well, no, restaurants in Wausau and in Chicago.

PIEHLER: Oh, okay.

ALTENBURG: In Chicago a hotel restaurant and, it was also a hotel restaurant in Wausau. My mother was a stay at home mom, as they all were in those days, I think.

PIEHLER: When you were born was your father working for the railroad then?

ALTENBURG: He was working for the railroad then. I suppose after my birth he began working more in hotel restaurants.

PIEHLER: Had your father served in the military at all?

ALTENBURG: No.

PIEHLER: Did you have any family members, extended family, that had served in the military?

ALTENBURG: None.

PIEHLER: You mentioned you were born in Wausau ...

ALTENBURG: No ...

PIEHLER: ... Or were you born in Chicago?

ALTENBURG: Born in Chicago.

PIEHLER: How old were you? Do you remember moving to Wausau?

ALTENBURG: About six or seven.

PIEHLER: Do you remember what year you moved to Wausau roughly?

ALTENBURG: I was born in '29, so therefore it would be ...

PIEHLER: 19 ...

ALTENBURG: ... '36.

PIEHLER: It sounds like your father was able to stay employed during the Great Depression, is that ...

ALTENBURG: As a cook.

PIEHLER: As a cook.

ALTENBURG: Well, also, no—I was a Kirby vacuum cleaner distributor in Milwaukee. And he was a salesman in Milwaukee, excuse me, a salesman in Chicago after he got off the railroad, for Kirby. And then we moved to Wausau and back in the restaurant business, and then went back to Milwaukee and he went back to selling Kirbys.

PIEHLER: The Kirby vacuum cleaner?

ALTENBURG: The Kirby vacuum cleaner.

PIEHLER: And he would go door to door?

ALTENBURG: So did I, before I was a distributor. (Laughter) That's a lost art, by the way.

PIEHLER: Yeah, even when I was growing up in the 60s, for example, the vacuum cleaner salesman was still very common. I remember I had an uncle who sold vacuum cleaners for a while door to door. You mentioned your mother stayed at home, was she active in clubs or ...

ALTENBURG: No.

PIEHLER: How about the church? How active was your family?

ALTENBURG: Quite active; quite active at the Catholic Church.

PIEHLER: Catholic. Now, if I remember correctly, you were the oldest ...

ALTENBURG: Of three.

PIEHLER: And you have a brother and a sister?

ALTENBURG: Brother and a sister; sister's the youngest.

PIEHLER: Did your brother or sister do any military ...

ALTENBURG: No.

PIEHLER: So you're the only one in the family?

ALTENBURG: Well, my daughter did. She enlisted.

PIEHLER: Which daughter?

ALTENBURG: Jerrilyn.

PIEHLER: Jerrilyn. What branch did she serve in?

ALTENBURG: The army.

PIEHLER: The army.

ALTENBURG: In fact, she moved down to Alabama, following a guy, and they were broke. So, in order to get a job she enlisted. And she called and says, "We got married, and I joined the army." I said I can understand one or the other, but why both? (Laughter)

MOONEY: So it didn't have anything to do with your own experience in the military?

ALTENBURG: No.

PIEHLER: Just to follow up on that, were you surprised at both, it sounds like?

ALTENBURG: (Laughs) Well, for many years I called him ole what's his name; my son-in-law, that is. And then Ron-boy but now I don't call him ...

MOONEY: Now you don't call him anything? (Laughter)

PIEHLER: You were six when you left Chicago. Do you have any memories of Chicago, of your neighborhood?

ALTENBURG: Just one. I think it was on Halloween eve—I should say two, uh, halloween eve and my dad took me trick-or-treating and I was allowed to wax windows with a bar of soap, or soap windows, I should say. And then, I don't remember if it was Wausau or Milwaukee, but my mother was changing my brother's diaper on the kitchen table and a streak of lightning went right over her head through the house. Those are the only memories of that age that I have. Also, when we would drive, my grandparents lived on a farm in Milton, Wisconsin, and when we would drive up there I would always sleep, or lay-up on the back window above the backseat. That was my spot in the car. No seat belt days. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: I even remember cars in the '60s had that, because I used to sit ...

ALTENBURG: We're talking about the '30s. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: Yeah, but even in the '60s they survived, because I remember as a kid, that space, if you were a small kid, you could go up and now they would arrest people.

ALTENBURG: Yeah, that's correct.

PIEHLER: You moved to Milwaukee before Wausau.

ALTENBURG: No, after.

PIEHLER: After. So Wausau then Milwaukee ...

ALTENBURG: Chicago, Wausau, Milwaukee.

PIEHLER: What do you remember about Wausau and Milwaukee? Where did you end up going to high school? Was it in Wausau or was it in ...

ALTENBURG: No, Milwaukee. Well, a suburb of Milwaukee, West Allis, that's where I went to high school. There's not much about my time in Wausau except that as a teenager I'd go back to Wausau 'cause I had cousins there. The second highest point in Wisconsin is called Rib Mountain in Wausau and we would take a quarter barrel and go up on what was called Sunset Point with a little three-sided log cabin and party. (Laughter) I was in Wausau on V-J [Victory over Japan] Day and we stole toilet paper out of the Hotel Wausau and went up on the roof and were throwing toilet paper off.

PIEHLER: Off the Hotel Wausau?

ALTENBURG: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Do you remember where you were when Pearl Harbor occurred?

ALTENBURG: Oh yes, in West Allis. I remember hearing that on the radio. In fact, I ran across the field to my friend's house. I was twelve years old then, and they didn't know about it, and I

told them. As a youth I was very interested in World War II. I would listen as much as I could, read as much as I could about it. And I had an uncle, I guess he was drafted. He took a beating and came back; was at Guadalcanal.

PIEHLER: With the Army or the Marines?

ALTENBURG: With the Army. He contracted malaria there and that's really what killed him.

PIEHLER: Did you write to him while the war was on or ...

ALTENBURG: I would cut out cartoons of magazines and paste them in a book and send them.

MOONEY: Did your interest in the war, did that influence your decision at all to enlist yourself?

ALTENBURG: Absolutely not.

MOONEY: Absolutely not?

ALTENBURG: ... Well, the government lied to me. They said if I enlisted as opposed to being drafted, no reserve time. So I took the extra year for the fellows that served with me that were drafted to hold any reserve time.

MOONEY: So you're pretty sure you were going to be drafted?

ALTENBURG: (Inaudible)

PIEHLER: Going back to World War II, you mentioned you followed the war really closely. Did you buy any bonds?

ALTENBURG: Oh sure, oh yeah, sure. Eighteen cents or a quarter, every buck I earned until 1975.

PIEHLER: And were you involved in the boy scouts or any other organization growing up?

ALTENBURG: Yes, boy scouts.

PIEHLER: What rank did you make?

ALTENBURG: I never made, uh, what is that? First class?

PIEHLER: First class.

ALTENBURG: Never made that, no.

PIEHLER: Were you involved in any scrap drives or any paper ...

ALTENBURG: Always paper.

PIEHLER: Do you remember any sort of black outs? Did your town have any black outs or practice black outs?

ALTENBURG: Yes, on occasion. Also, now they call it recycling, but there was recycling of tin cans and in order to buy a tube of toothpaste you had to take your empty toothpaste to the drug store. And of course, the gas station rationing ... because my dad at the time was in sales so that wouldn't allow for more gasoline. But then he was of the age where they told him, they said either get a job in industry or you'll be drafted in the Seabees [Naval Construction Force], because he was in that age too old for combat but ...

PIEHLER: But young enough for the Seabees?

ALTENBURG: But young enough for the Seabees, yeah. So of course he went into Allis-Chalmers [Manufacturing Company] as a tool grinder; what he called a tool grinder, I didn't know what that was, but I still have a pair of his safety goggles from that era.

PIEHLER: And what plant—where was the plant ...

ALTENBURG: Allis-Chalmers, West Allis, Wisconsin. It was famous for tractors.

PIEHLER: Yeah ... I mean it's a well known company. So for the war, he worked in a factory?

ALTENBURG: Yeah.

PIEHLER: So, in a sense, your father did a number of different things in the '30s and then through the war.

ALTENBURG: Yes, yes sir.

PIEHLER: Did he leave the factory after the war?

ALTENBURG: Back in vacuum cleaner sales.

PIEHLER: And did he ever go back to the restaurant business?

ALTENBURG: No.

PIEHLER: So he retired?

ALTENBURG: From the restaurant business.

PIEHLER: From the ...

ALTENBURG: Oh, from the vacuum cleaner [company].

PIEHLER: And so it sounds like there's a real family link into your going ...

ALTENBURG: Well, I was going to Marquette and I started selling Kirby's on weekends or vacation periods and I was making more money part time than my major, which was journalism, would ever pay. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: So you were ...

ALTENBURG: I was hooked. And it was totally independent, I didn't have a boss.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

ALTENBURG: I was totally independent.

PIEHLER: Now, did you graduate from Marquette?

ALTENBURG: No, I quit in April of my junior year because I went into the military, which was during April of my junior year.

PIEHLER: You couldn't get them to defer?

ALTENBURG: I could have gone back with a G.I. [Bill], but I got married and started raising a family and that wouldn't work down the line.

PIEHLER: Did you go to a Catholic school or the public school?

ALTENBURG: I went to public school. I went to a Catholic school as a youth. The first Catholic school in Milwaukee was called Saint Barbara, and if you weren't Polish, what was your reason for living? –Polish nuns. So, I refused to go back to that school, and I went to another Catholic school until we moved West Allis went to public school.

PIEHLER: Well, it sounds like there was quite a lot of tension between the Poles and the non-Poles in that one particular, was it just the school or was it the ...

ALTENBURG: No, it was just the school.

PIEHLER: It was just the school?

ALTENBURG: It was just the school, sure, because the other school was maybe three or four blocks away. It was just, Polish nuns, and they were mean. (Laughter)

MOONEY: They were still using rulers back in those days?

ALTENBURG: Yeah they were.

PIEHLER: Your interest in journalism, do you remember ...

ALTENBURG: I was going to be a Hemingway. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: When you said you followed the World War II news, it sounds like you read the newspapers quite regularly?

ALTENBURG: Yes, quite regularly, yes.

PIEHLER: Was it started by the war, or was that even earlier than the war?

ALTENBURG: Was it what?

PIEHLER: Was it started by the war, your interest in the news, or was it even ...

ALTENBURG: No, it was the war.

PIEHLER: It was the war?

ALTENBURG: It was the only war that I knew, so ...

PIEHLER: So it sounds like you just kept the habit up?

ALTENBURG: Absolutely.

PIEHLER: You mentioned Hemingway, had you read Hemingway?

ALTENBURG: Yes, I was quite a reader and when I went in the military that was the end of it, I think.

PIEHLER: When you were growing up, I mean, what did you read? You mentioned Hemingway and the newspaper, what was some of the ...

ALTENBURG: There was Ernie Pyle, a favorite author of mine, and there was another name starts with a ...

PIEHLER: William Shirer?

ALTENBURG: No, I don't believe that's him.

PIEHLER: Bill Mauldin?

ALTENBURG: No.

PIEHLER: No? I give up now. (Laughter)

ALTENBURG: He wrote—Steinbeck.

PIEHLER: Oh, Steinbeck, yes.

ALTENBURG: John Steinbeck, there you go.

PIEHLER: Yeah. And so you were interested in journalism. Why Marquette?

ALTENBURG: Well, they were famous for that and engineering at the time. And, I was telling Fran, sixteen credits was one hundred sixty dollars a semester. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Yeah. How did you like college?

ALTENBURG: I (unintelligible, tape volume too low)... Yes, I enjoyed it.

PIEHLER: Had you been on your high school's newspaper?

ALTENBURG: Oh, yeah. I was also, in high school, I put myself in the drama club and then I directed plays for the junior high schools, what you called, spotlight. I was the student director for that.

PIEHLER: Had you played any sports?

ALTENBURG: Cross country, that's all. I was a little kid. Not big enough for football, not tall enough for basketball.

PIEHLER: But it sounds like very active in the school newspaper and the ...

ALTENBURG: I was; I got a couple awards for activity at graduation.

PIEHLER: I've been waiting to ask you, but you mentioned you started selling vacuum cleaners in college, first as a part-time job, and you even said selling door to door is now a lost art. Can you describe, particularly in the 1940's, what it was like ... particularly when you were beginning because you had to learn things.

ALTENBURG: Well, I had what I called the "little boy look," and they weren't afraid to let me in the house. And at that time we carried just the motor unit of the Kirby vacuum cleaner, it had a handle, and in those days people had problems with moths and it had what was called a crystallator. Put crystals in this crystallator and they would explode and fumigate. That crystallator was on the part, we called that unit a pig, because it looked like it; a pig. And, people really didn't know the name Kirby too well then, and they would say, "Kirby, what is that?" Drop that pig in the door and roll it towards the wall. Then I'd come up, "I'll go out and get the cord and be right back." And then I'd go out and get the rest of the vacuum cleaner and put it together because it was a very versatile unit. It was a canister, it was an upright, it was a floor polisher, it was a rug shampooer. It could do all these things in this one unit. But, that's how I got through the door, they'd go, "What's that?"

PIEHLER: So the trick was to get through the door?

ALTENBURG: That was the trick, yeah.

PIEHLER: And then once you got through the door, I mean, how did, you know ...

ALTENBURG: Well, a lot of salespeople think you've got to do all the talking, it's just the opposite. You do a lot of listening. You see which way their mind is going, if the wife wanted the vacuum cleaner and the husband was saying no, you just sat there. She got it. (Laughter) But, if the wife was saying no, pack up and leave. (Laughter) Or if she would just sit on the arm of the chair, get through this fast and go. That was a sign of total disinterest.

PIEHLER: So, it sounds like, the way you described it, is knowing when to leave ... because you were just wasting your time.

ALTENBURG: And know when to shut up too. If I didn't have the order within an hour, I went home. There were a lot of salesmen who'd sit there for two full hours; sometimes they'd wear them out. But I wasn't that type of salesman

PIEHLER: So, you allotted an hour? What was a good day in selling?

ALTENBURG: There was no special day.

PIEHLER: I'm just sort of curious, how many would you sell a day?

ALTENBURG: Well, I have a record of about seventy-two in a month. A lot of the time we would just strive for at least sixteen a month.

MOONEY: You had to deal with, I would imagine, quite a bit of rejection?

ALTENBURG: That didn't bother me at all. I had two sons that I dissuaded from doing it but they both had to go. They both had to do it. The youngest one, he went out looking for a job and was telling me, "I got a job." So, I said, "How much does it sell for?" He told me. "How much is the commission?" He told me. And I said, "Okay, if you really want to sell that bad, okay." (Laughter) The rejection got him. Not the "no," but the many people who set up an appointment and they wouldn't be there, or they wouldn't answer the door. That is the rejection that killed him. The "no" in the house didn't bother him at all. The people that weren't home; I used to get back at them, I sold a lot of machines that way, I'd come back a couple of days later and I'd say, "Oh, I'm sorry, I couldn't make it, and I just couldn't call you." (Laughter)

PIEHLER: So it sounds like one of your tricks was you were very detached, in the sense that it wasn't personal if people said no.

ALTENBURG: No, not at all.

PIEHLER: And even if people stood you up, it almost sounds like you just rolled along with it.

ALTENBURG: You had to. I would knock doors all day in the part time and it got me knocking doors at night, especially in the summertime when it's light, or in the wintertime I'd knock doors at large apartment buildings—inside. But, rejection didn't bother me at all.

PIEHLER: When you came back, just to follow up on this part of your life, you went back to selling ... When did you become a distributor?

ALTENBURG: '72.

PIEHLER: Oh okay, you had a long career.

ALTENBURG: I started selling at nineteen and [it was] my whole work, except for the military. The last paycheck I got was when I was discharged from the Army ... [I worked on] commission most of my life.

PIEHLER: Both as a salesman and then as a distributor?

ALTENBURG: Yes.

PIEHLER: You followed World War II very closely, and you vividly remember V-J Day particularly. Did you follow what we would now call the Cold War at all?

ALTENBURG: Not really, no.

PIEHLER: How surprised were you by Korea when the war first broke out?

ALTENBURG: I was telling Fran this; we were talking about our first cars and what we we're driving now, I said, "Well, my first car when I was going to Marquette was a '37 Dodge." The Oldsmobile came out in 1950 with a Rocket 88. You couldn't just go to a dealership and buy one, you had to order it, cause they were still working on production. So, I got my car in June of '50 as Korea broke out. I got engaged New Year's Eve of '50-'51 and two weeks later I realized what I had done. (Laughter) So I enlisted, and dammit she waited. So, when I got back I said, "Well, while I was in Korea, the first sergeant and I had private quarters and we had Korean housewives for two bucks a week, or two bucks a month, I don't remember what it was. But, they'd keep the place clean, they'd get our laundry done, and I said, "I can't give up this lifestyle, I've got to get married." (Laughter)

PIEHLER: You mentioned over lunch that you had thought of the Air Force but didn't like the ...

ALTENBURG: No, no, no, I didn't think of the Air Force. While I was waiting at the center to go, the Air Force came over to me and wanted me to switch to the Air Force and I just told them I said, "I'll take three, not four years."

PIEHLER: Oh, okay. So that's when the Air Force came up. Had you thought of the Navy?

ALTENBURG: Yes. A friend of mine and I went down to join the reserves; he got in but I didn't. I was blind, as far as the Navy was concerned.

PIEHLER: So you wore glasses?

ALTENBURG: Yeah. I was 4-F [unfit for active duty] as far as the Navy was concerned. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: But for the Army you had no problem passing your physical?

ALTENBURG: No. I even drank a ton of coffee that morning to kick up my blood pressure. [They said,] "Go lay down." (Laughter)

PIEHLER: You talked about it over lunch, but it was really the draft that motivated you to enlist?

ALTENBURG: Sure, the three years with no reserve time.

PIEHLER: Did you expect to go to Korea?

ALTENBURG: Measles sent me to Korea; a case of measles in basic training. I was training with a unit that went to Panama for a year and Greenland for a year. But they said, "Well, Altenburg has been out for a while, so send him with this unit." And that unit went to Korea.

PIEHLER: So getting measles at a certain [time] ... you might have had a very different ...

ALTENBURG: Experience in Panama and Greenland. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Which is kind of an interesting pairing in terms of thinning your blood and thickening it. (Laughter) You had had an uncle who had served in the Army on Guadalcanal, what did you ...

ALTENBURG: No, he was Marines.

PIEHLER: Marines. You followed World War II closely and you had read, for example, Ernie Pyle. What did you expect ... now thinking back on your time, what did you sort of expect from the Army?

ALTENBURG: I didn't. But I was fortunate that I was at the right spot at the right time for promotion and I made sergeant first class in thirteen months, which was practically unheard of unless you were in a combat unit.

PIEHLER: By World War II standards that would even be very quick. Going back, where did you report to enlist? Where did you enlist and where did they ...

ALTENBURG: Milwaukee.

PIEHLER: And then where did you go after?

ALTENBURG: Fort Sheridan. And then they put us on my first train ride all the way across the country to San Pedro, California, which is the sea port for the city of Los Angeles. That's where I did my basic training and they had a landing craft outfit ...

PIEHLER: So your basic training was very specific then, it wasn't just general infantry?

ALTENBURG: No, it was general. But the unit, that's what it was, it was general.

PIEHLER: What do you remember about basic training?

ALTENBURG: Picking up cigarette butts every morning. And somewhere in the '70s we, the family, took the Chevy Chase trip to California. You ever seen ...

MOONEY: [National Lampoon's] *Vacation*?

ALTENBURG: Yeah. (Laughter)

MOONEY: I remember.

ALTENBURG: And went back to San Pedro, and the ground, the so-called parade grounds, the parking lot was full of cigarette butts. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: It sounds like a surprise to you that the standards had gotten, so that was ...

ALTENBURG: So, of course I told the story, "Yeah, we were picking up cigarette butts all the time." Or, we had a field strip, so it wasn't cigarette butts; that's what it was, field strips from tearing open the paper and scattering the tobacco, rolling up the papers ...

PIEHLER: What do you remember of your drill instructor?

ALTENBURG: Sergeant... Oh, was it, [inaudible]. He was a tall, thin guy. During basic he was a drill sergeant, after basic he was a real nice guy. I said, I called his name out, and I said, "When this is over I'm going to kick your ass." And I was just a little guy. Our final week of basic training was up in northern, or central California; combat training. That was over and we were all at the bar, the bar was closed, going back to quarters, I come up running full speed behind him, "boop" and just kept going. (Laughter) So, I did what I said I was going to do.

PIEHLER: What do you remember ...you mentioned this was your first trip across the country by train, and it sounds like your first time in California?

ALTENBURG: Yeah, sure. First time out of the state of Wisconsin, except Chicago, Illinois.

PIEHLER: You really hadn't travelled outside of Wisconsin and Chicago ...

ALTENBURG: Well, I turned twenty-one when I was in basic training, and no I hadn't.

PIEHLER: Your family never took vacations outside of ...

ALTENBURG: No.

PIEHLER: What did you think about the cross-country trip and then meeting all these people at basic training?

ALTENBURG: Well, I didn't really have much thought about the train ride across. I met some nice guys in the military.

MOONEY: Forge any lasting friendships from basic?

ALTENBURG: Uh, no. For a while we got back it was ... and one time one guy had kind of a reunion in Kalamazoo, Michigan. I stayed friends with um... Corporal Smith, he was, who was a jeep driver for the chaplain. Kept up for the first six weeks back and forth to Detroit and Milwaukee for while, now he's moved out to Indianapolis, but [we're not in contact] ... as of today.

PIEHLER: Was there anything you particularly liked about basic training in terms of the rifle range? I mean if it's possible to like basic training.

ALTENBURG: You didn't know what to expect 'til you were there, and it was, it didn't pay to have any likes or dislikes because it didn't make any difference.

PIEHLER: Well it sounds like you weren't so happy about picking up cigarette butts. (Laughs)

ALTENBURG: Well, I corrected that, I said we had a field strip and there was none there but the place was littered with them when I went back.

PIEHLER: How often did you get assigned KP [Kitchen Patrol]?

ALTENBURG: In basic I think it was once or twice, it wasn't much. It wasn't much at all. The military food for breakfast, I'm not an egg eater, those were all dried eggs anyways so— powdered eggs I should say. A cup of coffee and bread and jelly was my breakfast.

PIEHLER: How was the lunch and dinner?

ALTENBURG: It was okay.

PIEHLER: You mentioned you got the measles. How long were you out?

ALTENBURG: Well, this particular barracks, which also had the supply room, had measles in it. So [I said,] “I’ll worked in the supply room; I’ve had measles,” So I got them a second time. (Laughs) So, I ended up in the hospital for five days.

PIEHLER: And did you have complications ... it more sounds like quarantine?

ALTENBURG: That’s what it was, yes.

PIEHLER: But it was long enough that when basic was finished they didn’t send you out with the unit to Panama.

ALTENBURG: They said, “Altenburg goes with this unit.” And we went to Korea.

PIEHLER: When did you join the unit?

ALTENBURG: I don’t remember that.

PIEHLER: Was it in the states?

ALTENBURG: Oh yeah, sure.

PIEHLER: The unit went over together?

ALTENBURG: Yes.

PIEHLER: What was the name of the unit?

ALTENBURG: Oh, it was 409th. It was commanded by a one star brigadier general ...

PIEHLER: This is General Kellogg?

ALTENBURG: Kellogg. You showed me that, what he had on the 409th ...

MOONEY: Building and service stations.

ALTENBURG: I can’t recall that at all.

PIEHLER: So, your 409th was a very different outfit by the time you joined it, at least when it went overseas?

ALTENBURG: Yes, but that was the same time period.

PIEHLER: Yeah. You joined the unit in the states, you don’t remember where, but how long were you with the unit before it was sent overseas?

ALTENBURG: I can’t recall that.

PIEHLER: Yeah. How did you get to Korea?

ALTENBURG: My first cruise ship, a two-week cruise.

PIEHLER: How comfortable was the ship?

ALTENBURG: Uh, I can't recall if it was on the trip over or back, but I had the lower bunk in the bow and we hit a storm and the bow," up and slap, up and slap." Didn't sleep at all.

MOONEY: The whole way. (Laughs)

ALTENBURG: It was people from Wisconsin and Michigan and we'd play a game called Sheep's Head. It was played with thirty-two cards and diamonds are trumps, [We'd] spread out a blanket on the deck and play Sheep's Head the whole daylight hours and at chow time there was always somebody that would jump in, because it was a five handed game. So that's what the trip over was. And then we were near Yokohama and saw flying fish.

MOONEY: When you first got with the 409th was there any kind of specialized training? They were an engineering brigade.

ALTENBURG: Uh, not really. Now that you take me back, I don't remember the purpose of it. I mean, the 523rd there was a purpose, but the other unit I don't remember the purpose. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: It sounds like they would have told you, for your unit.

ALTENBURG: What?

PIEHLER: You said that you were never told the purpose.

ALTENBURG: I suppose there were, but I don't remember.

MOONEY: The 409th ... I understand Korea was the first time they had integrated units?

ALTENBURG: Well, the story that came down of how that happened is that the African Americans would bug out [run away]. They went over there as units and when the [North] Koreans attacked, they wouldn't hold the lines, they would just scatter. So, that's why they integrated.

MOONEY: Was the 409th?

ALTENBURG: No, it was the combat units.

MOONEY: Just the combat units?

ALTENBURG: Yeah.

PIEHLER: So your unit didn't have any black soldiers?

ALTENBURG: No.

PIEHLER: How long were you in Japan?

ALTENBURG: Thirty days.

PIEHLER: And, in sense, waiting to get deployed ...

ALTENBURG: Well, the rumor was we could have stayed there, but the one star brigadier general wanted to become a war hero and go into politics in California when he got back.

PIEHLER: So ...

ALTENBURG: Note to self. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: But the rumor was pretty widely ...

ALTENBURG: Accepted.

PIEHLER: Even if it wasn't true.

ALTENBURG: It wasn't. But from there we shipped out of Sasebo, Japan, which is a seaport on the southern tip. The train ride, on a Japanese train, was an interesting experience.

PIEHLER: What do you remember about it?

ALTENBURG: The hard wooden bunks I got to sleep in.

PIEHLER: How long did it take you to get down to the southern part of [Japan]?

ALTENBURG: A couple days.

PIEHLER: It's sort of remarkable because now with a high speed line, you would be there within a few hours. ... for someone reading that, it would definitely be strange today.

ALTENBURG: By the way, the cruise ship that we went from the states to Japan on was called the [USS] *General Morton*, it was a large troop transport.

PIEHLER: You mentioned over lunch that you liked Japan; the little time you spent there. What did you like?

ALTENBURG: It just was a peaceful country. And I was in Japan before the peace treaty and after the peace treaty and to make a point about the attitudes of the Japanese and the G.I.s.

Before the peace treaty, if you were walking down the street, the Japanese would practically get off the sidewalk and walk in the gutter. But, after the peace treaty, G.I., you had better do that.

PIEHLER: And this is very noticeable to you?

ALTENBURG: Oh, yeah, sure.

PIEHLER: You mentioned you also took your R&R [Rest and Recuperation] to Japan.

ALTENBURG: Yes, that's where I was.

PIEHLER: What did you do at R&R? Where did you go in Japan?

ALTENBURG: To Ginza. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: In Tokyo?

ALTENBURG: Or do you want the Paul Harvey deal? (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Um, did you travel a little outside of Tokyo or did you ...

ALTENBURG: No, and that was a mistake because I should've gone to some of the real ... communities, that were ...

PIEHLER: So, you didn't go down to see Mount Fuji or ...

ALTENBURG: Oh yeah, we saw Mount Fuji, we were going by train.

PIEHLER: But it was really Tokyo.

ALTENBURG: But Ginza is an amazing place, just an amazing place. I bought cultured pearls—we weren't married yet, but that was my wife's wedding present.

MOONEY: Now when you were in Japan you were expecting to go to Korea at that point?

ALTENBURG: Oh yeah, sure.

MOONEY: At that time had you heard anything about what Korea was like?

ALTENBURG: No. When you're young, you're just invincible. What the heck? (Laughter)

MOONEY: Just going with the flow.

ALTENBURG: Yeah.

PIEHLER: You mentioned you had followed World War II very closely. Did you start following the Korean War, particularly when you knew your number was coming up?

ALTENBURG: Well, not really, because I was in right after; I was in Japan in August of '51.

PIEHLER: But a lot happened in 1950.

ALTENBURG: But you don't even, I suppose I did, I can't recall that. But, you don't get any newspapers over there on Korea, so whatever story you hear. I was in Korea with the 523rd [Engineer Pipeline Company]; the back end of our compound was adjacent to the U.S. cemetery and across the street was Graves Registration. So, when there were intense battles up north ... [we saw] two and a half ton truckloads piled high with bodies covered with canvas and ice on top of them coming to the Graves Registration.

PIEHLER: So you could sort of tell the flow of the war by the truck and the body traffic, literally.

ALTENBURG: One time we had so-called "work together," to dig a slit trench because the North Koreans allegedly had some Russian bombers that they thought might come down. But they wouldn't have had any chance with those F-14s they had back then. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Now your unit went over to Pusan, and you were based in Pusan.

ALTENBURG: Called myself the Pusan commando.

PIEHLER: What was it like to arrive in Korea? Do you remember your first response to arriving in Pusan? Any sort of initial impressions?

ALTENBURG: "Oh, we're here, we're here." (Laughs) Dirt roads, they had street cars. One time, because being a supply sergeant I had my choice of vehicle the whole time. And I was in Pusan and I saw a street car run over a little girl. Another time, a ROK [Republic of Korea] soldier walked into the side of my jeep [and] compound fractured his legs. His officer was peeved, because he got hurt.

PIEHLER: You mentioned you didn't start out as a supply clerk. There was sort of a story there which you told us before we got, Frances wasn't in the room, but it was a good ...

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE-----

PIEHLER: Let me ask you the question, you had told us a story, before we got started, [about] how you became a supply clerk, because that was not your original classification.

ALTENBURG: Well, I was a corporal and I was running the NCOs [Non Commissioned Officer] club also. I was in the bar and I had to urinate. So the latrines were too far away, well, maybe I should back up. The latrines were too far away so I urinated through the fence and they

had permanent guards in the unit, and they were fellows that were kind of screw-ups and won't admit it. They were sent down to be permanent guards. They turned me into the company commander, who was a first or second lieutenant. He says, "Altenburg, I'm gonna bust you." I said, "Sir, I'm not looking for a bust, I'm looking for a promotion," and I shopped for another job. They were looking for a supply sergeant and I told him I knew company supply, which I didn't. (Laughter) I had on the job self-training and I got a promotion to sergeant. Then the company commander was due to rotate. They have a quota log—to sign the forms. You were responsible for so much company property, you had a couple thousand dollars worth of company property per (inaudible). I had friends at the depot and I made a paper trail of the shortages, which did exist. So I got the other stripe and that's how I got to be sergeant first class in thirteen months. (Laughter) In the year that I was also running the NCO club, it paid ninety bucks a month extra ... The lowest officer rank, a warrant officer, was at the depot and he liked the whiskey, so I sent a quart of Canadian Club to him. Then I got a truckload of twenty sheets of plywood for a fifth of whiskey, or a quart of whiskey, whatever it was. With that plywood, [we] built the stage and brought in local entertainment, and we had a good weekend.

PIEHLER: Who would you bring in?

ALTENBURG: Korean groups. Two Koreans that worked in the orderly room, for the first sergeant in the south; one of 'em got married, and we weren't invited to the wedding of course but they invited us to their home afterwards to kimchee. The bride of course was not allowed in the room while the men were there. We didn't see the bride ...

PIEHLER: Before you became a supply clerk, what were you ...

ALTENBURG: I wasn't a clerk, I was a sergeant! (Laughs)

PIEHLER: I know, but before doing supply what were you doing besides running the NCO club?

ALTENBURG: Oh, I was in food service.

PIEHLER: Doing what?

ALTENBURG: Clerking, typing.

PIEHLER: Just typing, so you weren't actually doing ...

ALTENBURG: No, I was just typing.

PIEHLER: It sounds like you had, in Korea, a very routine ...

ALTENBURG: That's how I got my stripes on.

PIEHLER: Yeah. (Laughs) In a sense, you were in Pusan the entire... Did you ever leave Pusan?

ALTENBURG: No. By the way, I've got another story about the corporal on the bust duty. I went back to my unit and told the sergeant I worked for what was going to happen. He went into the major's office and the major comes storming out of there, looking for the company commander and put him straight. There will be no bust for Altenburg.

PIEHLER: A lot of guys would've just taken the bust, figuring they had no choice. How did you know that you could just shop around?

ALTENBURG: I don't know. Maybe they told me, maybe the major told me, maybe that sergeant told me. I just don't remember.

PIEHLER: Because a lot of guys have told me about being busted.

ALTENBURG: Yeah, they were looking for a supply clerk.

PIEHLER: You knew this, too.

ALTENBURG: I was informed somehow or another, yes, I don't recall.

PIEHLER: Right. You had to learn on the job, what was that ...

ALTENBURG: Well they would have requisitions, when a certain job would come through, they would be typed and I would just copy the other requisitions. And I never had any complaints that I had screwed up on it.

PIEHLER: So you just looked at other paperwork and just figured "follow the paperwork." How many men did you have under you in supply, as a supply clerk?

ALTENBURG: Just one. There's a story about this fella; he was a private, a PFC [Private First Class]. He said, "Sergeant, I've gotta go to town." He was just ... (inaudible). So I said, "Go see Annabelle." So the next day I said, "Did you see Annabelle?" "Yeah." "Did you wear a rubber?" "No." (Laughter) He got the clap. If you got a disease over there and you were due for promotion, you didn't get it. So, he could have used the money for corporal.

PIEHLER: But he ...

ALTENBURG: He didn't get it, I'm not sure what happened to him after that. I don't know how long before ...

PIEHLER: For a supply clerk, what was a typical day? You said it was a little more interesting [at the NCO Club]. You described the plywood deal. (Laughter)

ALTENBURG: Well, the cooks always liked socks with underlining. So I always ate at the cooks' table. Which was better than the (inaudible) chow. (Laughter) The cooks worked on

twenty-four, off forty-eight, so of course the Koreans shadowing us... gave us their best pheasant (inaudible)

MOONEY: It sounds like, with a lot of it, you were going with the flow, like you had said before. I was just curious if you had a sense of the greater mission that you were there in defending South Korea?

ALTENBURG: No, not at all. [I] served my time. (Laughs)

MOONEY: Just there for the pheasant.

ALTENBURG: Yeah. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: I'm curious. You mentioned going to a Korean home after the wedding and you had Korean house wards; how much other contact did you have with Koreans?

ALTENBURG: Every day, because they had Koreans working on the base. One time I was walking through a little village, as I mentioned Graves Registration was across the road. And here's two Australians and they're in this Korean home; it's open. The Korean was treating them for head wounds, they had gotten beaten up. I raced back to the unit and got a vehicle to bring them back and they couldn't thank me enough. Over at the NCO Club, they got me well oiled. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: So they were very appreciative. (Laughter)

ALTENBURG: Yeah.

PIEHLER: You mentioned earlier, if I remember correctly, about the priority. You even put alcohol over ammunition?

ALTENBURG: The state of priority on the trailer coming in was alcohol, food, and ammunition.

MOONEY: In that order.

ALTENBURG: In that order.

PIEHLER: It sounds like there was quite a bit of drinking.

ALTENBURG: There was nothing else to do at night.

PIEHLER: You said you booked Korean entertainment, and it sounds like that was very popular, that people actually ...

ALTENBURG: Well, they had no other entertainment.

PIEHLER: What about, for example, did you ever see a USO show come through?

ALTENBURG: Oh, Ethel Merman I heard sing one time.

PIEHLER: What about with a USO club or any Red Cross club in Pusan that you knew about?

ALTENBURG: There was a Red Cross club; coffee and doughnuts.

PIEHLER: Yeah, but that was it?

ALTENBURG: That was it, coffee and doughnuts.

PIEHLER: But no USO club that sort of had a home-away-from-home ...

ALTENBURG: No, in fact I think it was just a big trailer.

PIEHLER: What about movies from the States?

ALTENBURG: They would have movies. Most of the guys in the bar would rather watch a movie.

PIEHLER: In terms of mail service, how good was it?

ALTENBURG: Good, it was good, real good.

PIEHLER: How often did you write home? Or did you?

ALTENBURG: I did, quite regularly. When I was going onboard ship I kept a notebook of day-to-day experiences that I sent to my mother ...

PIEHLER: How often did you write to your wife?

ALTENBURG: She wasn't my wife ...

PIEHLER: Your fiancée?

ALTENBURG: Probably a couple, three times a week. But it was daily on her basis. And on the back of the envelope, I would write, the mailman got a kick out of this, "Run, mailman, run." (Laughter)

PIEHLER: It doesn't strike me that you were ever in harm's way. Is that accurate?

ALTENBURG: That's correct. Well, I probably was but didn't know it. I used to do some dumb things all by myself. Looking back, it was a stupid thing to do.

PIEHLER: (Laughs) What were some of the ...

ALTENBURG: Just going off alone in the countryside. Sometimes I would just take a jeep to get away for a while and go up in the mountains.

PIEHLER: At that time I think it was reasonably secure around Pusan.

ALTENBURG: It was.

PIEHLER: But even so ...

ALTENBURG: But we carried weapons.

PIEHLER: Just a year before, Pusan had really been this sort of ...

ALTENBURG: Perimeter.

PIEHLER: Perimeter, I mean, it was not that far from ...

ALTENBURG: It just got pushed in.

PIEHLER: Did anyone ever tell you stories of that while you were over there serving?

ALTENBURG: No. Those guys ...

PIEHLER: Those guys were long gone when you ...

ALTENBURG: Well, they were in combat units, they weren't as near to me...

PIEHLER: It sounds like the only time that danger seemed to approach was that time they wanted you to dig slit trenches?

ALTENBURG: [For a] perceived threat, yeah.

PIEHLER: But otherwise ...

ALTENBURG: None.

PIEHLER: In terms of supply, I'm not surprised to hear some of the, the World War II guys, you know, I've heard of whole jeeps being appropriated and you know ...

ALTENBURG: I had a whole truckload of overcoats that was loaded on my truck of overcoats, that was loaded on my truck, or should have been, but I did not black market them. I did make extra money, but that was more through the Air Force and the Marines, because they could not get liquor - only beer. So, the Canadian Club, for instance was \$12.50 a case, and at the bar it was being sold for \$.25 a shot. So I determined how many shots I got out of a bottle, and that's what I'd sell it for. Some GIs would send home for money and their parents would send them

American money, which was a court martial offense to have. They knew that I had a lot of money on me, you know, Korean money and script, military script. And I'd exchange it. So, when I got onboard ship, I had about five hundred dollars in an envelope, because I was sending money home. But you can only send one hundred dollars a month home ... you'd be investigated if you had more, to control the black market. I got onboard ship and I handed several to the ship's officer and his fingers went "crunch" and another. [said] "This feels like money, to me." I had been waiting the whole two weeks to get called in to be asked about this money, but I wasn't, and he gave it back to me on the way off.

PIEHLER: (Laughs) And that came from the currency exchange and ...

ALTENBURG: And the selling of the liquor to the ...

PIEHLER: ...the selling of the alcohol to the Marines and ...

ALTENBURG: The Air Force, yeah. To cover my extra purchases I would go to another NCO club and I'd say, "I'm buying sets of booze, and there's a form you're supposed to fill out." I said "Look, I want all my records nice and neat, just sign this will you? I'll type it up when I get back."

PIEHLER: How much supervision was there?

ALTENBURG: Supply was fine, [I] wasn't bothered by anybody.

MOONEY: No one ever, like, an inspector general never made a routine visit?

ALTENBURG: No.

PIEHLER: You almost describe a situation where you'd have to really screw up.

ALTENBURG: Yes. One officer, I think it was a major; the company commander brought him in and said, "Hey, Altenburg," because the officers are given a clothing allowance, so they had to buy all their clothes, "give the major a pair of shoes, would you?" I didn't know if I was being checked out, I said, "No, sir." I refused a major, and we had no way of knowing if I was being checked out, so I didn't...

PIEHLER: So you said no?

ALTENBURG: I said no.

PIEHLER: And that was it?

ALTENBURG: Yeah.

PIEHLER: It strikes me that that's the closest you came to someone really, you perceiving you were being checked out. Did you know of supply clerks...

ALTENBURG: A supply sergeant.

PIEHLER: Yes, supply sergeant, was there a sense as a supply sergeant that...

ALTENBURG: There was trading all the time, with this and that.

PIEHLER: And you would trade?

ALTENBURG: Yes.

PIEHLER: Did you ever have a sense that there were some supply sergeants that really had their hand in the till?

ALTENBURG: Never considered that, [I] didn't think of it.

PIEHLER: You gave some [of your] impressions of the Koreans, but what other impressions did you have of Koreans in Korea? You also went into the countryside ...

ALTENBURG: I did one bad thing one time. The first sergeant and I were out drinking and he was driving the jeep on the way back. There was a Korean riding a bicycle and I put my arm out and hit him on the back and knocked him off the bike. I felt sorry, and I still feel sorry about that. But they were basically nice people.

PIEHLER: What were your impressions of the countryside? You had spent time ...

ALTENBURG: Oh, no. Japan, yes. Korea, no. It was barren, there were no trees, there were mountains. It was a barren place...

PIEHLER: So the Korea you remember was a very desolate...

ALTENBURG: Oh, yeah, yeah.

PIEHLER: Both the countryside and the ...

ALTENBURG: The city was junk. I was very angry one time when I was a corporal ... or sergeant, but anyways, I was pulling guard duty and my wife had sent me... my fiancée had sent me a colored photo in a nice leather folder and it disappeared out of my tent, off of a shelf in there. And... maybe I was sergeant at the time (inaudible) ... at the time ... and this Korean came in and showed his pass and just ran out. I went home and met with the company commander and he said he bought it on the street.

MOONEY: It was a picture of your fiancée?

ALTENBURG: Well, he had the folder, it was in the folder.

MOONEY: But the picture?

ALTENBURG: The picture was gone and his ID tag. The company commander said, "Well, he said he bought it on the street." I said, "Okay, well..."

PIEHLER: So, they sided with the Korean?

ALTENBURG: Yeah, yeah, they didn't say a word to him.

PIEHLER: Or obviously punish him.

ALTENBURG: Just stay away from him.

PIEHLER: Yeah, yeah.

ALTENBURG: You couldn't prove that he went in there, but he worked on the compound.
(Laughs)

PIEHLER: So he had worked on the compound?

ALTENBURG: He did. He had access to the quarters. Those quarters had a little pot belly black stove in there, so it was just typical MASH.

PIEHLER: We've seen the pictures but people reading this interview won't. You essentially lived in a wall tent your whole time in Korea?

ALTENBURG: No, just in the 409th [Engineer Brigade]. I was in private quarters in the 523rd.

PIEHLER: When you say private quarters, how was that different from a large wall tent?

ALTENBURG: It was a building-sized large wall tent is what it was and ... (inaudible).

PIEHLER: What did you think about the whole, or did you give it much thought at the time, with the Truman/MacArthur tension.

ALTENBURG: I was a fan of MacArthur, based on World War II, and of course Eisenhower after that. In fact, I was unhappy with Truman when he sacked him [MacArthur].

PIEHLER: Were you still in service? You were still in service when that ...

ALTENBURG: Yes.

PIEHLER: Were you still in Korea?

ALTENBURG: Yes.

PIEHLER: You left Korea after your tour. Where did you go to next?

ALTENBURG: Well, I left Korea because we were supposed to be there for eighteen months. Combat troops were there for twelve, but every time I was due to rotate, they would extend the time. There was a fellow that I shipped over with, that I took basic with, in a unit that determined who would go when. [He said] “Altenburg isn’t going before I go.” But he was on R&R, and I was acquaintances of that office, “boom,” I was gone. By the time he got back I was out of there. (Laughter)

MOONEY: You went back to Japan first?

ALTENBURG: Well, I got a ship out of Japan, yes. A ship to Japan and a ship, we were delayed maybe a week because the general size ship that we were supposed to sail on took back a hundred GI foul-ups, prisoners. Big ship, one hundred prisoners. We had to wait a week for another ship.

PIEHLER: One observation is you always had a sense that there was the official system and then there was the system of how it actually was.

ALTENBURG: Of course. Now every time my wife says something I say, “Yes ma’am.” (Laughs) She says, “Stop doing that,” and [I say] “Look, I understand the voice of authority.” (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Had this been part of your personality before joining the army?

ALTENBURG: I don’t know, I don’t know.

PIEHLER: As I said, I mean, the idea that you would have taken the bust, like “well, he’s the officer.” It seems like you picked up rather quickly on how supply actually—one way to keep it working is trading, or it otherwise won’t work. But going back, you came home and you still had time to serve and you mentioned over lunch that you didn’t want to go to Colorado in the mountains at the time.

ALTENBURG: Well, the government gave us a train line from San Francisco to Colorado Springs. Then we had to make our own way home, and then back to Colorado Springs for reassignment. I got married, my wife came back and says, “Oh, get assigned here, get assigned here, I want to stay here.” I said, “It looks like Korea, no.”

MOONEY: So overall, looking back, it wasn’t something that was enjoyable, in some sense, compared to what other people were experiencing in Korea, but not so much so that you ...

ALTENBURG: I think I basically had a good time.

MOONEY: Right. But not so much that you would want to live anywhere that reminds you of it. (Laughs)

ALTENBURG: That's correct.

PIEHLER: Colorado Springs was not what it is today; in my understanding in the '50s it was much smaller.

ALTENBURG: My daughter moved to Colorado Springs and then when she moved to Knoxville I was unhappy because I liked taking my son-in-law's four-wheel drive and going up in the mountains.

PIEHLER: But at the time you'd had enough of it. And so you were able to manage to get transferred to Chicago?

ALTENBURG: I asked for an assignment at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, which is close to Milwaukee. I got an assignment in Chicago. It was on 79th and Harlem, and you wouldn't recognize that neighborhood today, but there were anti-aircraft gun sites, allegedly to protect O'Hare. I walked into the office there; it was about quarter to five. The corporal says, "Sergeant, you're AWOL." I said, "Corporal, you're full of it." It was still duty hours. It was before five o'clock, I wasn't late." (Laughter) "You said report on that day, and I did." (Laughter) And we were buddies from there on. We lived off base and we moved into the ... there was a house that was broken up into apartments, we moved in there. He moved to St. Louis for a while, but that was our initial visit. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: You mentioned that it was an anti-aircraft unit, what was your particular...

ALTENBURG: Supply.

PIEHLER: And this unit, what was its state of readiness?

ALTENBURG: I don't remember, but there was one black PFC (Private First Class) that was assigned to the supply room in Washington, D.C., and he had an attitude. And of course the troops had to pull guard duty ... and they had to clean their rifles ... There wasn't a guard that ever cleaned a rifle when I was supply sergeant because that's all I had this PFC doing all day long was clean rifles and clean them all again. I took care of that attitude.

PIEHLER: So in some ways your routine was very similar to Korea in the sense that you do supply and ...

ALTENBURG: Oh sure, no different, just location.

PIEHLER: And was it similar training as in Korea?

ALTENBURG: Oh no, no. 79th and Harlem wasn't as strict.

PIEHLER: In many ways it sounds like it was very quiet duty, what was the typical day like?

ALTENBURG: Boring. (Laughter)

MOONEY: I was going to ask if you got to use the GI Bill at all or not?

ALTENBURG: I didn't, no. I got married, raised a family, and had to make a buck.

PIEHLER: Did you marry after you got out or did you get married ...

ALTENBURG: On leave, we had about nine months to do that.

PIEHLER: So when you were in Chicago?

ALTENBURG: I was married.

PIEHLER: And your wife and you set up an apartment in Chicago? So at that point you were living ...

ALTENBURG: Like a civilian.

PIEHLER: Yeah, even though you're still a supply sergeant, you're ...

ALTENBURG: By five o'clock I was out of there.

PIEHLER: Yeah, you were out. What about weekends?

ALTENBURG: Weekends off.

PIEHLER: So really by that time you became very much a ...

ALTENBURG: Just doing my time.

PIEHLER: Did you ever have any alerts?

ALTENBURG: Chicago? No. It was really, it was mundane.

PIEHLER: Did anyone give you a story about re-enlisting? Or encouraging you to stay in the reserves for you pension?

ALTENBURG: Very little. In fact, they didn't care much because they knew I was out.

PIEHLER: When did you formally separate, was it in Chicago? Or did they send you back to Milwaukee?

ALTENBURG: At Fort Sheridan.

PIEHLER: And it sounds like, in some ways, you never looked back, in terms of your Korean War and military ...

ALTENBURG: What do you mean by that?

PIEHLER: I think you said you stayed in touch with one person, who did you stay in touch with when from your Korea?

ALTENBURG: Well, there was one in Waukesha, which was fifteen miles from where I lived, and another one in Detroit, Michigan—and the fellow in Chicago.

PIEHLER: The corporal?

ALTENBURG: Yeah.

PIEHLER: You mentioned, I think, one reunion?

ALTENBURG: Kalamazoo, Michigan.

PIEHLER: Did you go to it?

ALTENBURG: I went to it, yes.

PIEHLER: What was that ...

ALTENBURG: A waste of time. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Did you ever join any veteran's organization?

ALTENBURG: No, I didn't feel the need for a social life; I had one of my own. I mean I was in the Jaycees, they ...

PIEHLER: The Jaycees ...

ALTENBURG: The Junior Chamber of Commerce. I wasn't that kind of warrior that relived their stories; that wasn't for me. In fact, I belonged to the American Legion for a short period of time to please my father-in-law. He was in World War I.

PIEHLER: He was a World War I veteran? He was a real Legionnaire?

ALTENBURG: Yeah, he was after me ...

PIEHLER: After you to join?

ALTENBURG: Yeah. I would go to their Christmas ... the day before Christmas and drink Tom and Jerry's [a traditional Christmastime drink of eggnog, brandy, and rum]. (Laughter) But when he died that was it.

PIEHLER: So it was really the family ties that led you to the Legion, not any ...

ALTENBURG: Kind of to get him off my back.

PIEHLER: You mentioned over lunch that you've never been back to Korea, or Japan.

ALTENBURG: I'd like to go back to Japan, no desire to [go] to Korea.

PIEHLER: You said to me over lunch that if you went back to Korea you wouldn't recognize anything.

ALTENBURG: I'm sure I wouldn't, yeah.

PIEHLER: Has it surprised you how well Korea has done, at least southern Korea?

ALTENBURG: Well, uh, your tax money did it. I'm sure it's different.

PIEHLER: In many ways, once you left the service, you resumed your salesman—you mentioned earlier that the army was your last paycheck, a straight salary, as you worked on commission. I asked a lot about being a salesman, but living on commission, was there ever a real sort of trough where you don't ...

ALTENBURG: I had a period of time that, well, yeah one period I had twenty-one demonstrations without a sale. But that was just a brief period of time.

PIEHLER: But that was the worst that ...

ALTENBURG: Yeah.

PIEHLER: So, in other words, it was a fairly steady ...

ALTENBURG: Well, when the raises went up, you earned another two dollars. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: And then you became a distributor. How did that happen?

ALTENBURG: It was kind of a roll-over from my dad. But, I was offered the distributorship years before that in a small city called Racine, Wisconsin and I didn't want that.

PIEHLER: And this distributorship was based out of the Milwaukee area?

ALTENBURG: Yeah.

PIEHLER: It's a simple question, but what did you do as a distributor?

ALTENBURG: You hired salespeople and, of course, they got the machines for "x" number of dollars, and you got the rest.

PIEHLER: How did you pick good salespeople? Or was it just luck?

ALTENBURG: It was just luck. It was just one of those thing you had to pick up. And I had three people that were good for years, but most of them were a revolving door.

MOONEY: Do you feel like there was anything, in terms of skills, that you may have picked up as supply sergeant or anything that you took back with you?

ALTENBURG: No, I think it was the other way around.

MOONEY: Is that right? Your work in sales helped.

PIEHLER: Well, it sounds like you were very comfortable with people. Would that be a fair ...

ALTENBURG: I've never thought about it.

PIEHLER: Yeah, well, people might find it odd that I do this and do oral history. I ask total strangers all kinds of questions, I wouldn't say about really intimate parts of their life, but more than you generally—average people on the street don't start asking you about your war service and growing up. And on a daily basis you go to people's homes and spend an hour or two with them, and you seem to have liked that.

ALTENBURG: Yeah, I did.

PIEHLER: You mentioned [that] your one daughter went into the army, not without any consultation. Is there anything about her experiences that matched yours?

ALTENBURG: None, she was just stateside all the time. But I always told my granddaughter; I'd go up to her and say "Your mother wore combat boots." (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Quite literally. And you retired to Wisconsin?

ALTENBURG: This idea of retiring to some place I totally don't understand. All your friends ... you gotta start all over. Arizona, Florida, just doesn't excite me. I know my backyard, why should I go someplace else?

PIEHLER: One thing you also said in terms of your hobbies ...

ALTENBURG: None. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: Well, you did mention that the two channels you watch are Fox News and the Food Channel.

ALTENBURG: And playing cards ...

PIEHLER: When you mentioned cooking, I got a sense you picked up some of that from your father. Is that ...

ALTENBURG: Well, maybe it was in my DNA, but it was just a case of survival. Because sometimes I wouldn't get home til nine or ten o'clock, and she wouldn't make a meal for me. (Laughter) And if you didn't like leftovers, which I eat them now but I didn't then ...

MOONEY: So your wife said, "If you want a meal..."

ALTENBURG: Make it.

PIEHLER: So you had some late nights at times?

ALTENBURG: That's true, because most of your sales were made at night. Your contract's knocking doors through the day, and the husband had to be home. I would not demonstrate to a wife alone.

PIEHLER: Really?

ALTENBURG: [They'd say] "Well, I've got to ask my husband." So I had to come back anyway.

PIEHLER: So you'd set up the deal and then the contract and then come back in. So that made really long days.

ALTENBURG: It did. I wouldn't start until about ten.

PIEHLER: Oh okay. How had the business changed by the time you retired? You mentioned that, you even started talking about it, that it's a lost art, door-to-door sales.

ALTENBURG: Yeah. They don't do much door-to-door, they make telephone calls. Some distributors, I was never one of these, they would hire massive training classes and have them sell to a few friends and relatives and wouldn't train them beyond that. They would just keep hiring more and more people, and I would never do that. If I hired you, I trained you, I took you out with me. I didn't do the friends and relatives ...

PIEHLER: So, as a distributor, you kept your hand in part of the training process?

ALTENBURG: I also took a lot of my own personal ...

PIEHLER: You kept selling?

ALTENBURG: I kept selling, yeah, I enjoyed it.

PIEHLER: Do you think there is still a future for door-to-door sales? Or is that something that we just ...

ALTENBURG: I don't really know.

PIEHLER: What's the last thing that you bought from a door-to-door salesman? Do you even remember?

ALTENBURG: No, but on occasion, they're usually small products now, not the vacuum cleaner thing. But if they come to my door I'll usually buy it. (Laughter) You know, if it's a small item, not a big ticket item like I did. I say, "That's how I made my buck."

PIEHLER: (Laughs) There's a certain empathy for them.

ALTENBURG: We always enjoyed ourselves; our backyard was on the parkway. As a youth I always wanted to build a house on a hill or on a parkway. And if I got the opportunity to build a second house, to build it on a parkway with a backyard where the closest neighbor behind me is three blocks away.

PIEHLER: And how long have you been in the house?

ALTENBURG: [Since] 1966.

PIEHLER: You mentioned that you used to read a lot growing up until the army.

ALTENBURG: Yeah, I just stopped. In fact, in the army, I took about five books along to read. And when I got to Japan I dumped them because lugging them in that sack. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: Did you have any close library?

ALTENBURG: No.

PIEHLER: So there [weren't] magazines?

ALTENBURG: No, there was no reading material, unless it was sent to you.

MOONEY: No wonder everyone was drinking.

PIEHLER: Have you taken up reading at all in retirement?

ALTENBURG: It's hard for me to read a book now. The last one I read, that was not too long ago, it's been a year or so, was Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation*.

PIEHLER: Is there anything we forgot to ask?

ALTENBURG: I don't think so.

PIEHLER: I have to say, I ...

ALTENBURG: We did a lot of jawing. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: I'm very glad that you made time to be ...

ALTENBURG: I enjoyed it.

PIEHLER: Oh good, we enjoyed it a great deal. You have some very good stories that will not only eventually appear in a transcript, but might occasionally appear in a lecture without your name attached. (Laughter) Well, thank you very much.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----