THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANCIS O. AYERS

FOR THE
VETERANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND SOCIETY
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

INTERVIEWED BY
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AND
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KNOXVILLE, TENESSEE
MAY 8TH, 2001

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SADASIVAM: The date is May 8th, 2001. We're interviewing Mr. Francis Ayers, and Kate Landdeck is here, and Ramaah Sadasivam.

LANDDECK: Very good, very good. Alright, well let's start you off easy. Tell us about your folks and your family growing up.

AYERS: Okay. You obviously want to know where I was born?

LANDDECK: Sure.

AYERS: In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

LANDDECK: Can we get a date for that?

AYERS: I was born December 31, 1925.

LANDDECK: Oh, a New Year's Eve baby!

AYERS: A New Year's baby, right. But everybody says, "Wow, you were a good one for your dad 'cause he can use you on the income tax!" (Laughter) In 1925 there …

LANDDECK: There was no income tax?

AYERS: Well, there was an income tax but it wasn't anything to speak of! So, I didn't help a whole lot. But, you want to know the name of my mother?

LANDDECK: Yes, please.

AYERS: Okay, My father's name was Elmer Ellsworth Ayers. My mother's name was Charlotte Anne Kuhlman, and, of course, Ayers also.

LANDDECK: Right.

AYERS: But uh, I had a brother and two sisters, and … my brother and one of my sisters is still living, and they're both still in Pittsburgh.

LANDDECK: Are they younger or older?

AYERS: They're older.

LANDDECK: Older?

AYERS: I'm the baby of the family.

LANDDECK: Oh, all right.

AYERS: And my brother is—today is his birthday. He's eighty-four years old today.

LANDDECK: Terrific!

AYERS: And he still plays golf and he looks like he's about fifty! (Laughter) But he's very active and he's in good health. However, he is a little heavy. But my sister is—like my brother says—he's only one year older than my sister. If anybody asks him what his age is … whatever my sister says she is, that's how old he is—one year older! But she's eighty-three and she lives in Pittsburgh also. They have children. My brother has six of them, and my sister has two—two boys. But my other sister had a boy and two girls, but she died in childbirth. She didn't die in surgery; she died through childbirth. My father died when I was fourteen so my mother raised me through the teenage years.

LANDDECK: So he must have died during the Depression then, if you were only fourteen that was still—[because you were born in] 1925?

AYERS: In [Forty]-nine—yeah that was after the Depression. Well, I mean it was probably still on but …

LANDDECK: Had he been ill?

AYERS: He died with the Pernicious Anemia. He had been ill; they took him to the hospital and he died in the hospital.

LANDDECK: Now, what did your parents do for a living? Can you tell us about them? Did your mom work or did she just stay with the kids?

AYERS: No she stayed home. I mean, she probably worked before the children were born, but she stayed at home with the children. And my father worked for Gulf Oil Corporation, and he was a traffic manager.

LANDDECK: Now were they—they both had high-school educations, is that right?

AYERS: Yes. They both had high-school; they both graduated from high school. None of them had college educations. My grandparents—well I never met my father's mother and father, but I spent a lot of time, almost every summer, with my mother's grandparents. Actually my grandmother I felt [was] more like a mother to me than a grandmother! I really enjoyed them. We had good times! I enjoyed growing up. Actually, we lived out in Brentwood, which is outside of Pittsburgh, and my father and his brother [each] built a house right and they were right across the street from one another. And at that time they were the first two houses out there.

LANDDECK: Oh wow, founders!

AYERS: So they go back a long time!

LANDDECK: (Laughs) I guess so. Now did you have a question about …

SADASIVAM: Well, do you remember much of the Depression and how that affected your family? Or what your dad did during that time?

AYERS: I would say, fortunately, the Depression did not affect us too much—we were lucky. We actually had—he built his house out there and built a chicken farm. So we raised chickens and we had a large garden. I mean, it was almost a farm-like garden. And … for that time, he had a good job, so we were not really hurt too much with the Depression. It didn't affect us too much.

LANDDECK: So he wasn't laid off or anything?

AYERS: No he was not laid off.

LANDDECK: Oh, that's good. He worked the whole time.

LANDDECK: That's terrific.

AYERS: And he was, from what I understand, he was making pretty good money at that time. Of course if you were working you were making good, you know!

LANDDECK: Right!

AYERS: Any kind of money you were making was good.

LANDDECK: Definitely.

AYERS: So I was not—I knew the Depression was on, but it did not affect me a whole lot. We always had food on the table. If we didn't grow it, you know, we were able to purchase it, and we always had clothes and a roof over our head.

LANDDECK: Well, that's good; more than some people had at that time.

AYERS: That's right! That's a lot more than most people had.

SADASIVAM: And your mother was German in ethnicity?

AYERS: Yeah …

SADASTVAM: Sorry, your grandparents were German. Did they come recently, or how long?

AYERS: No. They were born and raised here, both my grandparents. My mother's parents were German of course, both of them, and my father's were Scotch-Irish.

SADASIVAM: Did you have any relatives in Germany at the time of the War?

AYERS: No, not that I know of. My grandmother always said she was a distant cousin to the Kaiser, (Laughter) Kaiser Wilhelm, but I—her name was Wilhelm, her maiden name—but I think she was pulling my leg! (Laughter)

LANDDECK: That's what grandmothers are for!

AYERS: That's right!

SADASIVAM: Why did you enlist in the Army?

AYERS: Because there was war; the war was going on. I actually enlisted because I wanted to make sure that I could get the branch of service and the—well, paratrooper infantry. I wanted to get in and that's why I did it—enlisted in the Army. I enlisted before I got drafted. Because, I knew they were going to draft me after my birthday, and if I got drafted I'd go where they told me I was going to go. This way I could pretty much …

LANDDECK: You had some choice.

AYERS: … had a choice to where I could go. They thought I was … when I said I wanted to go in the airborne, but I had read about the airborne and knew quite a bit about it, and a friend of mine had gone into the airborne and he said it was great. And at that time when you're eighteen years old—gung-ho! (Laughter) That's it, and that's what I wanted to do. (Noise of crows in the background.) I wanted to be a paratrooper. When I went into the service they, of course, were trying to get pilots. They were *desperate* for pilots! And apparently I scored pretty well on the test that they gave me. They tried to talk me—for about forty-five minutes—to try to join the Air Force and take cadet pilot training. I couldn't hear them; I didn't listen.

LANDDECK: You wanted to jump out of airplanes rather than fly them!

AYERS: That's right! I didn't want to fly them—I wanted to jump! (Laughter) So anyhow, they finally said okay, and they stamped my application, "U.S. Army Paratrooper."

LANDDECK: Goodness. Now your brother was in the military as well?

AYERS: Yes.

LANDDECK: Did he go in before you?

AYERS: Oh yes; he went in '41.

LANDDECK: He did. Was he drafted or did he enlist?

AYERS: He was drafted.

LANDDECK: He was?

AYERS: No, he didn't enlist.

LANDDECK: Not as smart as you?

AYERS: He was not as smart as I am. (Laughter) But he went to the Air Force though!!!

LANDDECK: He did?

AYERS: He did, yes. He went in the Air Force and he took basic training, I think in Goldsboro, North Carolina and then went to Atlantic City. And he went from there to MacDill Field in Tampa, Florida. He spent the rest of the war in Tampa, Florida fighting the battle of Tampa Bay! (Laughter)

LANDDECK: No kidding?

AYERS: He tried to talk me into—he says, "You're crazy! You don't want to." As it turned out I guess maybe I was lucky that I got to come back. I could have been shot down, not gotten back.

LANDDECK: How did your mother react to your paratrooping plans? You said your brother thought you were crazy.

AYERS: Well, yes. (Laughter) I don't think my mother was real pleased either.

LANDDECK: Yeah …

AYERS: But I said that's what I wanted to do.

SADASIVAM: Did you tell her before you enlisted, or did you tell her after you enlisted so she couldn't do anything about it?

AYERS: Uh, I think it was after I enlisted. I think I had already enlisted whenever told her I was going to go, and I was going into the paratroopers. I think that set my brother off (Laugh), he said, "Nobody wants to go into the paratroopers!" I said, "Oh yes they do!" But no, I don't think anybody was real pleased whenever they find out I was going into the paratroopers, 'cause I think they were pretty expendable.

LANDDECK: Yeah. Well, and they didn't have the fancy parachutes that they have today with all the—today you can go exactly where you want, but at that time they were just the round chutes, is that correct?

AYERS: They were good though—they were *bigge*r! And, you know, you could guide those things. Sure, they had risers that you could go one way or another.

LANDDECK: So it wasn't as, you know, you watch the old War World II movies it's like, "Oh, geez, what are those guys doing?" But it wasn't quite that bad?

AYERS: Oh yeah sure. If they dropped you in the wrong place it was bad; was not too much you could do about it. I mean you couldn't go scooting off to the side like they do nowadays, but … you could direct it somewhat. Not like they do today, though.

LANDDECK: Right; they're so sophisticated.

SADASIVAM: Did any of your friends enlist in the Army or any of the other military branches and why did they enlist?

AYERS: Well, we had—I had several. Almost all of the kids I graduated with went in the service too. But we all went in—I think I'm the only one that I know of that went in the airborne. … Well, after the war was over and we'd come back—I used to play basketball with a group before we went in the service and we played in the Industrial League and we had a sponsor and all that. So, we all played; there was about six or seven of us who played high school basketball together and in the Industrial League. Then we all went in the service, then we come back and we tried to get the guy to sponsor us again to play basketball. He wouldn't do it, so they went down and signed up with the Third Army, I think in Pittsburgh, and played for the army. Signed up in the Reserves! And they tried to talk me into going and playing with them, but I said, "I don't want to play basketball *that* bad!" (Laughter) "Sorry!" And fortunately, I didn't sign up, because the Korean War, of course, broke out not long after that and they went off to the Korean War. A couple of them got killed over there in Korea.

LANDDECK: Just for basketball.

AYERS: Just for basketball—that's the only reason they signed up. So, somebody's looking out for me.

LANDDECK: Definitely!

AYERS: Because, in the Battle of the Bulge there weren't too many that come back from there. I'm one of the fortunate.

SADASIVAM: What kind of goals—what was your attitude towards war? You said that you were really gung-ho. You wanted to go fight. But what did you think war was? What was your concept of war at the time, before you went?

AYERS: Before I went? Or before the war started?

SADASIVAM: I guess both.

AYERS: Before the war started I never thought too much about it. I was not concerned about it because I didn't think there would be anything like it, but after war broke out and particularly after Pearl Harbor—that did it for me. That sent me; I was all for going to war. I was going to

get even with them, I guess. 'Cause it, I mean it upset me. I remember it upset me—and I was a young fellow then! And I thought, "Well we're going to war. I'm going in. I'm not staying home."

LANDDECK: Did you see a difference between—you said you wanted to get even for Pearl Harbor?

AYERS: Mm-hmm.

LANDDECK: Did you see a difference between fighting against the Japanese and the Germans?

AYERS: No, no.

LANDDECK: Because they were allies?

AYERS: They were the enemy! As far as I was concerned they were the enemy. They were allies with Japan and they were our enemy. If they're our enemy, I'm going to war with them.

LANDDECK: Right, right.

SADASIVAM: Before you enlisted in the war what was your attitude towards death? Did you—especially in war did you—I don't know how to say it, but like what did you think was going to happen? What did you think about death? Or the possibility that you could have been killed?

AYERS: That was always on my mind. I mean, after I was in the service, yes. Well, it's a case you either kill or be killed. I mean that's where you're trained: you either kill or be killed. And there's always a possibility that, you know, you could be killed! And you try to keep it out of your mind, but it's almost impossible. 'Cause you're thinking about it all the time you know. I mean, somebody's shooting at you. They're going to try to kill you. So, if you can shoot and kill them first, they're not going to get ya. But like one of the guys said, "Hey, there's a bullet out there with my name on it." I said, "There may be a bullet out there with my name on it, but I'm not going to run in front of a machine gun nest to see if it's my time."

LANDDECK: Right.

AYERS: He's going to have to find me to kill me. I said, "I'm not going to be a hero where I'm gonna run up there and," I said, "I'll do my job. I'll fight. But as far as running up there and fighting to jump into a machine gun nest, I won't do *that* I don't think." And I didn't. I didn't *have* to fortunately.

LANDDECK: Did that attitude—the consciousness of the reality that you could be killed in the war. Did that change from—you know, you enlisted—you enlisted in a high risk area, the paratroopers, and you went through training. Did the realization that you could be killed change, or was it there even when you enlisted in the paratroopers? (Noise of planes overhead) Or did that—was there a point where reality struck? Do you understand what I'm asking?

AYERS: Yeah, yeah.

LANDDECK: 'Cause you were so young?

AYERS: At that time I guess I thought, "I'm not gonna get killed." I was too young to die. Too dumb to die, I guess! (Laughter) But no, I didn't think that—that never bothered me and I never thought that it would have ever happened to me. Of course, I mean you know that it can, but you always think it's not going to.

LANDDECK: So that changed once you actually got into combat. Okay. Well, you wanted to ask him some questions about the training?

SADASIVAM: Yeah, yeah. Can you describe what it was like training for parachute school? What did you do?

AYERS: Paratroop school?

SADASIVAM: Yeah.

AYERS: I can go back to basic training! (Laughs)

LANDDECK: Let's start there.

AYERS: Well basic training of course was: you learned how to shoot a gun, you learned how to march, you learned how to take orders, and you learned how to do it their way. You learned to do it the army way. Like I always say, "There's three ways of doing things: the right way, the wrong way, and the army way." (Laughter) But you do it their way, and they train you to do it their way. And you almost have to be that way 'cause everybody's depending on everybody else. Everybody has to be on the same page and working together or you've got chaos. And basic training is—what it says, they basically teach you how to be a soldier, and how to fight, and how to fire a gun. And it's—well, I took basic training at Fort McClellan, Alabama. And if you're familiar with Alabama, it is hot! (Whistles)

LANDDECK: Yeah, what time of year was this that you were there?

AYERS: (Laughs) Well, I went in the service in January I think—yeah January, yeah—January 16. Then … I was down there in January and all through the six weeks—*sixteen* weeks, not six weeks. Sixteen weeks of basic.

LANDDECK: Sixteen weeks of basic! I didn't realize it was that long.

AYERS: Yeah, it was sixteen weeks.

LANDDECK: Oh, goodness.

AYERS: And then after that I finished basic training and went down to Fort Benning, Georgia into parachute training. Of course, there you learn how to jump out of an airplane. You learn how to pack a parachute. You pack your own parachute and jump with the parachute that you packed.

LANDDECK: (Laughs) So, you're sure to do it well! (Laughs)

AYERS: Right! You learn how to do it right! However there's one thing about it. I mean in those days—I don't know if it's still the same or not, but in those days the parachute that you had was fairly large and was packed very well and it had a pack on the back of it like a cover. It had the static line on it, which you folded back and forth across the back of your parachute and then it had a hook that you hook onto a line inside the airplane. So whenever you jumped out of the airplane it pulled that thing the parachute all the way out. If it was tucked in there—the parachute was tucked in under rubber bands all the way down each side so you just folded it back and forth and back and forth and tucked it in.

LANDDECK: Under the rubber bands?

AYERS: Under the rubber bands. But it had covering over it—canvas covering. And then whenever you jumped out that static line was attached to the apex of the parachute and—I had forgotten how long it was, but it was long enough that when you went out the door it would let you fall away from the airplane and then it would pull the parachute out. So the parachute was already out—it was going to come out no matter how you packed it. Hopefully, it would come out in a way that was satisfactory so that it would open up and you could fall down.

SADASIVAM: How did it detach? How was it attached to the parachute, do you know?

AYERS: Yeah, with a nylon cord.

LANDDECK: It was. So it would just snap off?

AYERS: Yeah, whenever it finally reached the end of it. And I'll guarantee you when it hit—when you hit the end of the rope, or the end of the static line, it snapped! I mean it snapped you! You'd go—phewwwwwm!—it would flip you and you'd swing back and forth and that was probably the hardest thing about jumping out of the airplane was when the parachute opened up, because it jolted you.

LANDDECK: I bet you were glad it did.

AYERS: Yes! Oh yes. That was a joy whenever that thing opened up and then you'd look and "Ah, here I am floating down here!" And it's quiet. It is quiet when you're hanging. Well, in practice jumps. We jumped 1200 feet was the first few jumps that we made.

LANDDECK: That's fairly low, isn't it?

AYERS: No.

LANDDECK: They want to drop you low and teach you low, huh?

AYERS: No, not at 1200 feet.

LANDDECK: Twelve thousand?

AYERS: Because we jumped out of the—in practice out of the towers at 250 feet.

LANDDECK: Wow!

AYERS: Now they have a mock airplane door that you were standing on, then you hook your cable onto a cable that ran from there down to the ground. And you jumped out of there to practice jumping out of an airplane. Then it was on a pulley that would run you all the way down to the ground. And that is where you lost most of the fellas. Most of the guys that weren't going to make it in the paratroopers quit right there because, I mean, that's pretty scary when you're up there 250 feet and you just look out there and there's nothing! We lost—I mean there were quite a few that refused to jump.

LANDDECK: So they just decided to save the gas from the airplane and just have them climb the tower to weed them out rather than taking them up?

AYERS: Yeah.

LANDDECK: How many jumps did you have to do in training, do you know?

AYERS: Uh, well I took six jumps at Fort Benning training. I had nine all together. Every six months you had to jump to stay classified as a paratrooper. So I made six jumps here and made three over in Europe, but they were all practice jumps. Not in combat. I did not jump in combat. But … 1200 feet is what we used to jump. That was where the plane was going—1200 feet. That was nice because—but they kept lowering it because they dropped you—when they're dropping you in combat usually they try to get you as low as they possibly can. So about the time that your chute opens up you're going to hit the ground. So that you're not hanging up there, you know, with somebody shooting at you.

LANDDECK: Yeah, that makes sense.

AYERS: So, we started out at 1200 feet and worked our way down until—first, I'd say the first three jumps were about 1200 feet and then they start dropping down.

LANDDECK: I guess I've gone to too many air shows!

AYERS: The last ones were about three to four hundred feet.

LANDDECK: Wow, that's really low.

AYERS: That's low. That's right; that's close to the ground.

LANDDECK: Yeah.

SADASIVAM: So, I remember at lunch you said that you took the Liberty [ship] from the U.S. Did you go to England?

AYERS: Yes.

SADASIVAM: And where did you leave from the States?

AYERS: From the States, New York. (Noise of planes overhead) We went out to New York, like I say, on board the Liberty ship. It was British; it was a British ship, and we formed a convoy. We went out of New York and we stayed close to the shore all the way down to Florida, and each day as we were going more ships would join us. And as we started over, went overseas—down to Miami was as far as we went and then we started over. There was ships as far as you could see. You'd look out and there's nothing but ships! And everyday when you'd wake up you'd look over and there was different ships, they kept shifting positions all the time and kept changing around. But it took us a long time, I know, to get over there by the time—I've forgotten how long it did. Well, my record would probably tell you, but when we left the United States and when we landed in England—because we were supposed to jump—we were actually going over there with the idea of jumping in Holland. And they jumped in Holland on September, 17 and we landed on September, 19. Needless to say, I did not jump in Holland. (Laughter)

SADASIVAM: What did you do to pass the time when you were on board the Liberty [ship]? 'Cause it was a *long* time! (Laughter)

AYERS: Well, yes it was; it was a long time. It was a long time going over there. Just played cards and goofed around! Sometimes you pulled duty and—pulled KP duty or something. But most of the time it was just waiting and looking around. Waiting to get over there.

SADASIVAM: And did you make a lot of friends at this time since you were in such close contact?

AYERS: Oh yeah! I had one fellow that I went to basic training with and went through jump school together and went overseas together. We went over together. So, he and I were both pretty close. And I got—I made a lot of friends over there, 'cause they all knew what we were going for and we all knew what we were going for, so we all had the same ideas and the same—we got to be old friends. Of course, there were some that I wasn't too friendly with. (Laughter) I know one thing! (Laughs) The English sure have crazy ideas about food!

LANDDECK: Oh yeah?

AYERS: I don't know what they—if they do it all the time, but on board that Liberty ship we used to have tongue for breakfast.

LANDDECK: Ooh!

SADASIVAM: I never ate breakfast. (Laughter) I really didn't! I'd go down and maybe get some toast or something, but they served tongue for breakfast. The rest of the meals were pretty good, but I could not go and have breakfast.

SADASIVAM: Was it just American soldiers on the …

AYERS: Oh yeah! It was all American soldiers … Well, no. It was a British crew.

SADASIVAM: But they didn't realize that you guys—culture difference?

AYERS: I don't think they really cared! (Laughter) They had food that they made and that was it, and you either ate it or didn't. But I know one thing! Going over, the ocean was very calm. It really was. I mean I could—the ship was hardly rocking! But there sure was a lot of sick people going over there.

SADASIVAM: No kidding?

AYERS: I mean, I fortunately don't get motion sickness, but there was a lot on board that ship that were sick most of the way. But I stayed—I was always having a good time! (Laughter) Or, trying to have a good time

LANDDECK: Now where in England did you land?

AYERS: Southampton.

LANDDECK: Southampton?

AYERS: Southampton, England.

LANDDECK: Did you stay there, or did you go …

AYERS: No, we debarked at South Hampton and they took us—I forgot where it was in England, but we went from there in England over to Mourmelon, France.

LANDDECK: So you didn't spend much time in England at all?

AYERS: No, no. Not then.

LANDDECK: So you went to—say the name of the town again?

AYERS: Mourmelon.

LANDDECK: Mourmelon.

AYERS: Mourmelon, France.

LANDDECK: You'll have to look it up when you get over …

AYERS: I should have brought the book with me! I got an epic history of the 101st Airborne. But that's where our base camp was.

LANDDECK: Okay. How long were you there before you actually went into combat?

AYERS: Uh, well let's see. I guess about a month.

LANDDECK: Yeah. Did you do extra training, or what did you do while you were there?

AYERS: It was mostly training. Oh, that's another thing, too! When you're in the paratroopers you do everything double-time. Which is marching double-time! (Noise of planes overhead) You run. You're actually running, but you're running in cadence. You don't walk anywhere in training. And quite often when you're in, like overseas in the European Theater, you ran over there too. You're double-timed in cadence there too. I mean they kept you in good—I'll say one thing. I was in good condition physically because, I mean, they had you running all the time.

LANDDECK: They did that just to keep you in shape?

AYERS: Just to keep you in shape! That's right. That was one way they kept you in shape. And you did calisthenics, and one thing I used to go crazy with—you would sit on the ground with your feet spread open, and you would sit there and do nothing but pound the ground with the sides of your hand, and you did that until you got a callus on the sides of your hand. And you'd use that as a weapon. That was part of—you'd hit somebody, give them a backhand this way and you would hit them with the back of your hand and the side of your hand and it was like hitting them with a hammer, almost. But we used to do that. We'd sit there and we'd pound the ground.

LANDDECK: I've never heard of that.

AYERS: We did. And the side of the hand—where the fatty part of the hand is—was callused, and it was hard.

LANDDECK: I bet it was.

AYERS: And they teach you different ways—you know you killed people with that. And one way, of course, is to hit them. When you're attacking somebody and you hit them come up right at the nose—just on the nose and it drives the bone right up into the brain, and that's why you had this hard part, because it was like hitting them with a hammer. I mean, that's part of the training. I mean, they trained you to kill! They didn't train you to pussyfoot around, you know? (Laughter)

LANDDECK: Right! Well that's what you were there for, definitely.

SADASIVAM: Were you at—is it Rheims?

AYERS: Rheims? Rheims, France, oh yes.

SADASIVAM: Describe what it was like to be there.

AYERS: Well, that was after the war was over. And we had come back and they made a mistake—the Army did. They had the 101st Airborne on one side of Rheims and the Eighty-Second was on the other side of Rheims, and they would go in both together, and they had fights every night. They would fight—the Eighty-Second would fight the 101st. The 101st would fight the Eighty-Second. Finally they wised up and they put: any time the Eighty-Second was on leave in Rheims the 101st could not go there. And the next day it would be the 101st go in there and the Eighty-Second stayed home. And at that time they—I pulled MP duty for the 101st Airborne, a special duty. And I had to go into Rheims and stay there and whenever the 101st was in there then I had to—my duty was to keep our guys out of trouble. That's *all* I was doing! I mean, if anybody started getting in trouble. The regular military police could not control the airborne; they had trouble with them. So we had to have our own MP duty—military police—and I was one of them. And you would—if one of the fellows started getting in trouble or anything, we'd go over and talk to him. Very politely take him over and get him on the bus and send him back to camp. And he would listen to you, but they would not listen to any of the other military police.

LANDDECK: Is that a respect issue?

AYERS: Yes, oh yes.

LANDDECK: So, you're in France and you were there for about a month, and then you were sent into combat.

AYERS: Yes.

LANNDECK: How did they tell you that you were going to go and what was your reaction when you learned that you were going into combat for the first time? Can you remember?

AYERS: Well, they just said, "Come on, pick up your ammunition." And they'd load you on a truck and take you out. Well, at that time, I mean it was routine pretty much. You were going into combat but you didn't think a whole lot about it because you're going there! And so they did; they loaded us on a truck and we went out there and then they unloaded us in a bivouac area, and then later on they took us up the next day in with our group—companies that we were assigned to and we joined them. At that time it was pretty much just the bivouac area. We really didn't do much.

LANDDECK: Where was this exactly?

AYERS: In Holland.

LANDDECK: In Holland?

AYERS: Yeah. And then we were there—I guess it was maybe about a month, and then they drive us back to Mourmelon, to France in the base camp, and we stayed there. We were back there I guess—actually it wasn't much up there in Holland when we were there. It was all pretty much over by then. And we went back to Mourmelon, France and we weren't there too long. We were supposed to be [on] rest and relaxation, and we didn't get rest and relaxation very long. About three o'clock in the morning they come running around and getting everybody up. "Run out there and get your ammunition—get dressed and get your ammunition and load on [the] trucks. You're going up!"

LANDDECK: This is December? December of '44?

AYERS: December, yeah—December 15th or 16th. And three o'clock in the morning they woke you up and said, "Let's go. We're going." So we loaded on trucks and they *loaded* us in there. There was hardly room for you to stand up! We took off. Got our ammunition and our weapons and whatever we took with us and headed up to Bastogne. We had no idea where we were going. They didn't tell. I mean, we just knew we were going. So we went up to Bastogne. Actually they let us out outside of Bastogne and we—the next morning, that night, well, that day—we went out the next morning that we spent the night out there bivouac-like, and then the next morning we went—got together and they said "We're going out—we're gonna find the Germans. So we're gonna start marching." So we started out up toward Marvie and Marvie is where we ran into the Germans. Right there—I got to show you this.

LANDDECK: Oh good.

AYERS: It's something I've been carrying with me ever since I left the service. I was in their house when we went into Bastogne—or into Marvie. That is a calling card of the people's house that I was in.

LANDDECK: No kidding?

AYERS: And it was on the table when I went in there and I saw it and I picked it up and I thought, "I'm gonna carry that thing. I got to keep it." And I've been carrying it with me ever since.

LANDDECK: Isn't that neat! And you stayed in their house?

AYERS: Not long, because we ran into the Germans right then. That was right where we ran into them. And I went into the house—we set up a machine gun right in front of it, and I was back with a rifle. I was on the rifle, rifleman then, and I was sitting back to protect—to try to protect the machine gun. I was sitting on a chair with the back up leaning over with the rifle ready to pop any German that came around, and here comes this Tiger tank up around the corner and comes around, and he lowers his gun. I could see the gun going down—coming down in

that eighty-eight, and I thought, "Lord he's shooting at me—gonna hit that machine gun." And he fired. I guess fortunately for the machine gunner it went right over top of him and hit the house right where I was sitting! It blew me off of that chair! I went flying, my rifle went flying, and it knocked me over! And I thought, "I don't belong here!" (Laughs) And it blew the windows out. I picked up my rifle and started out towards the door and the door's gone; it blew the door off! So I went out of the house and started around. I made a strategic withdrawal. (Laughter)

LANDDECK: Well I don't think a rifle versus a tank is a very fair …

AYERS: No, it's not. That doesn't work too good.

LANDDECK: So you were injured though, or just knocked over?

AYERS: No, it just knocked me right—I mean the concussion just knocked me off the chair. Knocked the chair over, and me with it.

LANDDECK: Goodness!

AYERS: But no, I was not injured—didn't get hurt at all. But when I saw that thing coming down I thought, "Oh Lord!" (Laughter) But fortunately, like I say, it hit right in front of the house or hit the bottom of the house and it just blew the windows and doors off the house, and after—I'm going to move ahead a little bit real quickly.

LANDDECK: Sure, sure!

AYERS: After … the war was over, we went back to these friends of ours. [They] had a daughter and her husband that worked for Siemen's and was over in Germany and they used to go visit him. And this one time they said, "Hey, why don't you come with us? We'll take you over to Bastogne and back to Bastogne." [I thought,] "Hey, that sounds like a good idea!" So they did and I went back to the house and saw the house.

LANDDECK: Was it still there?

AYERS: It was still there. Oh hey, they had remodeled it and everything. It was nice. And I—it was funny, but I remember there was a church on the corner out there before the—and the house was here, and the church was over here on the other side of the street out near the corner. Right where the tank came around and I'm looking at the tank and the church right behind it! But when we went back, I went back to the same house, and they'd remodeled it. It was nice, it looked nice and I start asking people—I showed them the card to see if they knew and some of the people knew, but they didn't know where they were, and uh, and this one older fellow come out and it was funny. He come out and I'd showed him the card and *oh*, did he start talking. Well he's speaking French, and I don't speak French. I'm speaking English! He don't understand English. But we stood there and we talked and we were communicating even though we weren't speaking the same language, we were really communicating 'cause he knew the Germans. He was there when—and he knew the Germans were there and he knew we were there.

So we did communicate, and like I told the people we were with, if they hadn't come and taken me away we probably would have stood there and talked all day and never said a word to each other. But we seemed to communicate. But it was quite an experience!

LANDDECK: I bet. That's neat—you got to back and see the house.

AYERS: But whenever I left there, left the house—they have these hedgerows to mark off their property and so I'm going, and I'm jumping over top of these hedgerows and I no sooner jump over a hedgerow and get to the next one that I can hear the Germans coming up from the hedgerow behind me.

LANDDECK: Oh my gosh!

AYERS: And then I came—there was a brick wall. "Now, what do I do?" Well I looked and fortunately somebody had—either one of our tanks or something, or a German tank, blew a dip in the top of the wall and knocked out part of the wall. At the top there was—I don't know how high it was, but it was high enough that I was able to—I mean it was not that tall. I was able to jump over it. And I took a run—I threw my rifle and I took a run and dived over that wall. And come down head first and landed on top of another guy that was laying there! (Laughter) And I knocked the wind out of him. Then we got up and we took off. We went and ran back into the woods, and by the time we got back there we were wore out.

LANDDECK: I bet.

AYERS: So we stopped in the woods and rested and then we went back to Bastogne where we were headquartered. And we went out that day—we had two hundred and fifty-five men in our company, and when we reorganized the next morning …

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

AYERS: Oh, I was going to tell you something else too. When we were going up into Bastogne …

LANDDECK: Let's hold that story for a second.

(Tape Stops)

LANDDECK: … Okay we're back on track!

AYERS: Well, what I wanted to say—what I started to say was when we were going up to Bastogne after we got off the truck and we [were] marching up these tanks turned around and heading the other direction …

LANDDECK: German tanks?

AYERS: No, American tanks. American tanks were heading out of there and—heading out of Bastogne.

LANDDECK: That's not very encouraging for you. (Laughter)

AYERS: No, and that's what I thought! I hollered up to one of the tank men—I did! I hollered, "Hey!" I said, "Where are you guys going?" And he said, "It's too hot for us up there. We're getting out of there!" And right then I said, "Ayers, you're going the wrong direction baby. You don't belong going up there. A tank can't stay up there, what's an infantryman going to do up there?" Well, we went on ahead anyway.

LANDDECK: Wow.

AYERS: So we went in and got surrounded—got ourselves surrounded by the Germans! It was an experience. Fortunately, at that time when we first went over it wasn't too cold. It wasn't too bad, but it got worse; everyday it got worse. And then we find out—well, the first day I dug six foxholes. *Six* foxholes. They moved us; I mean they kept moving us so the Germans wouldn't know where we were. I guess that's why they were moving us. And I gotta tell you—finally after the sixth one I said, "I'm not digging another foxhole!" This is all during the night. All night long. I said, "I'm not digging another foxhole. I don't care." And I sat on the ground and it was just about that time artillery shells start coming in and, "Lord, why didn't I dig that foxhole?" 'Cause you know, you're laying out there and these shells are coming in and it's not a good experience. You want to get in the hole if you can.

LANDDECK: I bet.

AYERS: So I got as low as I could and laid on the ground and stayed there. And, as you can see, fortunately I wasn't hit or injured. They didn't do any damage, but that was scary!

LANDDECK: I'll bet, I'll bet.

AYERS: And from then on I never argued. … Never again did I say "I'm not going to dig a foxhole." I dug it about as deep as I could and still see out of it.

LANDDECK: Well, in December the ground had to be so hard.

AYERS: Well, at that time it wasn't too bad. It was hard, but it wasn't solid; it wasn't frozen solid. But from then on after that, I mean it got colder and it got colder, it got snowier, and heavier, and heavier, and colder, and colder. And then, whenever you tried to dig a foxhole if you didn't have one already dug you almost needed dynamite to blast it out, 'cause I mean it was frozen solid. You had a tough time digging a foxhole. You hopefully used somebody else's.

LANDDECK: Right, right.

SADASIVAM: How were you dressed?

AYERS: Well, fortunately at the beginning I had a topcoat. I had my olive drab outfit on, 'cause we didn't have really winter gear. We had regular Army uniforms. I had an Army topcoat. But on that excursion out of my strategic withdrawal I got caught on a barbwire fence and my topcoat and backpack went with—there on the fence. It kinda hung on the fence. I took off and left it, because the Germans were shooting. I could see the marks flying and I thought, "Oh no. I'm not worrying about that topcoat. I'm going." And I did (my best?). That's when I started running out of there trying to get out of there. But from then on I was just dressed in the khaki uniform—not khaki, but the olive drab uniform. I lost my gloves.

LANDDECK: Oh no!

SADASIVAM: How'd you stay warm?

AYERS: Well, you're not supposed to do this, but we did. We built fires. [They told us:] "Whatever you do don't build a fire." We built fires. We kept warm. And, like I said, at the time that was about the only way you could keep warm. However, we did on occasion—three of us would sleep together. Or sleep—you lay down together in hopes we'd fall asleep. And you do fall asleep because you eventually get so tired you have to fall asleep, and I remember the one time the three of us—we had one blanket. There was three of us laying together and we had our helmet—we were laying with our head on the helmets. I woke up in a pool of sweat. I was perspiring because the blanket was covered with snow. The snow was all the way up to my face just about, and that snow on top of that blanket made it so hot in there it was like an oven. It really was. I was *warm*! I mean, that was the first time I was warm in a *long* time. But it did snow so bad that there must have been a foot of snow on top of that blanket, but it felt good! (Laughter) And then of course then we got out. Then we woke up. Fortunately, nobody ran into—we didn't have any Germans attacking us that time. But we went—at night we would go on patrol, usually, trying to see where the Germans were. See if we could contact 'em—or go where we could hear something and knew it was a German. But, like I say, we were surrounded. They came and told us if they overrun your position, don't back up because there's no place to go.

LANDDECK: Really?

AYERS: Stay in your hole, and if they overrun your position duck down and hopefully they'll go past. And when they go past you turn around and start shooting the other direction. That's what they told us. I said, "Okay, we're in trouble."

LANDDECK: I guess! Were you able to get any reinforcements in?

AYERS: No. Well all the way up through Christmas—I think on the 23rd or the 24th of December—well the planes couldn't fly because it was so foggy too and it was cold and foggy and you couldn't see hardly, you know, I mean it was so foggy—for more than a couple feet in front of you. Of course the planes couldn't come in, but finally—I knew I called one time! I called for artillery fire on one position. I could hear the Germans and the tanks rolling out there, and I called for artillery fire out there. They radioed back and said, "Sorry, we don't have any ammunition. We can't fire." Well I was not very low myself. I had little ammunition. And

they always it seamed like after we got into Bastogne and got into fighting; they either put me on a machine gun or on an automatic rifle. I always had an automatic weapon, and that was quite an experience. And then, like I say, you know, you run out of ammunition eventually you know, and if you don't get supplied—and right before Christmas I remember the planes—it cleared up and the planes come over and dropped supplies to us, into Bastogne. And you never heard such a roar in your life with those planes come over and start dropping supplies. And we got food and everything else—K-rations or C-rations, whatever, but anything would have been good—and ammunition and we took the parachutes and lined our foxholes with them and covered with them. That's what we used to keep warm, pretty much.

SADASIVAM: Were there many civilians left in Bastogne when you were stuck there?

AYERS: There were a few, but not many. They had been evacuated. But there were … a few civilians in there. I know when we went into Marvie I was walking down and there was an older gentleman and his wife were standing there with me watching it. But they pretty much got out of there. They knew … what was happening.

SADASIVAM: The citizens that did stay in Bastogne—how did they react to you? Like, were they nice to you, hospitable?

AYERS: Well, I think they were more indifferent really. I mean, not now, not now. They really appreciate what we did for them, I'm sure. Because they have built—in fact I was going to wear the shirt. When we went over there—when we went to Bastogne they have a historical, Bastogne Historical Society that they have built and it's *beautiful*. They have a monument with all the forty-eight states listed on there and each state has its own pillar and then in the center there's a big emblem. I've forgotten exactly what it is. I've got pictures of it I can show you! But they have, off of that they have a Historical Society building where you can go in and see all the different pieces of equipment there and they also have a store, you know, where you can buy stuff. And, of course—I don't know if you know about General [Brig. Gen. Anthony] McAuliffe. When we were surrounded, the Germans sent in a couple of people—German soldiers to tell us to surrender or be annihilated—that we were surrounded by the crack German troops and that if we didn't surrender we would be annihilated. And so McAuliffe, General McAuliffe said, "What am I going to tell them?" And the Lieutenant said, "Hey, tell him what you just said." And he said, "Aw, nuts!" So he did. So he sent the reply back and when they went back they said—they took back to the Germans and said, "Is that affirmative …"

LANDDECK: Right, what does that mean?!

AYERS: "… or negative, or what?" And he said, "That means, 'Go to hell.'" (Laughter) And then they said, "Well, we've got them right where we want 'em now." But I'll tell you one thing, that I think, was a rallying cry for all the troops.

LANDDECK: How did you hear about it?

AYERS: About what?

LANDDECK: Him saying that; him passing that message on.

AYERS: 'Cause they came and told us.

LANDDECK: They did.

AYERS: Yeah.

LANDDECK: They made sure you heard about it?

AYERS: Yes they did. The Germans think they want us to surrender, but we're not going to surrender. No way! And that's true; we weren't about to surrender. We would have died before we surrendered.

LANDDECK: Yeah, why?

AYERS: Why? Just the way we were. We just would not surrender. I wouldn't have surrendered. I would not have surrendered.

LANDDECK: Do you think that's because you were the 101 Airborne?

AYERS: Mm-hmm.

LANDDECK: Yeah. Everything I've heard—that fits the stories I've heard. No way, no how! (Laughs)

AYERS: That's right, no way.

SADASIVAM: How did you spend Christmas in 1944? What did you do?

AYERS: Well, we put up Christmas trees. We, I mean, they had lots … of course we up little ones. And we'd hang hand grenades and clips of ammunition. (Laughter) We did! We hung hand grenades and clips of ammunition and stuff on the tree. That's how we decorated. We decorated and then we sang Christmas carols! We stood and sang Christmas carols. That's how we spent Christmas: frozen to death singing Christmas carols with a Christmas tree decorated with ammunition. (Laughter)

LANDDECK: Did you get any special meal for that?

AYERS: Get what?

LANDDECK: Any special meal for Christmas?

AYERS: No, there was no way. They couldn't get anything in other than what they dropped from the sky.

SADASIVAM: So … what kind of food did you eat? Or did you eat at all?

AYERS: Well, yeah, at one time we got into—well our group, my squad—our squad got into this one house. We went into one house and they had chickens in there. So we did eat some eggs—had some eggs, and we built a fire and cooked some eggs and a couple of chickens.

LANDDECK: Bet that was quite a treat.

AYERS: Yes that was. That was good! That tasted almost as good as steak! (Laughter) But then whenever we finally got out of there—which we eventually did get out of Bastogne—we did not surrender. And that's when one of my buddies—buddy that I was telling you about that went to jump school that he and I and this other fellow were on this flanking attack and we … had to move up the machine gun up to the position there at the bridge to protect the bridge, and there was a railroad track that the bridge went over the railroad tracks. And we were going along the hillside there, and, of course it was snowing. There was a lot of snow there, and we were sliding and falling, slipping and sliding. We finally got to the bridge where we wanted to be and we stopped and set the machine gun up there at the corner. And he and I were sitting like you and I, only he and I were a little closer together talking, and all of a sudden, "Pow!" It hit him right smack between the eyes.

LANDDECK: No kidding.

AYERS: I mean, it popped him right between the eyes, and he was sitting like that. He had the helmet back and it hit the back of his helmet and flipped it up in the air, and blew the back of his head out. The helmet come off and landed right in his lap.

LANDDECK: No kidding. And you were right next to him.

AYERS: I was sitting right next to him talking. To this day I always think, "Fifty-fifty chance." It could have been me instead of him. He was, like I said—at that time, I mean, in the Army he was the best buddy I had. I thought, "Oh man. That's no place for me man." So I climbed up on the other side and went down in a ditch. I stayed in that ditch until the Germans start coming in and I opened up a machine gun. Though by the time the Germans got back he, myself and this other guy picked up a machine gun and carrying it on to set up down further, and that's when I got wounded.

LANDDECK: Yeah.

AYERS: I was carrying a machine gun and I guess it was the same sniper—or not necessarily, but it probably was. But the bullet went right through my arm.

LANDDECK: Goodness.

AYERS: And the barrel of the gun of course, when you're carrying it—I carry the front end of it by the front leg tripod—hit the barrel of the gun, ricocheted off the gun, and went through my

pants all the way through the shorts, and put a crease on my leg here. It put a burn mark on my leg …

LANDDECK: No kidding?

AYERS: … at the hip, but it didn't break the skin, at the arm there. And I could see the bone. I thought, "Good Lord, I've been wounded." I knew when I was hit. It was like a poker. Of course, I let go of the gun and it felt like a hot poker going in. But I thought I'd been shot in the leg too!

LANDDECK: Right. I bet.

AYERS: And so, of course the medic came over. But it went through—at that time I had my, I had a fatigue jacket and top coat and pants. I had two pair of pants on and my underwear, and it went through—put a hole right through all of them. But it bent (Laughs)—it bent the barrel of the gun like that.

LANDDECK: No kidding?

AYERS: Yeah. When it hit it ricocheted off. Fortunately, otherwise it would have gone right through my hips right straight through. And, it bent that gun. And when I came back to my outfit again—after I went to the hospital I went to—they took me to—oh, I got to tell you this. They said, "Okay." When the medic patches up they'll put [sulfa] on it and all that—bandage and everything. He said, "Go back to the aid station!" I said, "Right. Where's the aid station?" "It's back that way." "Okay," [I said] of course, we're in the Ardennes forest.

LANDDECK: Oh gosh.

AYERS: And I'm trying to find an aid station in the Ardennes forest. And I'm walking back there, and I'm going down this little path like just wide enough for about a Jeep. And I'm walking along there and all of a sudden, "Boom, boom, boom, boom!" I hear that and, "Holy mackerel! I'm gonna get it!" So I dove into the side of the ditch over there and I laid there. One hit in front of me and one hit behind me. Another one and I got up and started going. And then I thought, "Well, where am I going?" So I started looking around and I saw this telephone cable laying on the ground so I walked over there and I picked it up and looked at it, and it had U.S. thing on it but. "Baby, I'm following that thing. It's gonna take me somewhere. I don't know where, but it's gonna take me." So I grabbed hold of it and I walked with my left arm—carrying it in my left arm, and I wouldn't let get of that thing either.

LANDDECK: I bet.

AYERS: But I followed it and it took me back—took me back to a headquarters, but it wasn't mine. I asked where the 101st I-Company aid station was, and he said, "I don't know." (Laughter) I said, "Well I was supposed to go to the aid station." Well, he finally called and he found out where it was. So they put me on a Jeep and took me over to …

LANDDECK: Oh that's nice.

AYERS: … the aid station there, and then they sent me to the hospital in Luxembourg—general, or field hospital. And I was there in Luxembourg for a few days and then they decided I better go to the General Hospital, so they sent me back to Paris to the general hospital in Paris. So I spent a few weeks in Paris (Laughter) at the hospital. I was treated pretty well there. I mean, I got a private room; they had me in a private room! (Laughs)

LANDDECK: Wow.

AYERS: But it was—I enjoyed it. Well, I enjoyed it, I mean …

LANDDECK: Right, recovering from your injury.

AYERS: Yeah, yeah. I wasn't doing any duty, and I had nice clean sheets and a bed to sleep in every night.

LANDDECK: Having plenty of warmth, plenty of food.

AYERS: And I think that I can leave the hospital, and I was in—I mean, the only thing is I couldn't use my arm, but I had that in a sling and I was good—left-handed, oh God! (Laughter) Then when I got back to the outfit the guy said, "Hey! Come here!" The supply sergeant, "Come here. I want to show you something." So I went back, and sure enough they still had the machine gun.

LANDDECK: Did they really?

AYERS: They did! (Laughs) And I said, "What in the world did you keep that for?" [They replied,] "Oh, we kept having to shoot around corners." (Laughter) Oh, great. But for me, the hardest or the scariest thing, more than anything else, was when this plane came in strafing, strafing, because there was nothing you could do. You lay there and just hope that he doesn't—the bullets don't hit. One time it just come right down both sides. (Makes a clapping noise) Like that. That's scary! Yep. I mean, I'm not easily scared, but I was scared.

LANDDECK: Were you strafed a lot?

AYERS: No.

LANDDECK: I mean by the summer of '44 the German Air Force was in pretty bad shape, wasn't it?

AYERS: Yeah, well this was up in Bastogne. They were still flying then, but not much. But we got strafed a couple times, and uh, that's scary. That's scary. This other stuff, I mean, it's scary too, but not like that because there's absolutely *nothing* you can do! Unless you can crawl into a hole and get inside a hole like a mole, but you can't do that. I mean, even if you're in the foxhole if he happens to come right along on that foxhole, he's going to hit you.

LANDDECK: Right. That's a good point. Right. No place to hide.

AYERS: That's scary. That was—to me I guess was the scariest thing.

LANDDECK: I bet. I bet.

SADASIVAM: How were you and your company—the morale, the spirit. Were you guys—'cause you were surrounded—did you guys think you could defeat the Germans? Or what was going through your minds?

AYERS: It never occurred to us that we were going to be annihilated. We said no way! And we all felt that way. I mean, everyone; everyone I talked to and everyone that I knew. I mean, you know, "Hey, we're not gonna lose, we're gonna beat 'em! We'll beat 'em. I don't know how, but we will." 'Cause it was getting pretty bad there after a while, you know. You start running out of ammunition, you're going to have to find some way of killing them, and you don't have any ammunition, then you got to start figuring on getting a knife or something.

LANDDECK: Right.

AYERS: So that's pretty, pretty scary. But we had no thoughts of ever surrendering or being annihilated. That was the furthest thought.

LANDDECK: Just not going to do it.

AYERS: No way.

SADASIVAM: How did you relieve the tension at war? The fear?

AYERS: Hmm. I don't know, I really, I mean. I just never thought about it I guess. I never really thought much about it. I mean, I knew I was in a war. I knew they were shooting at me and trying to kill me, and I'm trying to kill them, but I never even thought about it. I guess it never—it really never struck home until I got wounded that I, you know, that I *could* get killed. I coulda got killed then, but I didn't. I coulda got killed when my buddy got it! That—now that made me sit up and take notice! I thought, "Hey! There's only two of us here and they picked him and not me."

LANDDECK: Was that a real turning point for you?

AYERS: Mm-hmm, yeah. I think that, I mean that, that shook me up.

LANDDECK: 'Cause that was the same day you got wounded?

AYERS: That's the same day I got wounded.

LANDDECK: Within just a few hours, right?

AYERS: Yeah, right, exactly. In a few hours, yeah. And it was on the twelfth of January and they pulled the 101st Airborne off the line on the thirteenth. *One day* after I got wounded they pulled them off the line.

LANDDECK: Wow.

AYERS: But I did get to go back to Paris. (Laughter)

LANDDECK: Right, a liberated Paris.

AYERS: Yes, yeah. Right, a liberated Paris!

LANDDECK: Well, how did you feel when they sent you back to join your group? Were your emotions about that different from the first time you went into combat?

AYERS: No.

LANDDECK: No?

AYERS: No. I wanted to get back and see my buddies. See my friends! I wanted to go back there. I—there was no way I was going anywhere else, I *had* to go back.

LANDDECK: Just to be with them.

AYERS: Just to be with them, that's right. Exactly right. Just to be with them.

SADASIVAM: I've read some books and I've read that there was a fear that the Germans would imitate Americans—pretend to be Americans and—was there fear?

AYERS: Oh yes. We knew it. We knew it 'cause they came and told us. They said, "There are Germans running around out here in American uniforms."

LANDDECK: Really.

AYERS: And they speak English, so be careful. Be careful.

SADASIVAM: How would you be able to distinguish between a real American and a German?

AYERS: Fortunately I never had to—I never encountered it. But I would guess the only way you could do it would be by asking him some question about America that they wouldn't know that they should know. I mean, that's the only way I would know, and only other way I know where I would do it, but fortunately I never encountered it. Wherever they were, they weren't in our area.

SADASIVAM: I also read somewhere that—you might want to clarify … if I'm incorrect, but did George Patton send the Tenth Army to help you—to help the 101st in Bastogne?

AYERS: They're the ones that liberated it. I mean they're the ones that got us out of Bastogne.

SADASIVAM: So, do you believe that they were necessary to save … or rescue the 101st from Bastogne?

AYERS: Oh *yeah*. Oh yeah! As a matter of fact, they came around and they start telling us that Patton's army's coming in and they're going to be breaking through any minute now, or any hour now. Well, that was three days it took them finally, before they finally broke through. And it was a celebration when they got through, yes! That was a celebration, because we knew then that we were *free*—that we had made it! And once, once we knew we were out of it, then we start going after them. But, up until that time we were trying to save our skins rather than attacking anybody. But once Patton broke through and broke the "doughnut" then we started attacking because we got the ammunition, the guns, and everything we needed then.

LANDDECK: You could finally do your job.

AYERS: Mm-hmm.

SADASIVAM: Also, how do you react—I read in a book, I think it was Stephen Ambrose's *Band of Brothers,* and he said that keeping the 101st Airborne in Bastogne was the single most important decision of the whole Battle of the Bulge. Would you agree with that, or what do you think of that?

AYERS: Well, I don't think anybody else could have done it! I think the 101st was the only—well, maybe the 82nd might have done it too. But it was either the 82nd or the 101st Airborne would have been the only ones who [could have] held Bastogne. And I think not only were we the only ones able to do it, we were lucky, too! Because really, if the Germans had wanted to break through, I think they [could have broken] through and wiped us out. But they wouldn't have got any live ones!!! We would not have been taken prisoner.

LANDDECK: So, what did you do after Bastogne?

AYERS: Well, I sat in Paris hospital (Laughter) for awhile, and then I finally went back to the outfit. We hung around Mourmelon, France for awhile, and then we got leave. And I got two weeks' leave.

LANDDECK: Where'd you go?

AYERS: England. Went to London, and I had a ball! That was one time—I hope nobody's going to be offended.

LANDDECK: *We're not*. (Laughter) We're not! We had this talk beforehand. You should be as frank as you'd like.

AYERS: To me, the French people are not very good. You can tell—you can tell immediately when you crossed the French border into Germany that you had gone into another world.

LANDDECK: How so?

AYERS: Clean! The French area was dirty. And … when I went on leave, I went back to Le Havre, and left Le Havre for England. And Le Havre—this is, you know, this is after the war was over. They had been liberated long ago and everything. Rubble, rubble and stuff—bricks and everything were lying around in the streets and you could hardly get around town. It was a *mess*! I would think that they would have enough pride in themselves to clean the place up, but apparently not. But, I went over in a ship back to England.

LANDDECK: Yeah?

AYERS: And I went to London and I had, I went to Hammersmith Palais.

LANDDECK: Oh yeah?

AYERS: That was a dance hall and they had two bands. They had Ambrose and his orchestra, and then they had a rotating stage. And when he played his session the stage would start to turn and this other band would come on. And it was continuous music the whole time, and you danced your legs off if you wanted to! (Laughter) And I just about did I think! But it was good being back in England where I could talk to somebody! But that was pretty tough to understand what they were saying too, sometimes. (Laughter) Some of them had pretty good accents. But oh, it was nice. Oh, I did forget! After—when we went to Bastogne, we were the first ones in Bastogne—the 101st Airborne—into Bastogne, or not Bastogne, Berchtesgaden. What am I talking about?

LANDDECK: Right. Tell us about that.

AYERS: We went to Berchtesgaden. And we were the first ones in there to take care of—and we went up to Hitler's hideout, the Eagle's Nest. And we were the first ones up there too, and I was up there. I've seen pictures of—you know, they show you the guys up there and some of them with wine. I swear one of them had to be me, because I remember standing there with a bottle of wine in my hand like this! But, that was quite an experience when we were in Berchtesgaden, and, of course, they had the SS barracks there too. That's where we were. I think that's where we were stationed—or not stationed, but while we were there we were at the—and, of course, we took tours of duty guarding the Eagle's Nest. And when we took over they had stables there. The horses had saddles, German saddles and all this, and if you could, if you wanted to you could ride if you weren't on duty. So I did! I rode all over the countryside. Every chance I got I got a horse. I'd get a horse and ride. And I rode all over the countryside up there. And I'm riding up there through this one area and I came across this bivouac-like area and it was German. And I went in there and there's pots and pans and everything all lined up, you know, just like it had been used yesterday. And I was looking around to make sure there there

weren't any Germans around or anything, but it was a lot of fun, I mean when you weren't on duty—to explore that area. That is really a beautiful area of the country.

LANDDECK: How did the German people react to you? I mean the war is over and they've lost.

AYERS: They lost. The people seemed to be, at least to me anyhow …

LANDDECK: Well yeah, your impression?

AYERS: I thought they were fairly nice. They didn't show any animosity at our coming around then. And one time I was walking down the street and went past by this one house and there were two women in there. I said hello to them; they said, "Hi, Hello." And I just kept on and they didn't seem to mind it. I thought they were pretty nice—the Germans that I came in contact with. Of course, we weren't allowed to fraternize with them.

LANDDECK: Right.

AYERS: Other than saying hello or something nice—that's it.

LANDDECK: Right.

SADASIVAM: Would you say that there was a lot of looting of Nazi stuff I guess? Like Nazi flags and Nazi cups and …

LANDDECK: Leftovers.

SADASIVAM: Yeah.

AYERS: I don't know. I really don't. I mean, when we took over the Eagle's Nest—Hitler's Eagle's Nest—we guarded it and we protected it. Now, if it was looted it was when we weren't there. And so I don't, I mean, I didn't—but I do know one thing, and I'm still upset about that. (Laughs) We were going through Munich on the train and we stopped in Munich, had to stop to switch tracks I guess, or something like that, or backup or something. There's a whole line of railroad cars over there, German railroad cars with the spread eagle and the swastika underneath it and the eagle sitting on top of the wreath with the swastikas. And I said, "I'm getting one of them." So I jumped off the train and ran over there and I worked that—I must have used my bayonet. I had something, anyhow, and I worked that thing and I got it off the railroad car. Just in time 'cause I just got back on the train right before they pulled out. And I had that and I took it with me and I got back to the camp and I had a box made. I made a box and packed it in that box ... and I'm going to send it back home.

LANDDECK: Right.

AYERS: I'm going to put it up on—what I was thinking about doing was putting it up on the mantel and cutting that swastika out of there and putting a clock in it. And I thought, "Well that

would look good over the mantle." Mm-hmm. So my company commander saw it. He says, "You can't send that home!" I said, "What do you mean I can't send that home, why not?" "'Cause I want it!" (Laughs) I said, "You've got to be kidding me." I said, "I want that thing." He said, "No." He said, "I want it." He said, "How much you take for it?" I said, "I won't sell it." So he started bartering. So, the price was right. (Laughs) So, I gave it to him.

LANDDECK: No kidding! (Laughs) He just had to have it?

AYERS: He had to have it. All my work for nothing! (Laughs) For a couple bucks that I spent and threw away …

LANDDECK: Right.

AYERS: … and I don't have anymore. But I did come home with some German souvenirs. I mean, I have a German armband with a swastika on it.

LANDDECK: Oh really?

AYERS: And I have—I did have a .32 automatic, but somebody broke into the house and stole it.

LANDDECK: Oh no.

AYERS: So I don't have that anymore.

LANDDECK: Where did you get them?

AYERS: Off a German.

LANDDECK: You did?

AYERS: I took them off of a German.

LANDDECK: Was that a real common practice?

AYERS: If it wasn't *me*. (Laughter) If I saw something that they had that I wanted, I took it! They didn't argue. Trust me, they didn't argue about it! (Laughs)

LANDDECK: I guess not.

SADASIVAM: Where did you stay in Berchtesgaden? Where did you stay while you were …

AYERS: I think we were staying at the SS barracks that they had. They had an SS troop in Berchtesgaden. Of course it was, I think, the guard that Hitler had there when he was there. And they trained there too. But, uh, this is where we stayed.

SADASIVAM: How did you react to staying in an SS barrack? Like, here you are—Allied troops …

AYERS: Better than a foxhole! (Laughter) No, it didn't make any difference to me. I didn't care. I mean, the war was over then.

LANDDECK: No hard feelings?

AYERS: No, as a matter of fact …

LANDDECK: *No* hard feelings?

AYERS: Well, maybe. Maybe, but no, I mean I didn't have any animosity, I mean other than the fact that they were stupid I thought, you know, doing what they did. I think they could have been a lot smarter, but if that's what they wanted to do, then that's up to them. I thought—I think—I know there's a lot better way of doing things than that.

SADASIVAM: When you were in Hitler's Eagle's Nest were there a lot of dead German soldiers?

AYERS: No I didn't see any there in Berchtesgaden, no. But in Bastogne I did. There [were] a lot of dead Germans there. A lot of dead Americans too. But it was, I mean, it was something—you walk along—I remember one time, a couple times, that you're walking through the forest area and you see an arm hanging up in the tree or a leg, you know? I guess one of the most things that scared me, I mean upset me the most, was when I was at the field hospital—well I guess it was the aid station, it had to be. Because I was there and they were doing medical procedures and this guy came out with a sheet over his shoulder, this medic come out, and laid it down almost next to me. The sheet fell and there's a guys leg from the thigh down. I looked at that and, "Hmm." I had to get up and walk. I mean, I couldn't sit there and look at that guy's leg.

LANDDECK: People think about war and we study war, but we'll never understand war.

AYERS: No!

LANDDECK: We'll never understand it.

AYERS: I mean, you know, like I said, I saw chilling—I saw guys getting killed. I saw—killed people. But just the thought of sitting there—and here comes one of our guys comes with his leg coming over there, and like I said, it was cut off right at the thigh. Plopped it down along side—and as hard as you get, it still bothers you. It did me, anyhow.

LANDDECK: Yeah, I can imagine.

SADASIVAM: So your reaction to seeing dead German soldiers—could you compare that to … what your reaction was to seeing dead Allied soldiers? Was there a difference at all?

AYERS: Are you talking about, I mean, German soldiers compared to British soldiers?

LANDDECK: Or Americans. You know, did you—you said as hard as you get that some things still bother you. Was there a different reaction when you'd come upon—you said in Bastogne there were a lot of dead Germans and a lot of dead Americans. Was there a different reaction, or were you hardened to all of it to a certain extent?

AYERS: I would say that when I saw a dead American I felt bad. When I saw a dead German I was kind of happy.

LANDDECK: Yeah.

AYERS: I mean, but it didn't affect me a whole lot one way or the other. I mean they were both dead whether American or German, but being an American, yes. It was harder to take than seeing a dead German.

LANDDECK: Right, right.

AYERS: 'Cause at that time, as far as I was concerned, the only good German was a dead one.

LANDDECK: Right. Then he wasn't going to get you.

AYERS: That's right. He wasn't going to get me. Exactly right.

LANDDECK: Definitely.

AYERS: You were talking about ... my reaction, you know, about the Germans. When I went back, well it was fifty years after the end of the war—'45.

LANDDECK: Right.

AYERS: It was'95. In '95 we went back there. These friends of ours—their son and daughter of course worked for Siemens over there, and one of the friends of theirs—they formed a German club, a German-American club. And Americans and Germans met every—once a week or once a month, something like that. But anyhow, one of the foremen, or supervisors I guess at the Siemens company is a German Major—a Major in the German army. He's from Berchtesgaden and when he heard we were coming over and that I was coming over—his dad fought in the German—he was a Nazi, member of the Nazi party and a German soldier. And his dad fought and he says, "If you don't think he would mind I'd like to take him around Berchtesgaden and show him Berchtesgaden the way it is now ... compared to what it was then." And so Randy said, "Oh, he won't mind. He's pretty liberal-minded. I'm sure he wouldn't mind; He'd be happy." So—Herbert was the guy's name—Herbert and I were standing there together and they took a picture. We're standing up there at the Eagle's Nest looking out over the lake—I'm trying to think of the name of the lake now, and I can't; I forgot what it is. But anyhow, there's this big lake right there that you look down and you can see it from up there at

Berchtesgaden. And Herbert and I are standing there side by side and he's pointing things out and I'm talking—he's about 6'2", and he trains up there in Berchtesgaden also. He takes his troops—he's a major in the German Army now, and he trains his troops up there.

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

AYERS: Oh boy, that brought back memories—holy mackerel. I couldn't stop crying.

LANDDECK: Yeah, well they do that on purpose sometimes, I think just to cleanse your soul. Good for ya. (Laughs)

AYERS: Yeah. But it was good. It was a good trip. I enjoyed it. We had—it was nice weather and we had beautiful weather, beautiful. It's a beautiful country; it really is.

LANDDECK: Yeah.

AYERS: And that Alpine area there—he was a Major in the Alpine Corps and he, like he said, he trains right up in there in those mountains. I'll tell you, you got a gorgeous view from up there.

LANDDECK: I bet.

AYERS: That time I enjoyed it. The other one, I wasn't too enthralled with it! (Laughs)

LANDDECK: A little too busy to enjoy it!

AYERS: That's right! (Laughter)

SADASIVAM: How'd you celebrate V-E day in 1945?

AYERS: I don't know—I really don't; I don't know how I celebrated.

LANDDECK: Do you remember learning about it—how you heard about it or?

AYERS: No, that I don't remember—I really don't. I really don't recall how I knew the war was over. I knew it was over, but I don't know how I found out! (Laughter)

SADASIVAM: Do you remember where you were, or—at the time you heard the news? 'Cause you were still on duty, right?

AYERS: Yes. Oh yeah! Because we were supposed to come back here to the United States and train to go over to Japan.

LANDDECK: Oh really?

AYERS: Oh yeah! Oh yes! We were gonna train to go over to Japan, and the war ended before we got back here even. Because I know when we come back we made a—we went to Camp Shanks, New York when we landed back in the States. And we stayed there at Camp Shanks for two weeks I think before they sent us to the separation center and we made a parade in New York—downtown New York—tickertape parade.

LANDDECK: When was this?

AYERS: This was after—when we were coming back. This was after the war was over in Europe.

LANDDECK: 'Cause you were discharged in January of '46? … You served overseas until January of '46. So what did you do between May of '45 and January of '46? Is that when you were moving around?

AYERS: Yeah.

LANDDECK: Told you we were going to pick your brain today! (Laughs) Make you think.

AYERS: Let me see. I'm trying to remember now. Well, let' see. I know there was a time of course, like I said, when they broke up the 101st Airborne [and the 501st] after the war was over. Broke up the 101st and they sent us [the 501st] off into—with the 82nd Airborne.

LANDDECK: But that's after the whole war was over, not just after Europe.

AYERS: Yeah, that would be after the whole war was over.

LANDDECK: Do you remember what you did in the summer of '45?

AYERS: Yeah, I was pulling military police duty at Rheims. (Laughter) Yeah, I'd say that's …

LANDDECK: That's the story you told earlier.

AYERS: Yeah, that's the story. That's right, yeah! That's where we were messing around just not doing much of anything really—waiting to get shipped back to the United States. But, now that was impressive—that tickertape parade in New York where we marched down there. I can recall the people, now, boy they're lined up on the streets on both sides and then we marched up and down and they yelled, "Company halt!" And you'd go: "Whomp-whomp!" (Loudly stomps twice) Then they'd, like, look at you, "They looked like they hit a brick wall!" (Laughter) And we did—we really put on a show for them.

LANDDECK: I bet …

AYERS: I think they were—at least the people right around us were impressed the way we stopped! (Laughs)

LANDDECK: I bet.

SADASIVAM: Before you came to the U.S., the war was done. The war in Europe had ended and you were coming back to the U.S. What expectations did you have about your new life coming back? What did you expect your life was gonna be? Did you know what you wanted to do or …

LANDDECK: Have any big plans?

AYERS: I was coming back to go back to work. I had a job.

LANDDECK: Where did you work?

AYERS: Huh?

LANDDECK: Where?

AYERS: I was working with Allis-Chalmers at the time in Pittsburgh. Actually at the time—in high school you could go and work two weeks. They had a period where you worked two weeks and go to school two weeks if you qualified to do that. And so I worked at Allis-Chalmers testing transformers for the Army and the Navy, and also the electric companies too, I guess, but it was mostly military stuff they were building. And I used to test the transformers. And I figured, well when I get back home I'll just go back to work. Take, you know, take a couple—a month or so off then go back to work. I mean that's what I was planning. And—but talking about that. That's one of the things—when I graduated from high school I gave a speech at commencement exercise, and the speech that I gave was on the education of the returning soldier.

LANDDECK: Really?

AYERS: I did. I did and I was proud of it too! And I talked about what I thought the government should do for the soldiers when they get back to give them an education—the soldiers an education.

LANDDECK: And that was before you were a soldier.

AYERS: That's right. Before I was a soldier and that was before they even thought about that!

LANDDECK: Wow!

AYERS: And I'll tell you one thing! If it hadn't been for the GI Bill I wouldn't have gone to school. I wouldn't have been able to. I mean, unless I really wanted to work and go to school too, but I don't think I was that energetic. (Laughter) I think I would have *worked* and I'd have forgot the school. But that GI Bill—that's the only thing—I was able to get into college and graduate. I think that's one of the best things that the government did for the soldiers. Really. You agree?

LANDDECK: (Laughter) I agree a hundred percent—definitely.

AYERS: And I'll tell you something else that I think they should do too, that they didn't do and they haven't done and they probably never will do, but they should take all the fellas when they get out of high school—graduate from high school—put them in the service for two years. Make them go—no question, for two years! Because most of the boys when they graduate from high school haven't the *slightest* idea of what they want to do! There's going to be a few that are going to get hurt. I mean, there's a few that are going to know exactly what they want to do and they want to go do it, but two years is not going to hold them up that much. That way, you're going to have a standing army all the time ready, and the kids will know that they're going into the Army, whether they like it or not.

LANDDECK: Right. They do that in Germany.

AYERS: They do! They do in Japan, they do in China—those people boy, they know what they're doing. I mean, in that respect. But I don't think it will ever happen here.

LANDDECK: No, I don't either.

AYERS: Not *no*w anyhow for sure. But after World War II, I think it could have been done without too much trouble, and they could have kept it going. But they don't listen to me! (Laughter)

LANDDECK: Well at least they got the GI Bill 'cause of you.

AYERS: Yeah, *you're* listening to me! But I mean, I thought that would have been a good idea. There really ought to be—boys when they get out of high school, they don't know what they want to do—most of them. They have no idea! And that way they'll get *discipline*. They will get discipline.

LANDDECK: But then what do you do with the women?

AYERS: Well, if the women want to go they can go too. I mean, I wouldn't *force* women to go. I mean, but if they want to go, they can go, if that's what they want to do. I mean, I wouldn't have any objection to that, but I would object to having 'em forcing women to go.

LANDDECK: What did you think about the end of the war? The way it ended—the bombs?

AYERS: Oh, you shouldn't have said that. That was not one of our greatest things. I mean …

LANDDECK: You don't think so?

AYERS: Huh? *No*! No, I do not think that was a good thing. I mean, it may have ended the war quicker, and it may have, yes. But I don't think we can be too proud of being the first ones to drop the atomic bomb. That, to me, was—I didn't like that. I still don't.

LANDDECK: At the time?

AYERS: At the time I didn't like it.

LANDDECK: You didn't?

AYERS: No, I didn't like it then.

LANDDECK: Even though it kept—most likely kept you from invading Japan? I mean, you said you were going back to the United States to train to go be a part of that invasion.

AYERS: I was happy the war ended, yes. I mean in that respect, yes: I was happy the war ended. I was not real happy with the *way* it ended.

LANDDECK: Yeah. Did it take some time for you to realize what the bomb meant? You know, how different it was, how—or did you get it right away that this was …

AYERS: I knew right away. When I saw those pictures of Hiroshima and Nagasaki I thought, "Oh *Lord*. That is *terrible*, baby. That's terrible."

LANDDECK: Yeah.

AYERS: I mean that—that showed no mercy to anybody and anything. It's *gone* when they dropped that. It zapped them. You can't rehabilitate anybody or anything.

LANDDECK: Right, right.

AYERS: That was one thing I'm not real proud of. Even though I'm proud that we fought the war and won the war. We could have done it a better way.

LANDDECK: You think so?

AYERS: I think so.

LANDDECK: You think an invasion would have been more effective or?

AYERS: I don't know that it would have been more effective. If we'd gone, I'm sure that *we* may have lost more men, or more people, but look what it did to Japan, to the people.

LANDDECK: Yeah. Now you started our conversation today saying you went to war because you wanted to get back at them, though. Is that a conflict, or do you think it went to far?

AYERS: No, I don't think so. I mean, you can get back at them—I mean, war—war is no good. I don't care *where* you go. War is—there's got to be a better way to do things. War is no good for anybody.

LANDDECK: Right.

AYERS: *Nobody* wins. I mean you may win the war, but you haven't won anything. All you've done is destroyed somebody. But there's better ways of destroying people, I think, than war. Not necessarily destroying them, but ...

LANDDECK: Right.

AYERS: Their ideologies could be corrected some other ways.

LANDDECK: Right, right. Well, that's interesting.

SADASIVAM: How did your family react to you coming home?

AYERS: I'm not sure. (Laughter) No, I'll tell you they were happy! They were glad to see me come home.

SADASIVAM: What did your mom do?

AYERS: Hmm?

SADASIVAM: When your mom first saw you, what did she do?

AYERS: Well, she cried. She gawked on me. She didn't know I was coming home. I went to—well they sent me from New York at Camp Shanks down to Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, which is near Harrisburg, and they separated me there and sent me home. And they gave me a train ticket—train money and a ticket—no, I guess I had to buy a ticket. No, they had military tickets and they sent me home and I came back to Pittsburgh from Harrisburg. And they didn't know I was coming home. I walked in on them. (Laughter) My sister was there and my mother. I think my brother was—oh, he was married then. He got married down in Florida.

LANDDECK: I bet they about fell over when you just walked in the door.

AYERS: Yeah, yeah. (Laughs) "Hey, I'm home!" (Laughter) "Hey Honey, I'm home!" (Laughs)

LANDDECK: Goodness.

AYERS: Yeah, they were surprised. (A horn honks)

LANDDECK: I bet.

AYERS: My grandmother came to live with us before I went in the service and she lived with us for quite a while. And they said—I don't know—they said that after I sent the telegram that I had been wounded that she passed away shortly after that.

LANDDECK: Oh, no kidding?

AYERS: I didn't know about it until I got …

LANDDECK: They didn't tell you?

AYERS: They didn't tell me, no. They knew better than to try to tell me something like that—until one day after the war was over and I got a letter from my brother. He said, "Boy, its sure going to be funny to sit around the table and not have grandma there." And I said, "What!?" That's when I found out.

LANDDECK: He didn't realize they hadn't told you. My goodness. So what did you do when you got home? Did you take your couple of months off?

AYERS: I took my couple months off, yeah. Went back to work. And then I worked for awhile and well—the GI Bill and I thought, "Well, I'll just go to school."

LANDDECK: Now, where did you go to school?

AYERS: Hmm?

LANDDECK: Where did you go to school?

AYERS: Waynesburg. Waynesburg College in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania just about sixty miles from Pittsburgh.

LANDDECK: And you got your four-year degree?

AYERS: Mm-hmm.

LANDDECK: Can you tell us what that was like?

AYERS: Took me five years, but I got it. (Laughter) I was not one of the fast students. No, I dropped out for a year; my mother got sick and I helped take care of her. I took a year off. I took a year sabbatical (Laughter) and then I went back and finished.

LANDDECK: And you got a Bachelor of Science?

AYERS: Yeah.

LANDDECK: In?

AYERS: Business Administration.

LANDDECK: Business Administration. Now when did you meet your wife? I see you married in '48, is that right?

AYERS: Mm-hmm.

LANDDECK: Did you meet her in school, or did you know her before the war?

AYERS: This is an interesting story. This really is. She was—she and I graduated the same year, in the same class.

LANDDECK: High school?

AYERS: High school. High school graduation. We graduated from high school. We didn't know each other. We had never met each other. So I came back from the service; I wasn't dating anybody. So, I got a notice that they were going to have a class reunion—dance. I thought, "Hey, I'm not doing anything. I think I'll go to the class reunion."

LANDDECK: Was this like a fifth reunion?

AYERS: I guess it was fifth. I don't know. Well it was—it had to be one …

LANDDECK: I'm trying to date everything—that's my job here! (Laughs)

AYERS: Yeah. I think it was fifth year. So I thought, "Well, I think I'll go to the class reunion." So I went to the class reunion. I was there and I looked over and I saw a good looking young lady standing over there. And I was talking to a fellow and I said, "Who's that girl over there?" I said, "I don't remember *her*!" And he said, "That's my cousin." I said, "You're kidding! How about introducing me to her." (Laughter) So he took me over and introduced me to her. So I started talking to her. We're standing around and waiting around, music was playing and nobody was dancing. I said, "Hey, did we come here to dance, or are we going to stand here and talk." I said, "Let's dance." So, she and I went out and started dancing. The rest is history. (Laughter) I spent—no, excuse me—I didn't spend the *night* with her! I spent the evening with her, and I said, "I'll give you a call." So I called her up a couple of days later and asked her if she wanted to go out with me. We started going out, and a year later we got engaged, and a year later we got married.

LANDDECK: No kidding. Now was she working at the time?

AYERS: Oh yeah!

LANDDECK: Yeah? Where did she work?

AYERS: She worked for U.S. Steel.

LANDDECK: Oh, yeah.

AYERS: They're no longer in existence.

LANDDECK: Yeah. What did she do for them?

AYERS: She was a private secretary. And she—well, later on she became *executive* secretary!

LANDDECK: Oh, wow.

AYERS: And that was shortly after—oh no, shortly before—that was before we decided we were going to have children. And that was a decision, because we had to split our income almost in half to raise kids! (Laughs) We sat and talked about that for a long time before we finally decided, "Yep, we're gonna do it." So—because I told her, I said, "I'll tell you one thing." I said, "If we have children," I said, "*When* we have children, you're staying home and taking care of the kids. You're not going to keep working."

LANDDECK: How did she feel about that?

AYERS: She agreed; she thought it was right. So she didn't. She agreed, and we had kids. And so she stayed home and took care of them.

LANDDECK: Yeah, now how many did you have?

AYERS: Two.

LANDDECK: Two? Amy and …

AYERS: A girl and a boy. Shawn.

SADASIVAM: This is going back to World War II.

LANDDECK: Go ahead. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to …

SADASIVAM: This is just a general overview. What do you think—like for students like me who have never—I have no connection to World War II. What do you think is the single most important lesson that they need to know about World War II?

AYERS: I think they need to know that that is not the way to settle problems. I don't care what it is, there's no sense in settling problems that way. You've got to find a better way. And it's up to the young people to do it. The only thing we can do is tell you how bad it was, and why you shouldn't do it again. In fact, whenever I got the Bronze Star and there's—the ROTC group was out there talking to me, and I talked to them as a group, and I told them, I said, "I'm proud of you. I hope you continue on." I said, "But whatever you do, do not have another war." I said, "*Keep* from having another war." I said, "Whatever you do. That's the only thing that I can tell you. We need you! (Hits the table) We need the Air Force! (Hits the table) We need the Army. (Hits the table)," I said, "But we do not need another war." (Hits table for emphasis) I said, "It's good to train for them. Be ready for it, but don't have it." That's the most important thing. To me, that's the most important thing.

LANDDECK: Could you tell the story you told us at lunch about the Bronze Star for posterity?

AYERS: (Laughs) Oh yeah, sure I can. Well …

LANDDECK: Tell us how it all started.

AYERS: Okay. That flanking attack that I was talking about where a buddy of mine got shot and I didn't, and then I got wounded a few hours after that. They gave a Bronze Star out of that because of the flanking attack that we had done. Well, I was at the hospital when they gave it out, and whenever I come back and find out that they had given out the Bronze Star, I also found out that you needed ninety five hours—or ninety five points to be able to get home, and get discharged from the service. So I had a hundred and some points that I could get out on, and I said, "I'm going *home*!" I said, "Send me over. Sign me up. I'm going home." So they sent me home. But, my daughter made a collage and of course she had my medals. Good Conduct Medal and Purple Heart, and also we got the French Croix de Guerre and the Belgium Croix de Guerre, 101st Airborne, and the Presidential Citation. And I had the—oh imagine, can you imagine that? And she made this collage for me, and when I looked at it I said, "Boy, Amy," I said, "That is beautiful." I said, "The only thing is, there should be a Bronze Star on there," I said, "Which I never got." And I told her why. Well, she and her mother got a bug in their ear and start sending letters and trying to get it for me. Well they wrote to John Duncan; [they] were pursuing it, trying to get me the Bronze Star. Well they found out—John Duncan wrote a letter back and said that my records were destroyed in the fire in St. Louis where they had kept all the military records. And he said he was going to try and see if he couldn't find records somewhere else. Well, he fortunately—he did. I don't know where they finally—the Smithsonian or someplace. But he found the records and they indeed decided that I needed to have a Bronze Star. So he sent me the Bronze Star. These friends of ours had a reception for me to receive the Bronze Star and we invited friends and John Duncan also came to present to Bronze Star and the ROTC group from the University if Tennessee Air Force group came over and they were there at the reception too. And John Duncan presented me with the Bronze Star! And it was nice affair. My daughter made a cake for me too, and it was decorated in red, white and blue, and had a flag on it. It said, "The deed—the deed was *great.*" No, how did that …

LANDDECK: Forty years …

AYERS: "It was forty years late, but the deed was great!"

LANDDECK: Yeah, yeah. That's terrific.

AYERS: That was good.

LANDDECK: Do you know about what year that was when they finally did that for you? Was it fairly recently?

AYERS: Whoa. No, this one—this was John Sr.

LANDDECK: Oh, John Sr.?

AYERS: He died before—it had to be awhile ago …

LANDDECK: Was it in the 70's? … Always dating things, that's my job. (Laughter)

AYERS: Probably … I *believe* it was in the 70's. I can call you and let you know! [Ayers later confirmed the exact year was 1985.]

LANDDECK: That would be good.

AYERS: 'Cause I can tell you exactly when 'cause I got the plaque and the paper. I should have brought that. I could have brought that—the Bronze Star. Not only do they give you a medal, they give you a certificate that says you're entitled to have it.

LANDDECK: That's terrific!

AYERS: I didn't bring it with me; I could have brought that.

LANDDECK: You know, you can make copies of all those things and send a packet over to the Center and we'll put it in your file and have it all for you.

AYERS: I'll have to take it out of the frame.

LANDDECK: Well that's true. (Laughter) You don't want to do that.

AYERS: Oh I don't know. I may do that.

LANDDECK: So tell us more about your post-war life? I told Ramaah I'd ask you all sorts of post-war questions 'cause that's what I do. You got married in '48, started having babies?

AYERS: Well, no ... I got married in '48.

LANDDECK: That's what you said on your paper.

AYERS: Oh yeah, that's right. Excuse me. That's right, 'cause we—I met her in '46. We were engaged in '47, got married in '48. … I'm celebrating my fiftieth anniversary not to long …

LANDDECK: Oh, well congratulations in advance! That is terrific.

AYERS: … not too long ago; that was a couple years ago.

SADASIVAM: Oh well, yeah, '98?

AYERS: Mm-hmm.

SADASIVAM: Wow.

AYERS: Like everybody says, "Jeanne, you should be a saint to live with him for fifty years!" (Laughter) But, yeah, like I was going to say, how could that be? 'Cause Amy was born in '56 and Shawn in '59. Yeah, we didn't have kids right after we got married. We were enjoying life.

LANDDECK: Yeah, having fun.

AYERS: Yeah, right.

LANDDECK: So—I'm going to ask more about your wife. What's your wife's name?

AYERS: Jeanne. J-E-A-N-N-E.

LANDDECK: You had the kids and she quit work, and then did she go back to work or did she stay home the rest of her life?

AYERS: No, she …

LANDDECK: This is a big question about women of her generation—what they did.

AYERS: She stayed—yeah, she stayed home. Well, I transferred—I left Allis-Chalmers and went with General Electric. And General Electric transferred me from Birmingham up here.

LANDDECK: Okay, to Knoxville.

AYERS: To Knoxville, yeah. And that's another story too. I got up here and everybody asked me, "Where you from?" I said, "Birmingham." They'd say where did you come from?" I'd say, "Birmingham." And you could see it. You could see their wheels turning, you know. "Are you originally from Birmingham?" "Oh no, I'm originally from Pittsburgh." (Laughter) "Oh, Okay. 'Cause you don't have a Birmingham accent." But, uh—where were we?

LANDDECK: Your wife.

AYERS: My wife, yes. Okay. No, she did not work.

LANDDECK: Okay.

AYERS: She did not work until we got up here, and then I was going to have to transfer again to Spokane, Washington. I told them, I said, "I'm taking a vacation." So, I got a check from them, so we went to Florida. We got down there and took two weeks vacation in Florida, and I decided I wasn't going to move. I said, "I'm staying here." I said, "I like it here. I don't want to move anymore. I've moved enough." So, we didn't. We stayed here. She was not—she still hadn't started working. So I went and left—I've always wanted to drive a truck, an eighteen-wheeler. So I went out and bought a tractor truck. I started driving a tractor trailer.

LANDDECK: Did you really?

AYERS: Yeah, I did. I bought a brand new one. I had it for seven years. I put 800,000 miles on it.

LANDDECK: Wow. (Laughter)

AYERS: And then that's when she went back to work.

LANDDECK: Yeah.

AYERS: Because, I was not making enough money to keep the home and everything going, so she decided she better go back to work. So she went back to work for Hewgley's Music Company and worked there for a while, and then she finally left there and went to TVA.

LANDDECK: Oh yeah? Oh wow. What did she do for them?

AYERS: She worked in the Nuclear Engineering Department.

LANDDECK: Oh yeah?

AYERS: Yeah. She was secretary.

LANDDECK: So she—about—can you date when she went back to work for me?

AYERS: (Long pause) '78.

LANDDECK: '78?

AYERS: Around '78. Somewhere around there, yeah.

LANDDECK: Just curious. I date everything.

AYERS: Okay. Yeah, you're a history buff. You better! (Laughs)

LANDDECK: That's right. Terrific. Then what did you do? You drove the truck?

AYERS: I drove the truck. I drove the truck. Like I said, for seven years I drove it all over the country. I was in every state, but North and South Dakota. And we took a vacation together a year or so ago, maybe two years ago, and went up to North and South Dakota! Went to see Mount Rushmore, and I can now say I've been to forty eight of the states—forty eight of the fifty. I have not been to Hawaii or Alaska. Hawaii I'd like to go to sometime. Alaska, I'm not too sure. I know it's beautiful, but it's cold! (Laughter) And anytime you see cold, I don't want to go.

LANDDECK: Right, had enough of that to last a lifetime.

AYERS: That's right, exactly right. I like heat—I don't mind cold weather, and I don't mind snow, as long as I can sit here and look out at it, and I can stay indoors and look at it, fine. If I have to get out in it, "No thank you!" 'Cause see—and then, it was a case—I would have kept on driving I guess, but it really is not a good life for a married man. You're not home enough. You're on the road all the time. You only get home on weekends once in a while. But also I was going to have to put some money in the truck. I hadn't spent any money on it, hardly at all. I was going to have to buy a—either buy a new engine or buy a new truck, and I thought, "I don't want to go into debt anymore." So I quit, and I started working at TVA. I worked at TVA for awhile until I retired in '91, '92.

LANDDECK: What have you been doing since?

AYERS: Playing golf! (Laughter) That's about it—well, taking care of the yard and playing golf.

LANDDECK: Sounds like fun.

AYERS: And going to—well, I went to Europe and Scotland. We went to Scotland. We had a Scottish minister and he wanted to go back. So every couple of years he gets a group together and they go. I don't go every year; I went to one year back to Scotland. We got back to Scotland and he had set up this tour. We go on a tour! He takes us around and shows us everything that he knows about Scotland. But I, like I said, I went to Germany, and I went to Scotland, and North and South Dakota, been to Florida. And I go back to Pittsburgh once in a while to visit my brother and sister.

LANDDECK: Yeah. In the summertime I assume?

AYERS: Oh yes! (Laughter) I went back there in November one time for Thanksgiving. I got in a snowstorm coming home. I had to pull off the road—went to a motel. I told them then, I said, "Don't look for me for Thanksgiving anymore, 'cause I'm not coming back!" I said, "I'll come back in the summer." So I can play golf with my brother! (Laughter) He's a golfer too.

LANDDECK: Yeah, well do you have closing questions that you want to …

SADASIVAM: Oh yeah, yeah. What's your reaction to your generation being called "The Greatest Generation?" Do you believe that you are the greatest generation?

AYERS: Funny you should ask that, because I was watching *60 Minutes* the other night and they had—I don't know if you watch it or not, but at the end of *60 Minutes* they always have Andy Rooney on, and he comes on, and he was talking about a similar such thing, generation, and he says, "You know, we were not the greatest generation!" He says, "There's *no way* we were the greatest generation." He says, "We were a *good* generation." He says, "We did good, but we also did bad things." He said, "There are bad people in that generation as well as this generation." I say, I don't care where you go, what year you look, you're going to have good and bad people. And as far as our being the greatest generation he said, "We're not the greatest

generation." I kind of agree with him. I think it's overreacting. I think we were good. We were a good generation. We were good people. But there were some bad people, too.

LANDDECK: Yeah, but you only saved the world.

AYERS: (Laughs) Well, yeah. (Laughter) That's true; we did that. I guess if you would have to classify, yeah. I'd say we were a pretty great generation. We were great.

LANDDECK: I think so.

AYERS: We were greater than most, but I'm not taking any credit for it! (Laughter) I did my little part, that's it.

LANDDECK: Well do you have any closing thoughts or ideas that you'd like to tell us? Did we get all your questions?

SADASIVAM: Yeah, yeah.

LANDDECK: Do you have any closing thoughts? For posterity? For your children?

AYERS: For posterity? I think this is great. I really do. I think that it's something that should be done and ought to be done. And I'm glad I'm a part of it, because I think that people coming up should know about it, should hear about it, and should take note of what could happen—what has happened. Try not to let it happen again. 'Cause it is not fun, not fun. And if they get into a nuclear war, *it is going to be hell*. It will not be fun at all. There's no such thing as good war, but a nuclear war is bad. Nuclear stuff for peace? Yeah, I think it's good. But nuclear war for war—I mean nuclear stuff for war is no good. *No* war is good! Okay, that's all I got to say.

LANDDECK: Okay.

SADASIVAM: Thanks so much for coming.

LANDDECK: Yes. Thank you very much!

SADASIVAM: It's really been a privilege. Thank you so much.

AYERS: You're welcome.

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