

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN W. TOWLE

FOR THE
VETERAN'S ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND SOCIETY
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

INTERVIEWED BY
G. KURT PIEHLER
AND
MICHAEL TAYLOR

KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE
MARCH 20, 2002

TRANSCRIPT BY
MICHAEL TAYLOR

REVIEWED BY
PATRICK LEVERTON
GREGORY KUPSKY

KURT PIEHLER: ... This begins an interview with John W. Towle on March 20, 2002 in Knoxville, Tennessee with Kurt Piehler and ...

MICHAEL TAYLOR: Michael Taylor.

PIEHLER: And let me begin by asking you this formally: when were you born and where were you born?

JOHN W. TOWLE: I was born in—I used to say, when I went to first grade, that I was born over on the river. That is now Sequoyah Hills. I was born just off of Scenic Drive. My grandfather and father owned about three hundred acres in Sequoyah Hills. They farmed it. And do you know where Looney's Island is?

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

TOWLE: My father used to farm that. And that's where I was born, and when I was two years old, I moved to Bearden and lived there 'til about, well, 'til I went in the Army, really, in the Air Force.

PIEHLER: And you were born June 18, 1921.

TOWLE: 1921.

PIEHLER: And your parents were Mary Wilson Towle and William Levi Towle. And do you know how your parents met?

TOWLE: Uh, really, my father had moved from Ohio. They swapped farms in Philadelphia, Tennessee with a fellow that owned a farm in Philadelphia, and my grandfather had married a lady that—both of them were school teachers, and they didn't like the schools down there where my father was born, and so they moved to Scenic Drive. And the Knott family, they lived in Knoxville for years; my father met her and married her. And my grandfather taught school down at the forks of the road, on Lyon's View and Kingston Pike. He taught school there. It's tore down now. There's a fire hall there.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

TOWLE: But my mother, on my mother's side, her father taught school. And I haven't got it confirmed yet, but everybody thinks that he taught math down at—out on the mountain, I forget the name of the school [Suwannee College], that college down there, on the mountain. But both of my grandfathers were schoolteachers.... But, my grandmother, she died, and he married ... a Knott, which was Aunt Anne, and she had, in this book, if you'd read it, she knitted socks and stuff for the Civil War, 'bout four different wars, all during that time. Somethin', she was somethin', and I was—she lived with us for years, and after my grandfather died and I was on my way overseas on the Queen Elizabeth, on Thanksgiving Day, when I got word that she had died. And I got in England at 1943.

PIEHLER: And you didn't learn the news until you got to England?

TOWLE: Sir?

PIEHLER: You didn't learn the news until you got to England, that your grandmother had died?

TOWLE: They got it to me on the boat.

PIEHLER: Oh, they did get it to you on the boat?

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah.

PIEHLER: Was it the Red Cross that got ...

TOWLE: I don't know who it was.

PIEHLER: But you did get a message?

TOWLE: Yeah. Uh huh. They was on the Queen Elizabeth. They was 40,000 troops on that boat. That was the first time I'd ever been on the ocean. We was up on the upper deck and had bunks out there. Sea got so rough we had to go inside and they'd lock the doors down. And they said, "If we get in any trouble, you go out there and get in those boats out there." (Laughter) I said, "Lord'a'Mercy!" I said, "If this boat can't take it, what'd they have me [do] out there on that water, old country boy out there?" (Laughter) It's somethin'.

TAYLOR: Back to your early days, with your farming, did you help out on the farm?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah.... When my father moved to Bearden, we run a dairy farm. And at four years old, I was milking four and five cows. Get up four o'clock in the mornin', and I did that 'til—we run a dairy 'til I was a senior in high school. And when Roosevelt changed that you had to get all milk pasteurized, why, Daddy wasn't able to put in all that equipment, so we sold out. We used to sell milk to Eastern State Hospital. We sold it to the University of Tennessee.

TAYLOR: Well, had you had plans of being, continuing on in dairy farming?

TOWLE: My daddy did. (Laughter) I like farming. But, when I got out of the army and I come back to UT—in fact, before I went in the army, why, I was attending UT and I had a car wreck, right in the middle of a semester, or a quarter back then. And I had to drop out. They was hiring people at Alcoa, and so I applied for that, and got a job over there. And one reason that I went in the army—I volunteered in the Air Force—was I'd worked my way up where I was a supervisor over at Annealing Furnaces in Alcoa, in the aluminum company, and a guy that was pretty high up in the organization wanted me to be a supervisor over a whole section, and the only way I could get it was to get married. (Laughter) I was single. They wouldn't hire a single person. And so I was dating a girl I met here at UT that lived in Arkansas. Stuttgart, Arkansas. And she wouldn't get married. Her mother was nearly blind and she promised her that she'd be at the wedding. And, so I went to the supervisor—I was deferred from the army working over there—

and asked them for a week's vacation. And they said, "What for?" I said, "I got to take my mother out to Texas to tend to some business." (Laughter) They said, "You think the army'd [let you] do that?" I said, "Yeah, I believe they would." They said, "No they wouldn't either," so they wouldn't let me go. So, a friend of mine—we'd grew up together, Morton Lee—had gone to Texas to work in a car factory, and he joined the Air Force. So, I just volunteered and joined myself. So, I went back to work the next day after I'd joined, and they called me into the office and said, "You can't do that." I said, "I've already done it." (Laughter) So, that's how I come to be, join the Air Force. Otherwise, I'd [have] been deferred.

PIEHLER: So, in other words, if you had been able to go to Arkansas ...

TOWLE: There's no telling how ...

PIEHLER: You might have had, you would have married probably a different woman?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. In fact, I still—we still communicate.

PIEHLER: Oh, you still are in touch?

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: And I assume she did marry someone?

TOWLE: Yeah. She married a Air Force person. He was a pilot and he was from California. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: And did she move back to Arkansas or did they move ...

TOWLE: Well, they're down in Huntsville, Alabama. But he's dead, the boy's dead. They had five children. But, well, I get a Christmas card from her every year.

PIEHLER: Oh, that's very nice.

TOWLE: And, we still—we just come 'bout that close to gettin' married. (Laughter) In fact, while I was in the Army, I mean the Air Force, why, we had three B-17s, they was on a practice mission and they come in and peeled off. Three planes, B-17s, they peeled off and they made a mistake some way and they collided and killed all the crew members. And one of them happened to be from Knoxville. And they asked me if I'd bring the boy home. I said, "Well, I never have done anything like that." They said, "All you have to do is deliver him and stay at the funeral." I said, "Well, if you get it where I can stay home a week, I'll do it." And they said, "Okay." So, I brought the boy home. And, just before, when I joined to go to the army, why, I come up to Knoxville—didn't have cars—I come up to the Strand Theater. I had to catch the train at twelve o'clock. Old Southern Depot. And, I come up there and I had a date with this girl and I didn't have any way to go, and I didn't call or anything. So I went on there, and when I brought this boy home, I found out it was her brother. (Laughs) And I'd dated her while I was at home.

TAYLOR: Why did you ... choose the Air Force?

TOWLE: Well, I didn't want in the Navy. I don't care nothing about that water. And I didn't like that ground thing, so—and before that I'd had a mechanic's course. And I asked them when I went to join up, I said, "Now, am I gonna get to be a mechanic in the Air Force?" I said, "If I will, if you can be sure of that," I said, "I'll join." And so, that's the reason I joined the Air Force, really.

TAYLOR: I noticed in your questionnaire that you said that you'd gone to B-24 mechanic's school and B-17 mechanic's school.

TOWLE: Yeah.

TAYLOR: So, you were all prepared to be a mechanic in the Air Force?

TOWLE: Well, that's funny. We were down at—I was down at St. Petersburg, Florida. Being trained. They were doing just ordinary work, you know. And they had a guy, old fellow, come in there from the Air Force and he got us out there, out in the open with people passing by. Girls and everything. And he was telling us how bad they needed gunners on airplanes. And he's asking for volunteers. And they was some pretty girls walking along, you know. (Laughter) And, he turned and looked and said, "Oh, I see. You boys are looking at their empennage, aren't you?" (Laughter) So, I joined up to be a gunner. And I went on to school, went to this B-24 school for twelve weeks. And they sent the top four people in the class, they sent them to Burbank, California to B-17 school. And from there, if you was in the top four out there, why, they was making B-17s there at that factory, and they'd let you take a airplane and go on a B-17 delivery to Salina, Kansas.

TAYLOR: Oh, okay.

TOWLE: So, if anything broke down on the way, why, we could fix it, you know, without having to just leave it wherever it stopped. So, I got that and went to Salina, Kansas, and on the way there these two pilots was flying the plane, we was coming across Kansas, and it's just flat as—you know how flat it is, I assume. And saw a old A1 Ford driving down a dirt road and them dern pilots got right down it. (Laughter) I mean, they didn't miss that guy by far and, boy, he shook up ...

PIEHLER: He's shaking his hand in the sky, his fists in the air.

TOWLE: ... And I told 'em, I said, "You guys are nuts." (Laughter) But, from there, why, I went to Wendover, Utah to gunnery school and stayed out there four or five weeks. But, it was right out in the desert, forty miles from Salt Lake City, and they'd let you go AWOL for two days before they'd go hunt you. (Laughter) You lived in tents. It was right out in the desert, I mean, out in nowhere. And they had three shifts going to school.... If you come in at night, you had to tear your bed up to check if you had any rattlesnakes in it. Several boys got bit by rattlesnakes.

But from there, why, I went to Seattle, Washington. And to this day, I don't know why. But it was a new camp, and I don't even remember the name of it. Anyway, they was setting up—I joined part of my crew there—they was setting up a WACs [Women's Army Corps] battalion out there. And they always told me not to volunteer for anything in the Army. (Laughter) So I went and I told this sergeant in charge, I said, "I'm not volunteering for anything." He called me over to the side and said, "I got a good job for you." I said, "It better be good," I said, "or I don't want it." He said, "You take three or four boys, go down to this camp." And I went down there—it was WACs—they was setting up, we was setting up beds and whatnot. And there was a bunch of WACs in there, it was early in the morning, and we went in there and them ... gals, hell, they'd get up naked and everything else. (Laughter) I don't know if you ...

PIEHLER: But it was a good job. (Laughter)

TOWLE: Yeah. I said got back and ... said, "Just send us back there tomorrow." (Laughter) But from there, why, I come to Harvard, Nebraska to join a crew, and that's where these three planes collided. But on the way from up there, ... it was summer time when we left up there. And we just had our khakis on and had all our bags. All our bags was put on the baggage car, you know. Barracks bags and everything else we had. And on the way, boy, it got cold down through the mountains. We was on an old train that—coaches didn't have any heat in them, had these big bellied stoves in them. And we liked to froze to death. In fact, they tore up half the seats to build fires in there. (Laughter) And on the way, we stopped in some little ole town. It was way out, way out in the desert, and some of the guys saw a whiskey sign over there on the side. (Laughter) It was just about half a block from where we were. Boy, here they went. (Laughter) And two or three of my crew, they said, "Boy, if I had some money, I'd get me something." I didn't drink then, and I said, "Here." I give'em some money and they went over and got it. But on the way on down, through the desert, these guys—they must have got drunk—hey lost about five. They'd get out on, you know, in between the cars and probably heaving, you know. And they'd fall off that train. They lost about four or five out there in that desert. I don't know whatever happened to them. But we made it on to Harvard, Nebraska, alright.

PIEHLER: I just want to go back to your growing up in Knoxville a little bit more. You mentioned your father had to sell the dairy farm when pasteurization was required. What did he do after that for a living, after he sold the dairy?

TOWLE: We went into raising beef cattle.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm. So he still kept in farming?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. That's all he knew. He grew up doing that. But ... during our days of dairying, why, we delivered milk on bicycle. At Westmoreland, I don't know if you know where Westmoreland's at.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

TOWLE: Well, Bob Neyland lived in Westmoreland. Fred Brown used to run a clothing store. He lived in Westmoreland. And Judge Webb and two or three people, and we delivered milk on

a bicycle to them. In fact, one of the family's sons is my eye doctor now. He talks about that all the time, about us delivering milk on our bikes.

PIEHLER: So he remembers that?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

TAYLOR: Now, you were living in Bearden at this time, but you went to Central High. Did you all live in Fountain City, or did you ...

TOWLE: No, we lived in Bearden. We caught a—you know where Eastern State Hospital is?

PIEHLER: Yes.

TOWLE: Well, the end of the car line is up at the upper entrance. It's there where you come down by that little old store. The car line would come down there and turn around.

TAYLOR: Okay.

TOWLE: And we rode the bus. We'd go into Knoxville and transfer and go to Fountain City.

PIEHLER: How long would that take you? Do you remember?

TOWLE: Lord, that's been a long time ago. (Laughter) I don't know, I'd say about an hour. But we had to get up and milk.

PIEHLER: So you were already up quite a bit?

TOWLE: And walk five miles—not five miles—half a mile to the car line. And I couldn't go out for football or anything 'cause if I did, I'd have to catch the street car home, and it would be so late, and I needed to come home and help Daddy milk, you know.

PIEHLER: So you would milk morning and night?

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah.

PIEHLER: How early would you get up? It sounds like you got up very early.

TOWLE: Well, get up four o'clock, sometimes earlier.

PIEHLER: Well, that's really ... (Laughs)

TOWLE: That's back when you had, in the winter time, you had to get up and build a fire. And if Daddy—when I got a little older, why, if Daddy didn't feel like it or he got contrary, why, he'd kick me and tell me to get up. (Laughter) "Go build a fire!"

PIEHLER: So, growing up, you built, for warmth, you had fires?

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Did you have indoor plumbing, or ...

TOWLE: No, no. Lord, no, we never did have indoor plumbing. But we had—my older sister got married, and we had a spring down at the foot of the hill. A pretty steep hill, and it was a wooded area. And, we'd carry water up, but the family we'd bought the farm from had a ram. Do you know what a ram is?

PIEHLER: No.

TOWLE: It's a automatic thing, no electricity or anything. The pressure from the spring keeps it pumping. And we got that fixed, and it'd pump water into the house... My older sister got married and her husband fixed, got two fifty-five gallon drums and built a platform and set them up there and pumped that water into there. That spring water's cold! And my other sister got married and married a preacher, and he went out there to take a shower, and, "Boy!" he said, "That's cold!" (Laughter) But that's all we had, growing up. We finally got electricity.

PIEHLER: When did you get electricity?

TOWLE: Where?

PIEHLER: When did you get electricity? How old were you? Were you already in high school or was it earlier?

TOWLE: It was probably long about in 1935, somewhere along in there.

PIEHLER: So was it TVA? I take it it was TVA.

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Had the power lines made it out that far? To Bearden?

TOWLE: No, no.

PIEHLER: 'Cause Bearden now, as someone who is new to Knoxville, Bearden seems like the close-in part.

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. There's a map of old Bearden in here.

PIEHLER: And I've also seen an old map of old Bearden in—I think it's Parker Brothers.

TOWLE: Yep, Parker Brothers.

PIEHLER: Now how old is—was Parker Brothers around when you were growing up?

TOWLE: No, now they weren't—yeah, they was uptown, though.

PIEHLER: Oh, okay. So, they've moved out.

TOWLE: Yeah. Parker Brothers and Mayo's was the two seed stores.

PIEHLER: Oh, okay. So they both made it out.

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah. And, I tell you, Bearden's really changed. (Laughs) It's really changed.

PIEHLER: Um—oh, go ahead, Mike.

TAYLOR: You mentioned that you had—well, you included there was eight children in your family, is that correct?

TOWLE: Yeah.

TAYLOR: Who was the oldest? Were you the oldest?

TOWLE: My oldest brother. No, my brother was oldest. I had a brother, a sister, a sister, and a sister, and myself, and another brother, and a sister and another brother. (Laughs)

TAYLOR: And you had one other brother that also served in the military during World War II.

TOWLE: Yeah, the youngest boy. He served, well, it was after the war was over. He served in Japan and stayed over there. I don't know how long. A year or two, I think it was.

TAYLOR: Well, did most of your brothers and sisters stay around this area after high school?

TOWLE: Well, no, the first one that moved away was Lane, that wrote this book. She married a boy from Florida. He come up here to play football for Neyland, and they got married. And they moved to Florida after the war. Well, he was in the Merchant Marines or something during the war. And my oldest sister, her husband ... had arthritis or something, and they told him to move to California and it would help him. So, they moved to California and she is still out there since then. He's dead. And my sister [who] married a preacher, a Presbyterian preacher, she left and went to—oh, up north to some Presbyterian church, then he come back and come to Chattanooga. North Fourth Presbyterian Church. Preached down there for several years, and then when he retired he moved back ... to Knoxville. And he is dead, and my sister, his wife, is dead. She died last year....

My oldest brother got killed in an airplane wreck in ... about 1939, down at Oneida, Tennessee. He was a battery salesman, and he met this guy that bought airplanes, small airplanes, and he'd just got a new one and he'd been after my brother to go up, and he weighed about 230. He was big, and played over here at UT. And he finally told him that he'd go up with him. And it was a

brand new plane. I don't think he realized how heavy W.C. was. And they come down and just dove right into the ground. I think he was trying to scare W.C., and he dove down and couldn't pull it out. And it killed him on his daughter's first birthday. And ... they couldn't get any insurance out of any of them.

PIEHLER: Hmm.

TOWLE: And they had a boy and two girls, he did. They had a pretty rough time for a while, 'cause we couldn't—Daddy couldn't help 'em a lot, 'cause we had a dairy and all those kids. We didn't have any money but we had a lot of assets. But, fortunately, her mother and father—he was head of the laundry over at Eastern State Hospital and they moved in with them and helped them a lot. They got along pretty good.

PIEHLER: I want—I guess—you worked a lot, growing up, milking early. What did you do for fun, 'cause you must have had some fun?

TOWLE: ... On Sundays ... we had a big meadow down in the field. And on Sunday, we'd have either baseball games or football games. And, that is about it.

PIEHLER: No going to any of the movie theaters downtown?

TOWLE: No. We couldn't afford to buy a Coca-Cola. If you got any money out of Daddy, you'd have to catch him talkin' to somebody. (Laughter) You could ask him for a quarter or something, and he might give it to you then, but he just—he didn't have any money. He'd get checks from the state and from UT for milk, you know, and sell cows once in a while. But buying clothes, it cost, back then, goin' to Central, there'd be three or four of us goin' to Central. And that's twelve cents a street car—each way is six cents. That's twelve cents a day for three or four kids. Plus buyin' our clothes, and whatnot. And back, way back when, it's Christmas, you got—we'd get an apple and orange. And about three or four pieces of candy. And some nuts. And if somebody needed some shoes real bad, why, they got a new pair of shoes, or some clothes of some kind. But you never got any toys. You made your toys back then. You just didn't have money to spend. But, we had plenty to eat. During the Depression, we eat like kings. We grew our beef and we had a screened-in back porch and had a hind leg of beef hangin' back there. We'd have steak for breakfast a lot of times. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: I take it you had probably a big garden.

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. Oh, you ought to [have] seen Mother's basement. It'd be full of canned stuff. She'd can, can, can. Potatoes, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes. We just had everything. Had plenty to eat. Eggs. Had chickens. Hogs, killed hogs. Back then, we didn't have any trouble, but they's a lot of people we'd call, up on the hill, Harley Road, they's a bunch of blacks lived up there. Back then I called 'em niggers, but they was good, good people. And we'd come down, we'd give 'em stuff, milk and, Lord, I don't know what all, out of the gardens. And, they'd come down and help you do anything in the world.

PIEHLER: So you'd occasionally use some black workers to help you work, work in the farm?

TOWLE: Very seldom. Very seldom. We—back then, you swapped work.

PIEHLER: So you would swap work?

TOWLE: Yeah, with other farmers and people that, you know, knew how to farm. When you run a dairy, we'd fill the silo. And that's when I'd get out of school, to help do that. (Laughter) But, they'd come in and help. And the man [that] carried our mail, he had an old Fordson tractor, and he'd come over and run that cutter up and I don't know whether he ever charged Daddy a thing for it or not. I don't know. But, we'd just swap work. We had some cousins that, for instance, their watermelons come in early, and he'd come over there and bring a wagon load of watermelons—theirs come in early. And when ours come in, we'd take them back to them. Back then, everybody helped each other.

TAYLOR: You say you got out of school, sometimes, to work on the farm. Did you enjoy going to school, though?

TOWLE: Going to school?

TAYLOR: Mm hmm.

TOWLE: Uh, not really. But, my Daddy and Mother insisted. Both of 'em was smart. I don't know whether they ever went to high school or not. In fact, I don't know whether they had a high school then or not. But, my mother and daddy could ... help us in grammar school, anything in math, anything like that, they could help you. And I, to this day, I haven't beaten my mother playin' checkers yet. (Laughter)

TAYLOR: Well, did you have any particular subjects that you liked, or ...

TOWLE: Well, I liked history. I used to had a—Nannie Lee Hicks, from my high school, a teacher in history. And we'd known the family for years. And, of course, several of my sisters and brothers had gone before me out there. But I was in her history class and we was discussin' the branches of the government and I told the class, I said, "Why, those politicians up there." I said, "You vote for me and I'll vote for you when you want somethin'. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." And, boy, she got disturbed about that, she said, "Why, they wouldn't do that at all." Said, "They're too honest." And she'd cry, she'd cry about it. Yeah.

When I come back from overseas, she was joined some ladies organization, 'bout war or somethin'. And, anyway, I come up to YMCA and made a speech to 'em. She asked me to come up there and talk. And I had to make two or three talks at the Baptist church where I went. And the preacher let me use his car to date in. (Laughter) Said, "You come and speak Sunday night," said, "I'll let you use my car." (Laughter) So, he did. And the Presbyterian Church, same way. But I enjoyed it. I wasn't no speaker, but one of the deacons in the Baptist church, that I got through talkin', come up and told me, "You'd make a good speaker if you had a little training." But I didn't make out anything. I just got up and talked, you know, told my experience. I told about drinkin' wine over in France, and they didn't like that much, I don't think. (Laughter)

But the mornin' after I got shot down, they come in—I forget what they had to eat for breakfast. But anyway, they had a quart of beer sittin' there, but I never drank beer in my life. I'd drank a little, tasted wine some, but other than that, that's all I'd ever drank. I told 'em, I said, "I can't drink that." They didn't drink water; they drank wine. I don't know why they didn't drink water.

TAYLOR: I have one other question ...

PIEHLER: Oh, go ahead ...

TAYLOR: ... about Fountain City. You said earlier that you knew quite a few people in and around Fountain City while you were going to school. Did you know Roy Acuff, or any other ...

TOWLE: Roy Acuff? Why, sure, I knew him. My brother played football with him.

TAYLOR: Oh, okay.

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah.

TAYLOR: Did you enjoy his music?

TOWLE: Yeah, sure did. Yeah.

TAYLOR: Would you have voted for him for governor?

TOWLE: Yeah. He wouldn't ever have made it. (Laughter) Nah, I probably wouldn't have. In fact, he wouldn't have run, I don't think. I don't think he would have. But I knew Grandpappy Campbell.

TAYLOR: Uh huh.

TOWLE: And, he was a good friend of my brother's also, and he was a funny guy. In fact, I played—about two weeks before he died, I played golf with him down at Fairfield Lanes.

TAYLOR: Oh, wow.

TOWLE: And I asked him—did you ever watch "Hee-Haw?"

TAYLOR: Uh huh.

PIEHLER: Yes.

TOWLE: I asked Pappy, I said, "Pappy," I said, "What keeps you goin'?" I said, "It's those big chested gals down there on that show?" He said, "That helps." (Laughter) He said, "That helps." But he—I have a friend that was born and raised up at Bull's Gap, where Grandpappy

was. And he said, “That guy never hit a lick.” Said, “He’d sit around on a street corner strumming on the guitar or somethin’.” Said he’d never known him to work. (Laughter) You know, it’s strange. Nearly all your country singers and what not is nearly old country people. You take them, Dolly Parton and Coal Miner’s Daughter, and all those girls, is just old country girls. Pappy was—he was born up there in Bull’s Gap.

PIEHLER: I’m curious about farming. It sounds like your father didn’t have a lot of cash. You sort of mention how you really couldn’t go to the movies very much.

TOWLE: No. ‘Til I was in high school—well, all through high school, we never went to movies. We didn’t have it. I’d gone, back in high school. We’d have a date. A friend of mine or a cousin, really, who lived next door, his daddy—he was a preacher, and he had a big ole Hupmobile. And he’d get it once in a while and I’d gone. I’d get two dollars, that I’d probably made somewhere, and I’d have a date and we’d go to the movie, probably, and come back to Highland’s Grill. It’s gone now it’s down at the forks of the road, Lyon’s View. And they was three of us had a date, and we went in there after we went to the movie and ordered a hamburger, I guess, and a glass of milk, I guess. And the boy that owned the car—or his daddy did—he’d order the same thing. And when it come round to payin’, why, he didn’t have enough money to pay for his milk. And they took it back.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

TOWLE: And you had two dollars to spend. That’s all. That’s going to the movies and getting you a sandwich. And I used to take—I used to date a girl—her daddy owned Goodluck’s Dry Cleaners. It’s out of business now. She’s dead now, died about a year ago. And they went to the same church where I did.... When the fair would come in, why, I’d take her to the fair, and when I’d go up to get her, why, he’d slip around, he’d say, “Come back here, John.” I’d go back there and he’d stick somethin’ in my pocket. And he’d give me a five dollar bill. And I’d take her out. He knew we didn’t have money, you know. You just ... didn’t have no money. We had everything else, but we didn’t have no money.

PIEHLER: What about traveling? How, before you joined the Army Air Force, how much traveling had you done?

TOWLE: Well, after I didn’t come back to UT, I went to work for Alcoa. And I had money then. And, me and this friend of mine, Morton Lee, we bought a car together and we’d get around that way.

PIEHLER: But had you, say—you’d mentioned going on the Queen Elizabeth, earlier. Had you ever been to, say, the shore? To the ocean?

TOWLE: No. Yeah, yeah—I beg—yeah.... My oldest sister’s husband took us to Myrtle Beach.

PIEHLER: So you had gone to Myrtle Beach once?

TOWLE: Yeah. We went over there. They wasn't any hotels or anything on 'em. And we took our lunch with us and we were sittin' out on—just like a desert, just sand everywhere. And you could look out there and that water, you know how it goes up, heaps up? And, I come back and told everyone, I said, "That water is heaped up." I said, "It's gonna come right in over." And it looked like it, like it would. But they got a big kick out of that. Then, my oldest sister's husband, Tracy Lusk, he worked for J.C. Mahan. And he was a good mechanic. He rebuilt carburetors and fuel pumps and all that stuff. And he'd take a trip out to California. And one time he took part of the family, one time.

PIEHLER: Did you get to go to California?

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah. Went to California and we went to the Yellowstone and on out to California. And went up—he had, his daddy—he didn't know him very well. He lived up Spokane, Washington. And we went up there and up through Oregon.... He had some cousins or somethin' that lived in Oregon, and we went to visit them. There was ... five of us. And they didn't have room for everybody in the house, so they had hammocks outside. Boy, it was out in the country, and we'd sleep out there. But it was hot in the daytime. Boy, at that night, we like to froze to death, sleepin' out there. You could hear the coyotes hollerin'. We went all around in there and come back. He took two trips out there. Took my daddy. We come back through Cheyenne, Wyoming and they was having the world rodeo thing. And I'd been working for Spur Gas out here and had to shave everyday. (Laughter) And I told my brother-in-law, I said, "I'm not gonna shave 'til I get back." (Laughter) And we got to Cheyenne and he bought me one of them big old cowboy hats. And I was in shorts. And we was walking down the street—I needed a shave, and two old women—I was out ...

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PIEHLER: You were saying about two old women who were in Cheyenne. And you hadn't shaved for a while—and a cowboy hat?

TOWLE: Yeah. They passed me and they got where my brother-in-law was, and he turned to my sister and said, "Boy, they oughtn't to allow a thing like that on the street." (Laughter) But we went to that rodeo. I was wanting to ride on one of them horses. I was a pretty good rider back on the farm. But my sister wouldn't let me. (Laughs) My oldest sister, she—instead of going to UT—she didn't want to go. And she went to hair stylist school. And she run a little ole shop.... If we needed some money, why she'd give us money.

PIEHLER: So, your sister had a shop in the 1930s?

TOWLE: Yeah. Yeah. And she—and I still—she had a stool, that she'd set you on to cut your hair. And wash your hair, you know. And I use that in my greenhouse now, that stool. (Laughter) She come in from California last year and I said—I've got it in the greenhouse—I said, "Come out here, I want to show you something." And she come out there. I said, "Sit down on that." She sit down, she said, "What for?" I said, "Don't you remember that stool?" She looked at me, she said, "Oh, yes! That's the one I used to have in my barber shop!" (Laughs) She was a jewel. She's still living. She's eighty-six years old and lives in California.

PIEHLER: I'm curious: what did your family think of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal?

TOWLE: My daddy hated him. He didn't believe in farm subsidies, and he didn't believe in lettin' the field go blank and pay you for it, you know, and not puttin' crops on it.

PIEHLER: It was against his ...

TOWLE: Uh-huh. He didn't like him, at all.

PIEHLER: So ... your father never took any New Deal ...

TOWLE: No, he never. No, he wouldn't, he wouldn't do it. Didn't believe in it.

TAYLOR: What did he think about TVA?

TOWLE: Well, really, I never heard him comment on it. I remember one time, we was out in the back pasture, and they's a little ole biplane come flying around up there. And he looked up there and said, "You see that thing?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "That'll never amount to nothing." (Laughter) "It'll never amount to nothing."

PIEHLER: So, your father wasn't always right? (Laughs)

TOWLE: Yeah. When I was just, real young, we had an old mare named Bess. And that's what we'd deliver milk in, in a pack, over to Eastern State Hospital. And ... in the summertime, they'd be way back in the back pasture, feeding, you know. And I'd have to go get her, and I was five or six years old. I'd catch her eating and I'd throw my leg over her neck and she'd raise up, I'd get back on her back. Her butt was that high, that wide. And, time I got to the barn, I'd be asleep, and Daddy'd wake me up and get me off that horse. She'd take me—it's half a mile from our dairy barn to Eastern State—and she'd take me over there. And you go in, and you go under a little ole dip, and they's a walkway over, and there's a little courtyard there, and you can go in there, turn around and back up. And old nigger Lee—he was a patient over there—he'd take those, I couldn't lift 'em, five gallon cans of milk, he'd take those off for me. And going over there, backin' up, and coming back home, I never touched the lines on that mare.

TAYLOR: She'd done the route plenty of times.

TOWLE: Yeah. And old nigger Lee, every time I'd go over there in the mornin', he'd give me an apple. At Eastern State, at one time, they grew nearly all their food. With patience. They had people, people over that. They had people over the dairy, they had people over the garden, they had people over the laundry. It was self-sufficient. They had a good dairy, had a good dairy. Now, it's all gone.

PIEHLER: Well, I'm also curious, because you said that your original family farm was in Sequoyah.

TOWLE: Sequoyah?

PIEHLER: Yeah, what is now Sequoyah.

TOWLE: Yeah. That's way back when.

PIEHLER: Yeah. I guess, I guess—did you see ... Sequoyah Hills develop the way that it did? How old were you, when the houses went up in Sequoyah?

TOWLE: Well, I was two years old when we moved to Bearden. And I grew up—it was quite a long time before it really started building up. It's probably '34, '35 in there. All the highfalutin people moved in, people used to own Cadillac lived in there, Cadillac Motor Company distributors here. All the people, you know, who made big money ... moved in there. And I—we used to know all of 'em.

PIEHLER: From your milk, milk route?

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: What about—what was past Bearden?

TOWLE: Farragut.

PIEHLER: And, so, there was really just farms and ...

TOWLE: Yeah, just farms, yeah. That's all.

PIEHLER: Yeah, because I think of also—I mean, it's hard for me to even imagine Bearden as having farms.

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Well, Bearden, they wasn't that much farm land right in Bearden.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

TOWLE: Over on south of Bearden, down the bends of the river, they's a lot of farms.

PIEHLER: Yeah. That's all houses now. (Laughs)

TOWLE: Yeah. I drove down in there, oh, about a month ago, and I liked to got lost. And I knew everybody that lived down there at one time. Sharpes, Neils.

TAYLOR: Is that the same way with Halls, back then? Was there anything in Halls other than farms?

TOWLE: No. Uh uh.

TAYLOR: So, it's only recently developed?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. Yeah, it's really, really developed.

PIEHLER: Well, I feel like—I'm sort of new to Knoxville. I've only been here since 1999. I feel like I'm missing stuff I should ask you about Knoxville. But what about Knoxville growing up that we haven't asked you about?

TOWLE: Uh, well, I can't remember it, but I heard my daddy talk, when they had just dirt streets down Gay Street.

PIEHLER: Your dad could still remember the dirt streets ...

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And they used to be—you know where the bridge over the Tennessee is, down at the university farm? Down below that was a bridge. And it didn't have side rails on it at all. And on the other side of the river, there was a guy that owned all that. I forget his name now. But he run a farm.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

TOWLE: And he raised hogs. And one year, it got so cold that the river froze over. And my daddy helped him drive a bunch of hogs across the river, on the ice, to market in Knoxville, down Gay Street. And he said, one time, back in the horse and buggy days, he said ... they's two ole women in a buggy, and they had umbrellas up over 'em, driving down. It's along about where Magnolia takes off on Gay Street. And he said they's a team come down behind 'em and they run away. And they was goin' toward those women in that buggy and said they saw those umbrellas and, I guess those women was all dyked out, said they got up to them and just stopped, just like that. But, it was somethin'.

TAYLOR: Well, after leaving Knoxville for a time, during your service and things, what did you think of it afterwards, looking back, say, talking to people that you were in the military with, about where they were from? What did you think of Knoxville?

TOWLE: Well, most your people's in the military was just like I was. They's most of them from the country or—and didn't know a hill from a bean, or somethin'. (Laughter) And, they's all pretty good fellas, except we had some from Boston, and they was characters. We'd tell 'em a bunch of stuff we done on the farm, you know ...

PIEHLER: And they'd believe it?

TOWLE: Oh, they wouldn't believe you.

PIEHLER: So what would you tell them that they ...

TOWLE: (Laughs) I wouldn't want to repeat it on that. (Laughter) But, most your people in the service was pretty—you know, back then, why, you didn't have—cities wasn't that big, and most Army people lived out in the country. Just a lot of good ole country boys was in there.

TAYLOR: So, were most of the people that you served with from the South or ...

TOWLE: They was from all over.

TAYLOR: All over.

TOWLE: Yeah, they was from everywhere. They wouldn't try to get too many from the same place.

PIEHLER: I just want to back up, just a little, because you worked briefly at Alcoa, before the war.

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: How long—how many months did you work for Alcoa?

TOWLE: Little over a year.

PIEHLER: Little over a year?

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: And, what department did you work in at Alcoa?

TOWLE: I started up—you know the north plant?

PIEHLER: I've only driven on the outside of it.

TOWLE: Well, this first plant, and you can just barely see it from the highway, on your left as you go in. Out there where all those car dealers are, you know. It's over on the left out there. I started out in the west plant. And, they built the north plant. And at the west plant, Annealing Furnaces, they make these big coils of aluminum.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

TOWLE: And they had these Annealing furnaces, that they put these coils on a tray and put 'em in a big furnace. And those furnaces over there, they used electricity. And, the north plant, they wanted to switch to gas. So, I was made a supervisor 'fore I left over the west plant. They moved me to the north plant to open up that, and you had to run tests to get the temperature just right. And you had to open the doors just so much and all that kinda stuff. And they had to try it out before they could get it just right, before they could run these. And they'd bring these coils out and then send to the rolling mill. The rolling mill was a mile long, the longest rolling mill in

the world. But, we'd try and try and try, and this fellow that was over it—Mr. Walton, was over that—we ... was runnin' three shifts. But, he come in and one day and he asked me, he said, "John, can you add?" And I said, "Why, sure, I can add." He said, "Boy, they's a lot of these supervisors can't." (Laughter) I said, "What are you wantin'?" He said, "Take these figures home tonight and add 'em up for me." I don't know what he's after, but, anyway, I took 'em home and added them up. Took 'em back and give 'em to him. The next day I come in, he said, "By, golly!" He said, "You *can* add, can't you?" (Laughter) I said, "Well, yeah, I can add!" But that's one reason that I was supposed to get shift supervisor, if I'd been married. He recommended me for it.

PIEHLER: Because you could add.

TOWLE: Yeah. Plus the fact that you open little ole doors on it, where they cool those furnaces. And, one night, I forgot—they'd told me at a certain time. Oh, he was particular as he could be. And I said, "Oh, Lord!" But I put it down, just exactly what I done. And I told him what I'd done. He come in the next day, he said, "That's exactly what we want."

PIEHLER: That you were honest about it?

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: You had made a mistake but you didn't try to ...

TOWLE: Yeah, I didn't try to hide it. That's exactly what they wanted to get those, that gas furnace to working.

PIEHLER: Now, you were working at Alcoa after Pearl Harbor, because you enlisted in ...

TOWLE: Me and Morton Lee was going out Broadway when Roosevelt announced we was in war. Yeah, I was working at Alcoa.

PIEHLER: So you had gotten the job at Alcoa before the war?

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah.

PIEHLER: And you could have probably stayed at Alcoa with a deferment?

TOWLE: Oh, I could have, yeah.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

TOWLE: Oh, they give me down the road.

PIEHLER: Well, they weren't pleased when you finally decided to enlist.

TOWLE: No. Uh uh.

PIEHLER: And, I have a feeling they may have regretted that you—they'd pushed you too much on marriage. (Laughter)

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Who'd worked at Alcoa, in '41, '42, early '42? And did any women—how many women worked there?

TOWLE: Very few.

PIEHLER: Even after Pearl Harbor?

TOWLE: It's too hard of work. Most of it was pretty hard work. There's a lot of heat involved and a lot of oil. They had a four-high mill over there that they run, and this guy that run it—fellow by the name of White—that oil, it would just splatter everywhere and he'd broke out all over his face and on his body. But, they paid him well for it, but ... it was hard work. In fact, when I first went over there, why, this old man—everybody hated him—he was over hiring and giving promotions and everything. I can't think of his name now. But, he sent me down to where they bailed up scrap and stuff. And you had to lift these big heavy things. And I hadn't been there about two months.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

TOWLE: And I went and told him, I said, "If this is all you got for me," I said, "I'll just go back and work on the farm." I said, "I don't have to work over here." "Boy," he said, "Just stick it out about another week." Said, "We got something in mind for you." And I said, "Alright, I'll stay another week." So, they gave a test for supervisors. I'd been working with an old man that was over there for thirty years, I guess. And I told him I was gonna take that test and he said, "Why, you can't pass that." He said, "I've took that thing a dozen times." He said, "I can't pass it." I said, "I'm gonna take it." I said, "If I flunk it, I'll know what to do next time." So, the night before me and Morton Lee went out and stayed pretty late, (Laughter) and I was late for the test. And I went in, the guy said, "You're late." Said, "There's no need you taking that test." Said, "You can't finish it." I said, "Let me take it." I said, "I want to see what it's like." He said, "Alright." Said, "You can't finish it, I don't think." So, I went back and took it. I was the first one turned my paper in. (Laughter) He said, "Boy, you must not have filled out half of that." I said, "Yeah, I did, too." So, I passed and that's how I got my promotion. (Laughter) But it was heavy work. In fact, those coils, when you bring 'em out—that was when I was handling 'em—we'd get a break and work the midnight shift, why, it'd get pretty cool in there, I'd get over next to those warm coils, early in the morning, you know, and keep warm. One morning, why, I was next to them heavy, hot coils and I peed on myself. (Laughter)

TAYLOR: Well, were you commuting from Bearden to Alcoa every day?

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah. I rode a bus some and then we bought a car and we'd—but he, Morton Lee, was on a different shift, sometimes, and they's a bus come out at Lenoir City and I rode it. Back then, every day, there was at least one wreck on Alcoa Highway.

PIEHLER: Even then?

TOWLE: Yeah. At least one wreck.

PIEHLER: Where did most people at Alcoa—where were they from, and did ...

TOWLE: People?

PIEHLER: Yeah, where did most of the workers ...

TOWLE: Lot of 'em's from Blount County.

PIEHLER: Blount County.

TOWLE: And that was in their contract, when they moved here, that they had to hire Blount County people. And it got so big that they couldn't get people. And they got permission to hire people from Knoxville. Or from Knox County and surrounding counties, even. But, at one time, all those little ole farmers, they worked at Alcoa. And that's one of the richest banks, over there, that there is in the country. Most farmers, a lot of those farmers are rich. They worked over there and they worked on the farm, too, you know.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm. So, they were mainly people from East Tennessee ... when you were working at Alcoa. There weren't any immigrant workers?

TOWLE: No, no, no, no.

PIEHLER: Was there any union activity at Alcoa, during the war?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. But I never did—I never have belonged to a union.

PIEHLER: Never joined the union? But there was some efforts to organize?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. That was a mean union, at one time. In fact, they had some killings over there, at one time.

PIEHLER: While you were working over there?

TOWLE: No. Uh uh. No. I wouldn't belong to a union.

PIEHLER: You were living in Bearden, in Knoxville, during the—almost the first year of the war. How did the war change Knoxville while you were living here? Do you remember, for example, any Civil Defense drills?

TOWLE: We didn't have any such thing, drills of any kind, that I know of. Not at all.

TAYLOR: Did people still drive at night, things like that?

TOWLE: Huh?

TAYLOR: Did people drive at night? Or was there blackout conditions?

TOWLE: No, no, no. There wasn't any young men in Bearden. Very few cars. Way back then, back when I was growing up, there wasn't one or two families that had cars.

PIEHLER: And where was the nearest telephone?

TOWLE: Well, we finally got one. You was on a party line, 'bout four or five people. (Laughter) But, I don't remember what year.

PIEHLER: But, you were old enough to remember getting a telephone?

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: How did your family farm do, with the war on? Because, I've always read there was, particularly, shortages of meat later on in the war. Did your father make more money during the war?

TOWLE: I don't know what he done. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: Yeah, you're not ...

TOWLE: No, he—when I went, he wasn't doing much. He had some walkin' horses and he stood a walking stallion, stud farm. But, he didn't—I guess he had enough money back then. 'Course, it didn't cost as much to live and everything, you know. And he had—my youngest brother was there. But he had these three horses. Raised one, and Mr. McAmis—he worked over at UT, and his mare had a colt. The mare died, and Mr. McAmis—he lived over on Westmoreland—he was gonna kill—he was gonna do away with that colt. Daddy told him, said, "I'll take it." And Daddy raised it on a bottle. And he named it after his wife, Mary. Mary was its name. And he had two or three more horses, walkin' horses. When I got shot down and come back to England, why, the Red Cross made me call home. When Daddy answered the phone, I told 'em I wanted to buy his horses. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: That's what your daddy wanted to talk to you about, his horses?

TOWLE: Yeah. I said, "I wanna buy them horses." And he talked on a while. I said, "Daddy, this is John." He said, "Ah, it's not John." Said, "He's shot down." He hollered and said, "Mary, come here!" Said, "This feller says he's John." She come to the phone, and I talked to her. She said, "Why, Will," she said, "that's John." (Laughs) The night I went to the service, I

never said anything to Mom and Daddy about it. I got up—oh, it was about six o'clock. It was in September. I didn't get up; I got ready to go catch the train. Daddy and Momma had got in bed and I went in and told 'em goodbye. Said, "Where are you goin'?" I Said, "I'm going to the Air Force." That was the first time I'd told 'em.

PIEHLER: What was their reaction?

TOWLE: I don't know. I left. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: So, they didn't go down to the station with you, then?

TOWLE: No, no. They didn't have no way to go. I had to go to the car line to catch the bus. My daddy, back when T models come out, my daddy bought one. And it was over at Scenic Drive, and they brought it home. It was down a dirt road, I guess, to the house. He got down to the house and started stopping. He started hollering, "Whoa! Whoa!" at that thing, and he hit a tree. And to this day, he's never bought another car. And he sold that car to his wife's brother, and he drove to Texas, to the oilfields. But Daddy never owned a car after that.

PIEHLER: And your father lived ... until 1975, December of 1975. So, he never drove a car ...

TOWLE: Uh uh. No. Never drove one.

PIEHLER: What about your mother, did she ever drive?

TOWLE: No, no. Uh uh.

PIEHLER: And did they live the rest of their lives out in Bearden? Or did they ...

TOWLE: Just about. Yeah. Oh, yeah. They did, yeah.

PIEHLER: So, it sounds like they could walk to almost everything, or take the line.

TOWLE: Oh, yeah.

PIEHLER: ... You mention catching the train. Where were you actually inducted, into the Air Force?

TOWLE: Where?

PIEHLER: Yeah, where did you ...

TOWLE: Down at—not Tullahoma. What's this place down in Georgia? Fort Oglethorpe.

PIEHLER: Fort Oglethorpe. Okay.

TOWLE: That's where I was at.

PIEHLER: That's where you were actually sworn in.

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: What do you remember about your first few days in the Army?

TOWLE: Well, I was on the move. They was moving so fast, they was trying to build up the Air Force fast. But, you moved all the time. I left there and went to St. Petersburg, Florida. And we stayed down there not very long. While I was there, we was in a hotel. And they had a bunch of these wops from up in Brooklyn. They had great big, bushy black hair, you know. And they had a whole trainload of them dudes come in down there. And the sergeant told us, "Towle," he said, "take 'em upstairs." They had a barbershop. "Take 'em upstairs there and get 'em a haircut." He said, "You know what to do." And I said, "Yeah." I took 'em up there, and you never seen such a sad bunch of guys in your life. They come back and they was cryin'. (Laughter) They cut all that hair off. They just run the clippers over the thing. But from there, I went to, down to Biloxi, Mississippi, and stayed twelve weeks, and from there I went to California, stayed four or five weeks. And I went to Seattle and come back, and I went down to somewhere in Louisiana. We had to have training over water.... And went down there and stayed a week and come back and went to Camp Shanks and went overseas.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, because you had actually trained as a mechanic.

TOWLE: Well, I'd been to school.

PIEHLER: Yeah, yeah.

TOWLE: And I knew, you know, quite a bit about it. But, back then, we had to—on P-40s and P-39s, you had to ... be able to adjust machine guns to fire through the propeller, back then.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

TOWLE: You had to know all that stuff. And the carburetor on the B-17, it was fantastic. Very few people could work on 'em. And they'd teach you. They's hundred and ten miles of wiring in a B-17. Hundred and ten miles of wire.

PIEHLER: Which is a lot.

TOWLE: Yeah. (Laughs) Lord, there's no telling what's in 'em, now.

PIEHLER: Oh, yes. No, its ...

TOWLE: I mean, you get in these commercial planes, look at that instrument panel. Lord, they got thirty or forty times more instruments than we had. Pitiful.

PIEHLER: And you're training on how to repair, you're schooling for engine repair. What school? Was that in Biloxi?

TOWLE: Yeah, it's Biloxi, yeah. Keesler Field.

PIEHLER: So, it was Keesler Field that you learned—and you mentioned earlier that you were talked into becoming a gunner.

TOWLE: Yeah. Well, I was—see, the flight engineer, which I was, he's over all the plane. Mechanics on a plane. The pilot's over flying the plane. If there's anything wrong with it, I'd tell the pilot, he'd turn around and go back. But the flight engineer has the top turret gun.... I had to be able to take the plane off and I had to be able to land the plane. In fact, my pilot told me, said, "You're a better flyer than my co-pilot." (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Where did you learn how to take off and land the plane?

TOWLE: My pilot taught me.

PIEHLER: Now that's not regulation.

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, if they got shot, why, you had to be able to bring that plane back. Yeah, I'd fly that dude.

TAYLOR: Well, did you have instruments that you monitored?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah.

TAYLOR: While you were the flight engineer?

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah. You watched all that.

TAYLOR: Like the oil pressure and things?

TOWLE: Engine got hot, why, if you didn't feather it, why—if you didn't feather that engine, it'd get spinnin' so fast and it'd come off and was liable to come right through the cockpit, the blades on it. Yeah, it was a pretty good job.

TAYLOR: You also said, in your questionnaire, that you saw Rosemary Clooney when you were in Mississippi.

TOWLE: Yeah. Yeah, down in Mississippi.

TAYLOR: And you also danced in California with Betty Grable and Lena Horne?

TOWLE: Yeah, and Barbara Stanwyck.

TAYLOR: Did you see any other celebrities?

TOWLE: Yeah. Do you remember the “Little Rascals?”

PIEHLER: Oh, yes.

TOWLE: They invited us down to their studio. We went down there, and had a big time with them. And they told me, said, “When you get out of the Army,” said, “you come back out here,” said, “we’ll make a movie star out of you.” (Laughter) I had a good time in California.

PIEHLER: Well, what were you learning in California? Was that gunnery school?

TOWLE: No, no. I went over—Utah is where I went to gunnery school.

PIEHLER: Gunnery school was Utah. What were you learning in California, or why were you in ...

TOWLE: Oh, from B-24 school went to B-17 school.

PIEHLER: So, it was B-17 school.

TOWLE: Yeah. It was in Burbank, California.

PIEHLER: Oh, that is right next to Hollywood.

TOWLE: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

PIEHLER: You must have enjoyed that a lot.

TOWLE: I tell you what: you could be going down the street, hitch-hikin’ a ride, and people—girls—would turn around and take you anywhere you wanted to go. They’d take—when we first got to California, there’s two boys from Mississippi—we was going into town—and these three girls—they was going the other way—and they turned around and picked us up and wanted to know where we was going. We told ‘em, “We’re just goin’ into town.” They took us into town. And we went in and they had some drinks and whatnot. Started out, this girl, they left two or three dollars tip on the table. I let them get on out and I turned around and got that tip, put it in my pocket. (Laughter) But those girls—we drove to the Palladium, when I danced with Betty Grable. Jesse James—I’m sorry, (Laughs) Harry James was supposed to play there, and he was married to Betty, at that time, and she’d come there to catch up with him. He’d been out of town. You’d line up—oh, it’d be half a mile of people lined up to get in. And those girls would come up and get soldiers and they’d pay their way in. You’d go in there and dance with them. And you could—you might want to delete that, but you could ...

(Tape paused)

PIEHLER: (Laughter) So, you had a lot of good female company in California?

TOWLE: Oh, Lord. You could do anything you wanted to do.

PIEHLER: Which sounds like it was very different from home.

TOWLE: Oh, Lord. It was—see, out there, all those girls worked in the factories. And, the place was open all day, all night. See, they had shifts going, and it was all going on all the time.

PIEHLER: Were you ever, at all, tempted to go back? You mentioned one of them, the “Little Rascals,” some of them said, “Well, come back, we’ll make you a star.” (Laughter) Were you tempted at all to go to California after the war?

TOWLE: Well, I’ve been back out there. My sister lives out there.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm. But, you didn’t think, when you got out of the service, “Maybe I’ll go to California?”

TOWLE: No. Never even thought about it. Never thought about it. No, see, when I come back, from overseas, they was a bunch of us, coming back at that time, that they didn’t know what to do with us. So, they sent us people who’d been overseas, sent us to Amarillo, Texas. Sent us back to a B-17 school. And we had to go twelve weeks, back to B-17 school. And, it so happened that there was a general [who] was over the base.... We was going to that school, and there we knew a B-17 inside and out. We went up and got permission to talk to the guy at the head, and we told him, said, “General, we know all about B-17s.” We told him our story and he said, “I’ll tell you what you can do.” He said, “Any of you boys that want a job here on this base, you can have it.” Said, “You just name it.” Said, “We’ll send some of these guys been out here four or five years, and hadn’t been overseas, we’ll send them over there.” And one guy spoke up and said, “How about being your driver?” He said, “Be here, in the morning, at seven o’clock.” (Laughter) But ... I said, “What about this school, General?” He said, “Well, we haven’t got any place to put you.” He said, “They don’t know what to do with you.” And he said, “How about going—go to each week.” Said, “Take the test for that week, and if you pass go take [the test] for next week.” We said, “Well, we’d do that.” So, we went, that first day, I took five tests and passed ‘em all. (Laughter) That was five weeks. Got up to where they’d teach you to use a parachute. I told the woman, I said, “Lady, you can’t tell me a thing about how to use a parachute.” I said, “I’ve used one myself.” I said, “There’s no way.” She said, “You get up here and teach the class.” So, I got up there and taught the class on it. And in three days, we was out of that twelve weeks. (Laughter) The general heard about it, and he said, “How ‘bout going to that last week to get acquainted with the B-17?” Said, “Stay in there a week.” (Laughs) Said, “Okay, we’ll do it.” So, we went up and stayed in that class for a week, to get acquainted with the B-17. (Laughter)

And we’d volunteer to go different places. So, I volunteered—they was wanting people, engineers, to go on planes to go over and bring back injured soldiers from the islands. I had to volunteer for that, ‘cause I couldn’t go out of the United States anymore, without volunteering. So, I volunteered to go do that, ‘cause I’d like to see those islands, you know. And they wouldn’t let me. So, they sent me back to California to go to—they built a new plane out of the

A-20, and they had modified it and made it a lot faster. Had a lot more artillery on it and whatnot. I went to school on that for about four weeks.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

TOWLE: Then, went to Sacramento. We called it “Shack-ramento.” (Laughs) Went up there, that’s where they sent all, we got all the planes ready to go overseas, to the Hawaiian islands. We had a little old boy [who] caught on UT’s baseball team. He was from Sacramento. I was kiddin’ him, I said, “You live in Shack-ramento?” He said, “Why you call it Shack-ramento?” (Laughs) I said, “Hell, if you don’t know, I ain’t gonna tell you.” (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Why did you call it “Shack-ramento?”

TOWLE: You’d shack up with them girls! (Laughter)

TAYLOR: You talked earlier about finally getting together with your specific bomber crew in—where was it, Nebraska or Kansas?

TOWLE: No, it was in Harvard, Nebraska.

TAYLOR: Okay. And so you stayed with them ...

TOWLE: I stayed with them ‘til I got shot down.

TAYLOR: Okay.

TOWLE: Yeah. Yeah. We got together at Harvard, Nebraska and went to Camp Shanks. And our CO of the group, he took our plane away from us, to fly overseas in. We had to ride that dang boat. (Laughter)

TAYLOR: How long a trip was that?

TOWLE: The boat?

TAYLOR: On the boat. Yes, sir.

TOWLE: It wasn’t about four days, I believe. It wasn’t long. That thing’d fly.

PIEHLER: Were you in a convoy?

TOWLE: No, no.

PIEHLER: No, you were in ...

TOWLE: Queen Elizabeth, it could outrun most of the ships. It could do thirty knots, and submarines couldn’t do but twenty. We took off from New York and we kept seeing shoreline,

you know, the shoreline. Somebody asked why. They said they'd got word there's a submarine out there. So, they went down there and said, "If we can get around, in front of 'em, we can out run 'em." And I was sure glad of that. Well, I'd hate to see 40,000 people out in that ocean try to get a ride. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Could you talk a little bit about your crew? Who they were, where were they from.

TOWLE: I had a—well, I had two, I had the navigator, he was from California. I had a tail gunner who's from California. Both of them crazy as a loon. I had—my pilot was from Colorado. My copilot was from Texas. And my bombardier was from New York. I was from Knoxville. My radio gunner was from Rhode Island. And my two waist gunners was from Ohio. And that just about covers it.

PIEHLER: You mentioned the navigator was as crazy as a loon.

TOWLE: Oh, he was funny. Chotas was his name. We'd got overseas—the guy, he couldn't find his way home. Radioman would have to get us back home. Why, in fact, you remember Glenn Miller's story?

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

TOWLE: Well, we had just got overseas when he was missing. And we went out on the North Sea, lookin' for him. We'd get right down on the water. They thought maybe he was in the ocean. We got so close to the French shore that the Germans shot at us. And we got credit for a mission on it. (Laughter) But we looked for Glenn Miller ...

PIEHLER: And couldn't find him.

TOWLE: No, no.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

TOWLE: No, no. I think the Germans killed him.

TAYLOR: Well, I was reading, on the Internet, about bombers and whatnot. Did you all name your bomber?

TOWLE: Yeah.

TAYLOR: What was its name?

TOWLE: Ding's Dilemma.

TAYLOR: Dean?

TOWLE: Ding. D-I-N-G.

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

PIEHLER: This continues an interview with John Towle on March 20, 2002 in Knoxville, Tennessee with Kurt Piehler and...

TAYLOR: Michael Taylor.

PIEHLER: And, we were just asking you about the name of your ship. And I'll let ...

TOWLE: Yeah, Ding's Dilemma.

TAYLOR: Ding's Dilemma.

TOWLE: Yeah. I don't know who named it. I think ... the bombardier did. In fact, all of my pilots are dead. Both pilots are dead, the bombardier's dead, and I don't know about Chotas. But anyway, I correspond with my bombardier's wife. She lives in Florida now. In fact, this past summer, she come up to see me. She come up with her family, her children, and up to Gatlinburg and spent a week. And she come over and spent four or five hours with me.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

TOWLE: But I think ... the bombardier's the one that named the ship. I'm not sure.

TAYLOR: What were some other names that you can remember? Other planes?

TOWLE: Oh, they had every kinda name in the world. (Laughs) Memphis Belle, you know, made such a good name. And they's all kinda names. You didn't pay much attention to that stuff. In fact, when we first got to England, they sent us over to Ipswich, over on the coast. And they had guys that'd finished their twenty-five missions and they'd tell you—trying to tell you how the German fighters acted and so forth. You know, just what you do in combat. I asked this engineer, flight engineer, I said—top gunner had what I'd call a belly band, this little ole strap about that wide that come down under, and you could sit down on it, instead of standing up when you was using your gun. I asked him, I said, "Don't that thing get uncomfortable?" We'd be out seven and eight hours a lot of the time. He laughed. He said, "Don't worry about that." (Laughter) He said, "You'll never use that thing." I said, "Why?" He said, "You'll find out when you get in combat." And I found out, right quick. I tell you, you get up there and you're flying along, about an hour and a half, two hours before you get there, and where you're going, you see all this flak out there that you're gonna have to fly through.

TAYLOR: Well, how soon after you got to England were you actually on, flying on a mission?

TOWLE: Oh, it was about, I guess, three weeks. Something like that.

TAYLOR: Do you remember what your first mission was?

TOWLE: Yeah. It was over Frankfurt, Germany. We bombed Frankfurt, Germany three times. Blowed it off the map. They talk about killing a few civilians now, but, Lord, you should have seen England. London. That V-2—V-1, V-2 bomb and them dive bombers. Boy, it was pitiful. Down in the subways, down where you catch the subway, that ramp was—it was wider from here, I guess from here to that wall over on the outside there. And at night, that thing was filled with people, sleeping. They'd been bombed out of the house, or sleeping down there because they was afraid. It was pitiful. I don't see how they took it. I don't think the United States could stand it, I don't believe they could.

When I come back, the hotel I stayed in, half of it's blown away. It was terrible. People that wasn't over there in that, they don't know nothin' about what war's about. Nothing. And they talk about that thing up here, which is bad, I know. But, over in England and Germany—shooo! Lord'a'mercy! When you take 1,200 B-17s, with 1,200 500-pound bombs on each plane, and drop it over a town—and I doubt if you've ever seen a crater it makes, but you can bury two or three cars in it. War is hell, I'll tell you.

PIEHLER: You mentioned being in London and staying, for example, in a hotel where half of it had been bombed out. Any close calls where you've been the target of bombs or V-2s or V-1s?

TOWLE: No—well, I take that back. When I got back—we was stationed quite a ways out of London—but when, I got back from France, after being shot down, I'd been in London for two or three weeks, they said, “Just tell us when you want to go back, why, you can go back.” So, I went up to get a haircut. And I was sittin' in the barbershop and there was two or three barbers in there, and they had a whole bunch of people. One of the barbers said, “Did you hear that V-2 come over last night?” Said, “It was just up a block or two here.” Said, “It blowed the whole block away.” I said, “Is that right up here?” He said, “Yeah.” And I was staying right down here. I went back and I told the guys staying there in that hotel, I said, “I'm going home.” (Laughter) I said, “I've had enough of this.”

PIEHLER: So ... a block away?

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Which isn't ...

TOWLE: I mean, just ...

PIEHLER: It's close, yeah. Yeah, that's pretty close. Not close enough that—you could still ...

TOWLE: Close enough for me!

TAYLOR: Yeah! (Laughs)

TOWLE: See, where I was staying, in the house I was staying in, I could stand—go up in the attic—and they had tile roofs. And I'd slide them tile roofs back and I could see three of those launching pads, where I was stayin'. You could hear 'em taking off.

TAYLOR: But, when you were first sent over to England, you stayed in Rattlesden, is that correct?

TOWLE: Yeah, Rattlesden, yeah.

TAYLOR: I got a map of the base, off the Internet.

TOWLE: What, of Rattlesden?

TAYLOR: Mm hmm. Of the airbase.

TOWLE: Lord have mercy.

TAYLOR: Uh, where were your living quarters? I noticed they had listed different communal sites and living sites on the map.

TOWLE: Is this a map of that area, sure enough?

TAYLOR: Yes sir. I guess, I take it those are the airfields, and then over here are all the living areas?

TOWLE: Yeah. You got any more of these? Get me one of them.

PIEHLER: We can definitely make you a copy, yes.

TAYLOR: I've got the schematics for the different areas, as well. Like the living sites, and what not.

TOWLE: You lived in little old Quonset huts. Like that. They had a big pot bellied stove in there, you had to use coal or wood. And, Lord, when we got there, that first morning, we liked to froze to death. In fact, me and my radio gunner pulled our bunks together. We had those—we had our overcoats on, and they was warm. But we pulled our bunks together and threw our coats over both of us. 'Cause they didn't have any coal or nothing in that dern stove. In fact, we go down and cut down wood, trees, and burn them. State'd get on us about it. You know they got every tree in England numbered? They have! And the United States had to pay'em for them trees we cut down.

PIEHLER: To stay warm.

TOWLE: Yeah. And ... farmers—they was farms all around there. And they'd store turnips and stuff in these mounds. We'd go in there and dig in them turnips, get them turnips. (Laughs) And eat'em. But, I'll tell you, that fog. Fog. One morning, well I think it was about the first morning, we was going to chow and walked across there and it was foggy. And we walked right into a little old pond you couldn't see. (Laughter) It's pitiful. A lot of times, we'd be going on a mission and you'd get over the English Channel, about in France, and they'd call you back.

PIEHLER: 'Cause the weather ...

TOWLE: Yeah. Fog was moving in and, hey, you'd have to go back. And then there you had all them bombs on. First, they started dropping them in the Channel. And then, later on, they was doing it so much, they made us land with them. You talk about holding your breath, now. (Laughs) You hold your breath—shoo!

TAYLOR: Well, what was a typical mission day like? I mean, when would you get up? How would you be briefed on the mission?

TOWLE: We'd get up about twelve o'clock in the morning.

TAYLOR: Twelve o'clock in the morning?

TOWLE: You'd go eat. If you was going on a mission, you got fresh eggs for breakfast. And you'd come back and you'd go to the briefing room. They'd tell you where you was—pull that big old map back and show you where you was going. How many fighters you was gonna encounter, how much flak you was gonna get into. Then you'd go down to—they had a dry room where [you] kept your equipment, your clothes and stuff. It was so damp over there, they had to keep it dry. And you'd go down there and stand in line to get that. If it was a rough mission, you'd see boys sittin' down there, just bawlin' like babies. Scared to death.

Then, you'd get your equipment and get it on and they'd ride you out to your ramp, these places—that's where you had your airplanes parked. Take you out there and I'd check the plane over mechanically and whatnot. Why, the waist gunner would check all the gun equipment and everything. And the pilots, the officers, had gone to the briefing to, you know, get directions and everything where they was going. And, when they come out, why, they'd check and see if everything was alright.

And we'd get on our plane and get ready. We'd start up all the engines and go out to the starting line, and we'd take off. A lot of times, these fields was so close together, you'd take off over other fields out there. It was just about as bad getting in formation as it was going on a mission. 'Cause they was coming up from everywhere, around there.

TAYLOR: Oh, so there were other airbases in the vicinity?

TOWLE: Oh, they was real close.

TAYLOR: And then when you came back from a mission, what all did you have to do? Did you have to recheck the plane, or was that left to the ground crews?

TOWLE: No, that was the ground crew's job. We got off there and got away.

TAYLOR: Did you have any sort of a debriefing, or ...

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. You went to debrief, yeah. You got—they give you a shot of whiskey. Or two shots, whatever you wanted. Within reason. (Laughter) Then they'd ask you what, you know, what you'd seen. In fact, I was the first person that saw a jet German fighter and reported it. They laughed at me. But they soon found out I was right.

PIEHLER: When did you see this jet? That must have been quite a ...

TOWLE: Oh, this one mission we went on. And, the dern thing come by and didn't have a propeller on it, you know. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: And what did you describe it as?

TOWLE: I just told it was a plane without a propeller. I didn't know ...

PIEHLER: You didn't know what it was?

TOWLE: No.

PIEHLER: And they said—what did they say to you when you said, “There's a plane with no propeller?”

TOWLE: They said, “There's no such thing!” But, two or three missions after that, somebody else reported it. They believed it, then.

PIEHLER: Well, what would be a typical day like, if you weren't on a mission?

TOWLE: What was what?

PIEHLER: What was a typical day like, if you weren't on a mission?

TOWLE: Well, there wasn't a lot to do on the base. We'd sit around and talk, and a lot of guys would play cards, or something like that. But, I never did play cards to amount to anything.

PIEHLER: They didn't create busy work for you to do?

TOWLE: No, no. No, you didn't do nothing. You didn't do anything.

PIEHLER: What about getting into town?

TOWLE: Well, you could—you had to, if you was going to London, you had to have reservations. And if you didn't have them, you couldn't go.... They'd take you to the train station, down to the station, and then you'd catch a train and go into London and stay a couple of days. In fact, I went down to London one time with my radio gunner. He was just a little old bitty—I just thought he was a Frenchman but I found out later he wasn't. But he was bashful, hadn't been around much, like the rest of us.

And we went down, we stayed in the same room. And, they come up the next day and was gonna check to see if we was gonna stay any longer. Knocked on the door. And we'd just got up. We had to wear long-handle underwear. And you couldn't take 'em off once we started flying in the wintertime. And we'd just got out of bed, really. And, a knock on the door. I said, "Come in." Here come a woman in. And old Manas Manasian, he run and dove under the bed. (Laughter) I kid him about it. I've talked to him since then.

PIEHLER: So he's still alive?

TOWLE: Yeah. Yeah, he's still alive. He lives up in Massachusetts, now. He was from Rhode Island, but he went to Massachusetts. And he built some kind of engines, I don't know. He's retired now, though. I didn't know he'd been shot, I didn't know it. He got his leg shot. He stayed in the hospital in Lyons, France for, oh, four or five months. But he's alright, now. But he—he wasn't really, he didn't know it, but we wasn't about twenty-five miles apart, when he was in that hospital. I was in Hericourt, France.

TAYLOR: Well, how many days were there typically between missions that you would fly? Or did that just depend?

TOWLE: It just depends. You might fly everyday, if you come back. (Laughs) You know what the average life was back then, during combat? Two minutes. Once we bombed a ball bearing plant in Schweinfurt, Germany. A hundred B-17s got shot down.

PIEHLER: When were you aware how dangerous some of these missions could be?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah! They'd tell you how it was!

PIEHLER: So, they were very honest with you about ...

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah.

PIEHLER: Yeah. You didn't have to find this out after a mission?

TOWLE: No, uh uh. No, they had it pretty well estimated.

PIEHLER: Besides the time you got shot down, what was closest call, in combat?

TOWLE: Well, they got—I think—you see, we'd go out on missions. They have a lead navigator for the whole group. And, on a smaller mission, like when we flew in France, to hit these fine bomb sites, just a squadron would go. They found out—or, they figured that a lot of times the navigator, they'd see all this flak and they'd steer'em around it and drop their bombs, [and] it wouldn't do any good. So, they got onto 'em about it. But they had orders never to fly over Paris. That they had a Frenchman down there that had joined the Germans and they'd give him a thousand dollars every time he shot down an airplane. He was good with that anti-aircraft.

So, we went on this—well, it was after we was supposed to bomb that ball bearing place again in Schweinfurt, and they heard somebody call from London, said it was on the street that we was gonna bomb it the next day. And they called it off. So, about twelve o'clock that day, they called us out to go bomb one of those flying bomb sites. We had all the wing tanks and everything full of gas. So, we go over to bomb that place, and we get hit. If we hadn't had all that gas onboard those wing tips and everything, the plane would have probably exploded up when it got hit. But the gas burning, to start with, give it—we went into a dive, steep dive. And I tell you, when you do that, you can't move. You cannot move.

That turret I was on, its got two bars coming down each side. And we took our GI shoes with us, in case we had to walk across the Pyrenees Mountains. And I had mine setting here, and I couldn't wear my parachute, while I was in flight, and while I was shooting my gun. And, we went into that dive and I tried to get into my shoes and my parachute, and I couldn't. And the pilot finally pulled it out and I got them. Got my parachute and got it on—I had a chest type—and got my shoes.

We was supposed to dive out the bomb bay, two pilots and myself was supposed to got out the bomb bay. And I opened the door to go out, and there's a bomb still in there. The bombardier is supposed to jettison, and he hadn't jettisoned them. So I had a release, right inside the door, and I pulled it and let'em go. And about that time, my copilot, he run over me, gettin' out. Usually the pilot [would] tell you to bail out, but when I stooped down to get my shoes and parachute, why, I'd pulled my earphones off and I didn't hear it. But I knew to bail out 'cause the left wing was burning mighty bad. Going into that dive, I knew we had had it. So, I bailed out.

And they told us in class, in parachuting out, said, "You wait till you can see a barn or a house real clear, before you pull your chute." Said, "They'll still be shooting up there and they may hit you with that flak." And so that's what I done. The rest of my crew, they pulled their chute just as soon as they got out. And that's the reason they all got caught.

PIEHLER: So, they all got caught.

TOWLE: Yeah, they all spent a year and three months in prison.

PIEHLER: You're the only one from that original crew that made it?

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah.

PIEHLER: And that's because you did actually follow your training.

TOWLE: Yeah. I spent six months, with three good lookin' French girls. (Laughter) They spent a year and three months in a dern prison camp.

TAYLOR: Well, how soon after you had started flying did you all end up getting shot down?

TOWLE: It was on the nineteenth mission.

TAYLOR: Nineteenth mission.

PIEHLER: So, you had had a lot of missions under your belt.

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: And you hadn't had any close calls on those other nineteen?

TOWLE: Yeah, but as I was telling you about them navigators not bombing their targets, why, we went on this mission to bomb. We'd bomb over France, at that time, at 10,000 feet. That was to protect people in France. So, we went in to bomb this airfield, and we couldn't see it. So, we couldn't bomb it. So, the guy, the head man—he's a captain—and he said, "I want to bomb somewhere." So, he took us right over Paris.

And, buddy, have you seen these fireworks, down here on the bridge? There was flak just like that. I mean, boy, just all around your plane. And a plane right in our waist window, over here, was flying along, and right where the top turret is on the plane, on the right hand side is where all the oxygen tanks are. They was flak hit that plane over there, right—must have hit that oxygen. And, boy, it just—phew—like that. Nothing left of it. And, but, I mean, they was flying—their wing was in our waist window, nearly. And I told my pilot, I said, "If you ever fly over a place like that, when you're told not to," I said, "I'm bailing out." I said, "I'm not going to fly over that place."

PIEHLER: And this wasn't the alternative target?

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Paris was the alternative target, or ...

TOWLE: No. No, it was before we got to it. You know Orly airbase?

PIEHLER: Yeah.

TOWLE: Well, that's where we bombed.

PIEHLER: And that wasn't either the primary or the secondary target?

TOWLE: No.

PIEHLER: This was just ...

TOWLE: Our secondary.

PIEHLER: Oh, it was your secondary?

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, and I went back to France in 1979 and landed at Orly. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: What was—how strict was discipline on your base in England?

TOWLE: Really, you didn't have any, and you did have [it]. You knew not to foul up.

PIEHLER: But, how often would you salute?

TOWLE: None.

PIEHLER: What about uniform? How rigid were they on uniform?

TOWLE: You can wear anything you wanted. Course, all you had was your Army stuff. But, you didn't have to wear a tie or anything.

PIEHLER: They didn't care if your boots were shined?

TOWLE: Nah. Lord, no! They just wanted you to go on the mission.

PIEHLER: How much fraternization would there be between enlisted and officers?

TOWLE: Nada. You didn't have a chance. I mean ...

PIEHLER: So, you wouldn't eat with your officers, would you?

TOWLE: No, not in the mess hall, you didn't. But, they was right next to us.

PIEHLER: But you wouldn't actually sit down in the same table with a ...

TOWLE: Well, I never even thought about it. I don't think they'd say anything about it. You were just a family. You was over there, you didn't know whether you'd live the next day or not.

PIEHLER: Now, would you ever go into—was there a nearby town where you would go into? For, say, the pub, or ...

TOWLE: Yeah, to Rattlesden, but it was—Lord, it wasn't much. Lord, back then, I tell you, they was way back in the dark ages.

PIEHLER: In what ways?

TOWLE: Well, you know, farmers they had two-wheel carts, they pulled everything with horses, and they just—just everything was just different. Backward.

PIEHLER: Because your farm, you had—I mean, you didn't have electricity to write. So it was even, by ...

TOWLE: Well, I'm talking about afterwards, you know, after from the time I got out of high school on up, we had a lot—a lot of things changed by the time I got out of high school to the time I went into the Air Force. I mean, a lot of people had ... cars, they had tractors.

PIEHLER: Whereas, in England where you were ...

TOWLE: Oh, no, they didn't know what tractor was. I mean, they might have had some hid somewhere, but I never seen ...

PIEHLER: Yeah, but where you ...

TOWLE: And France, the same way. It was the same way.

PIEHLER: How friendly were the English women?

TOWLE: Oh, Lord! Don't talk about that. (Laughter) You could—turn that thing off a minute.

(Tape paused)

PIEHLER: Well, after that good, off the record story I don't know where we should go next, but let me ask you a little about—you told us about being shot down and how—you made it out. I mean, you weren't captured, but it took you a while to get back. How did that work?

TOWLE: Well, when I bailed out, I come down right over a big—all in France, in these little old towns, they got—you heard of the hedgerows, I'm sure. Behind each house, their gardens are all hedgerowed in. And I come down, right over the back of their gardens, and there was a great big tall poplar tree and I had to raise my feet up to keep from getting hung up in that thing. And there was this big open field there, and across the way there was a lot of trees. And when I landed, why, I was looking around to see if there was any soldiers around. And I saw two coming down, back of that hedgerow. I unbuckled my chute—you're supposed to fold it up and hide it—but, they was coming, and I just left it for 'em. And I took off down that hedgerow.

And I had the Mae West on, and I had shoes, and I don't know what all. And, I thought if I didn't get through that hedgerow, them suckers might shoot me. I jumped through the hedgerow and kept running. And I didn't think it was very far, and I got down behind one of these houses and there was a girl standing out there. I run up to her and she said, "You American?" And I wanted to sound foreign, you know, and I said, "Ja! Ja!" and that's German "yes." She said, "Are you German?" and I said, "NO!" She said, "You're American, aren't you?" I said, "Yeah."

She grabbed my arm and run and took me in the house. Run upstairs, and an old man was up there and he opened up the floor. He had a little old place in there. Oh, it was about five foot long and about four foot wide. And he put me down in that thing, put the floor down and—it was tongue and groove floor, and he'd knocked the grooves off, the tongues off where he'd took it out. And I heard him sweeping, they swept dust back in those cracks. Then, after about an hour, why, here come the German soldiers searching the house. They walked right over top of

me. They left, couldn't find nothing. Two or three hours later, why, they started to open that up and brought me a glass of wine up there. And I drank that. And I looked up there, and there's the one of the prettiest little old girls you ever saw. (Laughter) She was a pretty thing.

TAYLOR: But, they could speak English?

TOWLE: No. One of 'em, the oldest girl, the one that took me in—they'd taken in two English soldiers. At the Battle of Dunkirk. And those two, they took two of them in and she'd learned a little English. But not much. But, they had a French and English dictionary that she'd use. But, about two hours after I'd been there, why, they opened it up and I come out, and they give me something to eat. And I stayed in that hole for over a week.

TAYLOR: Oh, because the Germans kept searching?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. An antiaircraft battalion was right up the street.

PIEHLER: And where in France—when were you shot down and where was it?

TOWLE: It's Northern France, in Hericourt, France.

PIEHLER: And when were you shot down, do you remember roughly?

TOWLE: The day before payday. February the 28th.

PIEHLER: 1944?

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: So, it was several months before D-Day?

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah. Oh, yeah. But, we thought—or I thought, and everybody at the base thought, that D-Day was coming in May. Because, they come around all the Air Force bases. We all had—all the bases had new ambulances. They come around just before May and got all those new ambulances, and took them down for the invasion. We thought it was gonna be right away.... The Underground, this family was connected with the Underground, and they asked me all the time, "When's the invasion? When's the invasion?" And I told them I thought it was in May. But I didn't know for sure.

But ... after I'd been there, oh, I guess a month, the English had a small plane that could haul two passengers. They'd fly over at night and pick up people who'd been shot down. And, I was supposed to go out the next day, and that night, they flew over and the Germans caught them. My feathers really fell, then. It wasn't long after that, why, Ms. Beuvry, the mother, told this oldest girl, said I was gonna have to leave. And they fixed me sandwiches and whatnot, and wanted me to leave, you know, up in the dark around two o'clock. And, just about an hour before I supposed to leave, why, Janine come in and said, "Mother changed her mind." Boy, I was one happy character.

PIEHLER: Because, where would you have gone?

TOWLE: (Laughter) I tell you, if you ever land out in a place you don't know where in the world you are, you don't know where you are. I knew I was in Northern France, but—see, to get across the Pyrenees Mountains, I'd had to go all the way to ...

PIEHLER: You'd have a huge ...

TOWLE: Southern France.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

TOWLE: Well, now, I don't know if you know it or not, I brought—my brother-in-law, he got shot down on his first mission, on a B-24. In Lille, France, and he made that trip all the way to Southern France, came across the Pyrenees Mountains into Spain, and that way. I brought—he wrote a book on it. And I brought it up here and the girl, over in your office I guess, she's supposed to have made a copy of it. I thought you all'd like to have that. He was one of the first ... to fly over France and Germany. But he got shot down over Lille, France. And he died about two or three years ago.

TAYLOR: Well, besides your boots, when you jumped out of the plane, did you ...

TOWLE: Oh, I had them shoes with me.

TAYLOR: Did you have any other things? Like, did you have a weapon? Did you have a compass? Did you have any things?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. I had—you get a—in your flight coveralls, you have a little pocket there on your knee. And, they give you—chocolate candy is in it. They give you a compass. They give you a little A-hole saw. And some crackers, I think. There's two or three things.... And I got hit. It didn't hit my leg, but it just went in behind that candy and stuff, packaged stuff. Went across. I didn't lose that, so, when I was there, the boy next door, who lived across the street, he was about my size. And he—they run a farm, that was why he wasn't in the army. His mother made light bread, in great big pans about that big around. And he'd steal some of that and bring it to me. I couldn't eat that bread. It was about two thirds sawdust. It was German made. That's all the French got. It'd make me sick. But, anyway, his mother got stung on her ring finger, with a yellow jacket, and he come over there and he was asking if they had anything they could get that off with. It'd swelled up so she couldn't get her ring off. And, they didn't have anything, and I told Janine, I said, "Hey, take this saw." And I said—do you know what an A-hole saw is?

TAYLOR: Is that the kind that has the two rings on the end?

TOWLE: (Laughs) No, it's an asshole saw. It's covered with rubber, the whole thing. That's so, if you get caught, before you get caught, you stick it up your butt. So you can saw your way

out of something. I said, “Take this and have him peel that off.” And I said, “She can saw that off.” And she did, and they got that ring off of her. But that old woman, she didn’t know where that light bread was going. And, after the English took over where I was staying, why, he took me over and said, “Now, Mama, here’s the guy’s been eating your light bread.” (Laughter) Ah, Lordy.

PIEHLER: So, how long were you with this family?

TOWLE: Six months.

PIEHLER: So you lived in, basically, in this trap door, underneath the floor?

TOWLE: Oh, no. After—they kept me in there—they kept searching, see? They knew they’s a man down. And, after that let up, why, they let me stay out. I’d stay up in that room most of the time. Sometimes, I’d stay ... downstairs. And, the road ... was almost—I’d say, they wasn’t five feet between the houses and the road, the other side of the road. And, coming down this a way, coming in the house, you’d come past a big picture window and come in a little hallway. And, come in there—I’d come down there and stay, and they had curtains over that picture window, where you could see out but you couldn’t see in. And we’d keep an eye on if anybody come down there. I had—when you come in that hallway, I had to go out and go upstairs, and get in my hiding place.

PIEHLER: So, you had a hiding place upstairs?

TOWLE: Yeah. So, one time—they’d get wine, in a little old keg. I don’t know how much it held. About that long and about that big around. They come once a month, from Paris, and deliver that wine. And, they slipped by that picture window, and we didn’t see it. But, when they come in, they come in and come in the door, there, and go right over here and go down stairs to the basement. So we didn’t have time to go out that door, there. And they was going down in the basement with it, and I didn’t have anywhere to go. So, the old woman, she was pretty hefty and she wore dresses down to her ankles, great big old flowered dress. Where you went in and went upstairs, where you went to go into the basement, where you went in there, you could back up under it, you know, kinda. So, she backed up under that and pulled her dress up and shoved me under it. Them two guys took that keg of wine downstairs. When they got down there, why, she got me out and I run upstairs. She was the only one there and we couldn’t say a word to each other. When her husband and daughters come in, and she told them about it, boy, they just died laughing. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: It must have been, at times, pretty boring. I mean, to be basically in ...

TOWLE: Well, you couldn’t talk.... I finally, you know, learned a few words, but ...

PIEHLER: What did you do to pass the time?

TOWLE: Nothing. Sit around.

PIEHLER: Sit around? I mean, I guess it was better than prison camp?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah.

PIEHLER: But, still ...

TOWLE: Only thing, you didn't have nothing to eat.

PIEHLER: Because you mentioned the bread and occasional wine.

TOWLE: Oh, Lord. Well, they had wine. Hell, they'd drink their wine. But ... they'd have—I can't eat fat meat. There's no way about it.

PIEHLER: So, did you lose a lot of weight?

TOWLE: No, I didn't. 'Cause I didn't do nothing. (Laughter) But, they come in one time, they had sow belly. Do you know what sow belly is?

PIEHLER: I've heard of it; I've never had it.

TOWLE: Well, it's the side of the hog that's nothing but fat. And you can't fry it; you have to boil it. And it sets on a plate and just shakes. (Laughter) But, they ... passed everything to me first. And I'd have to take it, you know. That's all you had to eat. And, Lord, I'd eat two or three slices of bread with a bite of that stuff. Shoo! One time, they come in there with a dang cow's tongue, about that long, to eat. Lord, I was raised on a farm. My grandmother used to eat cow's tongue but, Lord, I never could stand to eat one. One time, the old man—I don't know where he got it—but he got a great big piece of steak, about that big around. And he brought it in and he put it in a cabinet. And they had a cat, and that dang cat got that steak. (Laughter) That old man caught that cat, put a string around its neck and hung it on the clothesline, out there. Killed it. You never heard such goings on in your life. (Laughs) But, he killed that cat. One time, they had a hog—this is in May, I guess it was. And they was afraid the Germans would get—the soldiers, they didn't have nothing to eat—they'd get anything that you had: cows, hogs, anything. They'd get it from you. And they had this hog, and they killed it in May, and they didn't have anyplace to keep it. So, they ground it up in sausage and put it in great big crocks, about that high. And, I guess they put something over it. They started eating on it, and it had maggots all in it. And they took and got them maggots out, and we eat that sausage. That's all they had to eat.

PIEHLER: You were, then, in France when you heard about D-Day.

TOWLE: About what?

PIEHLER: D-Day. The invasion.

TOWLE: No, no. I was out. I got out.

PIEHLER: When did you get out and how did you get out?

TOWLE: Well, I got out in—let's see. I got out in six months from ...

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

PIEHLER: Because you mentioned being shot down in France in February of '44.

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: And so, it would be—how did you get out of France?

TOWLE: The English took over where I was staying.

PIEHLER: So, it was—was it September that you ...

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: So, September of 1944.

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah.

PIEHLER: And so, in June 6th, when did you learn that, you know, the British and Americans had landed?

TOWLE: It was about the time they landed.

PIEHLER: Yeah, 'cause you ...

TOWLE: They didn't have a radio. They didn't have phones. They didn't have nothing. But the grapevine, you wouldn't believe it.

PIEHLER: So, you heard pretty quickly, through the grapevine.

TOWLE: The grapevine. See, the Germans took up all the radios from French people. But, they hid one. That morning—I don't know where they had it hid. But in the room, early in the morning, somebody come to my room, and I looked up, and there's Janine. And she had a radio and she turned it on. And she said, "The invasion's taking place!" And she turned it on, it was BBC talking 'bout the invasion. But they heard it through the grapevine.

PIEHLER: And so, did you have expectations in June, "Oh, any minute now, I'll be able to go?" 'Cause you still had several more months.

TOWLE: Oh yeah. No, I didn't have too many more months. 'Cause it took ole—what's that ole English general? Montgomery? Took him forever to get up there. (Laughter) But he, when they got up there, I'd get up in the loft of the house, and I'd hear cannons being shot. And, the

old man that lived across the street, he was in World War I. And, he saw Janine bring me in the house. And, I was looking out the window up there, and he looked up there and saw me and he told us, said, "That's an American soldier you brought in here." She said, "Yeah, it is. If you tell anybody, I'll tell'em you helped me." (Laughter) But, anyway, the English, before they got there, why—one night at about midnight, somebody knocked on the door. They went to the door. There was two English officers. And they wanted to talk to Janine and she made'em show that they was English officers. And she come up and got me out of bed, and she said, "They want a place." It had been raining a lot. And said, "They want a place to rest their soldiers. Get'em out of the rain." She said, "They wanted to know if any of these farmers would let them use their barns." I told Janine, I said, "Janine, just go across the street and ask Fernand." I said, "If he can use their barn," I said, "it would be alright. Said they'd pay you for any damages done." So, they got'em a place to stay.

And the next day, why, the English got up there. And the road, the main road, was out about a quarter of a mile where I lived on this other road. And everybody in that town was out there, tanks and things going up that main road. People had every kind of something to eat and flowers. Give'em to soldiers. And the commander of that outfit, he said—he found out that I was American, he said, "You tell these people to go back and get in their houses and don't come out." He said—this was a tank battalion—he said, "We're going on through." Said, "We're supposed to be in Belgium tomorrow." And he said, "Tell them to get in the house and don't celebrate and don't do anything." Said, "The infantry will be in here this afternoon." Said, "If you don't," he said, "these Germans is liable to kill a bunch of you." So, I told Janine to tell them. And she told them, and they went. And the next morning—well, that afternoon late, the infantry got in. The next morning, why, I got with the commanding officer, and he asked me about things, and I got one of the Frenchmen to tell him all about it. And he told these two men, "Go do this," and "Go do that," and "Go do that." They went out and captured that antiaircraft outfit, and two or three other little ole places around there. And they brought some prisoners in, and one of them was a captain in the German Army. And this English lieutenant, he was the one in charge of that infantry outfit. And they was standing there talking, in a big circle about the size of this room, just four or five enlisted men with him, you know. And this German officer asked the English one for a cigarette, and he give him a cigarette. And this German officer reached in to get his lighter, I suppose, and he come out with a pistol and shot that lieutenant. Right there. And, buddy, I don't know how many bullets that German officer got. But he got a bunch of them.

PIEHLER: So you saw him do that?

TOWLE: I saw him do it. And out there, this road come this a way and we lived here, and this road continued on through, and right there in the corner of that place, that English lieutenant is buried right there. And his mother paid for a cross, to put right there, and it's right there today.

PIEHLER: You've been back?

TOWLE: Yeah. Yeah, I went back in '79.

PIEHLER: Do you remember his name?

TOWLE: No. Uh uh. No, I don't remember his name. But my sister, my sister and her husband—[she] married a preacher—went over there, ... about where I was staying. And there wasn't anybody living in the house where I stayed in, and they [my sister and her husband] didn't have any accommodation. The girl, ... the middle aged girl that got'em a place in St. Paul, about five miles away, got'em a place to stay in a hotel. And they stayed all night, and Bernadette went down to get'em the next morning, and Regina and Harry was downstairs, already up and ready to go. And Bernadette asked them, "Did you pay for your room?" And they said, "Yeah, we've already," said, "we're ready to go." She said, "You mean you paid for it?" "Yeah." She went over there and told that guy, said, "You give'em their money back." Said, "Her brother helped free France." Said, "You give'em their money back." And, they did. (Laughter) My daughter went over there. She went when she was a junior in high school. And they went on a trip and went to Austria and Italy, I think, two or three places. And I told—they was going to Paris—I told the guys in charge, one of the girls was living in Paris at that time, and I told'em, I said, "I wrote and told her she's coming, my daughter's coming." And I said, "You look after her." And I told the guys in charge of the thing, I said, "Now, I've told this woman." I said—I told'em the circumstances and I said, "Now, if she wants to take my daughter anywhere," I said, "You let her go." And, so she got Julia and took her up, and she slept in the same bed I did.

PIEHLER: So, that was probably very memorable for your daughter.

TOWLE: Oh, yeah.

PIEHLER: And saw where you had lived for several months.

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: So how long did you remain in the town, after the English finally had secured the area?

TOWLE: Not long. They come in there and they said—I believe it was about two or three days. Anyway, ... they wanted to take me to St. Paul, that's about five miles away, to see that town. And we walked up there, and old DeGaulle was over recruiting soldiers for his army. And I met him. And he said, "I'm going back over to England tonight." Said, "You go with me." I said, "Sir, I'm not going anywhere with you." He said, "We need you to fight." I said, "I've done my fighting." (Laughter) Said, "I'm not going nowhere with you." Oh, he got hot.

PIEHLER: And this was in French or English? This exchange?

TOWLE: Well, he could speak good English. I couldn't speak no French.

PIEHLER: So you were talking to him in English?

TOWLE: Yeah. Yeah.

PIEHLER: So, you didn't go back with DeGaulle?

TOWLE: Huh? No. (Laughter) I didn't go back, but they told me—we got back the day or day after that—they said they had a car going down to Paris, the next day or—I don't know exactly when, but they said, "We'll take you down there so you can get you a ride back into England." Said, "We'll fly you back over there." And we told'em, "Yeah." There'd been a guy, shot down about three months before that, in another village, and they said, "You get him and ... we'll take you' all down there." And we went over there in horse and wagons, picked him up and brought him back over there. And we went down there. And as we was going down—we was in a Jeep—as we was going into St. Paul, you'd come in and you could see for a long ways down into the village. And in the town square, they had a good lookin' blonde down there, shaving her head. She'd been fraternizing with German soldiers. And they got us down to Paris and they just let us out down there. (Laughter) On this base. And we walked up—it was nearly dark—and they had a big tent out there. And we walked in there and told'em who it was, and they said, "Boy! You boys is taking a lot of chances." We had civilian clothes on, you know. We asked them why and they said, "There's a lot of German soldiers getting civilian clothes and saying they're Americans." Said, "You're liable to get shot." I said, "You get your commanding officer over here. We want to talk to that dude." And he took us over to him, to see him, and he questioned us and he said, "Yeah, you're alright." So, the next morning, why, we got on a C-47, DC-3, and took us back to London. They interrogated us in London and then went on in. They's a Captain White, who was in charge of taking care of people coming back. And I went out—well, I went to get my money—I had to go out to 8th Air Force headquarters—and I met General [James] Doolittle, and talked to him awhile. And I got my money and back pay, and that's when we went down to London.

TAYLOR: I have a question. You had written on your questionnaire that you had worked some with the French Underground.

TOWLE: Yeah.

TAYLOR: To—let's see—interrupt communications wires. Could you talk about that some?

TOWLE: Yeah. They had these hedgerows. That's where the Germans put their wires, communication wires. And you couldn't cut 'em. If you cut 'em, they knew somebody'd done it. And they had a device, and they'd get it at where a cow crossing was. And they had a device that they put on there and they'd pull it apart, like something had gone through and broke it. But, they wouldn't cut 'em. If they did, they'd come to the village and shoot somebody. Oh, it's vicious. They'd shoot you at the drop of your hat. They strafed—up north, in a little old coal mining town, up north of Hericourt. It was up near the Belgium border. And there was a train, coming out of Paris, that had a load of candy and sweets on it. And the Americans—or British—strafed it and wrecked the train and throwed candy all over the place. And, right near that town, those kids was out gathering it up. And the SS troops got out there and shot every one of them down, just like dogs.

PIEHLER: How did you know about that? When did you learn about that incident?

TOWLE: Things—they'd get it through the grapevine. They'd know as quick as we do, over here on the telephone. They'd send it up, you know, the Underground ...

PIEHLER: So, that messages were—yeah. So you knew about this train wreck soon after it happened?

TOWLE: Yeah. You ought to check—that was an interesting book—you ought to get that and read it. She made a copy of it.

PIEHLER: Yeah. I will check with my assistant.

TOWLE: A. B. Cox is his name. But you ought to read that. That's real interesting. How he got through all the things he had to go through.

TAYLOR: So, you got—when you finally got back from your experience in France to England, how long did you stay there? Did you—were you able to hook up with any of your crewmembers or were they still all in prison camp?

TOWLE: No. No, I saw my pilot in California. And I can't remember to this day how I knew he was out there. But I talked to him for a while. And other than that, I hadn't seen any of them or heard any of them, and I got my daughter to look up on the Internet, see if she could find some addresses. And she found my pilot's address and found my radio gunner's address, and my bombardier's address. And, that was just ... last year.

PIEHLER: So you, after the war, had never got together with them?

TOWLE: No. And I called my radio gunner about a year ago and, boy, he said, "John Towle. John Towle." He said, "There's nobody I'd rather sit down with and drink a beer with." (Laughter) He said, "I hope we can get together sometime." He's having a little trouble, I think, heart trouble or something. But, you talkin' about the Underground, them cutting communication lines is what the Underground would do. And I went out and helped them, a lot of times. But before the invasion, the Germans, in these open fields, they made the French people go out and dig holes, post holes, two foot deep. And made 'em cut timbers eight foot long to go down, and they put them in, in those holes, so when—they couldn't use gliders to come in, to land them. And we'd go out at night and pull them posts out of them holes.

PIEHLER: So, you occasionally did get out at night?

TOWLE: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

PIEHLER: But you were with the Resistance?

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah.

PIEHLER: But if you had been caught, you would have been really in trouble.

TOWLE: Oh, I'd be—yeah.

PIEHLER: You probably would have just been executed.

TOWLE: Well, I got out one more time. The old man had a—they feed beets to cows over there. And I went out with him, in behind this guy next door who run a farm on his place. And help chop out those beets, one time. Then, a little town just above Hericourt—I can't think of its name—but it was right close to one of them flying bomb sites. And they blowed that town away. I mean, they wasn't there and they killed one of the man. And he had a five-acre wheat field, out at the end of the village. And Mr. Beuvry bought that—[the man] got killed—and he bought it from a family. And we went out there with the scythes to cut it, me and two girls and the old man. Did you ever use a ...

PIEHLER: Scythe.

TOWLE: It's not a sickle. I forget what they call it. Anyway, you bring it around and you lay what you cut right up against what's not cut, and you come along and tie it up.

PIEHLER: So, you were cutting hay the old fashioned way?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah.

PIEHLER: Like you see in ...

TOWLE: Oh, I'd done it at home before, but it had been a long time. But, anyway, in that dern stuff, these bull nettles had grown up way high. Boy, they had stickers in them. And I was tying it up and Janine, she was pretty hefty, she was using that scythe. And, boy, I hadn't done nothing, you know, lately to get my hands tough, and them nettles, buddy, they seemed to like jump in my hands. I went up to her and I said, "You tie that up and let me do that." (Laughter) But we hadn't been working there long when here come the dern British, in them big bombers, bombing on of those flying bomb sites. I bet they wasn't a thousand feet off the ground. And they was shooting at them, flak was flying everywhere. And the old man, he grabbed some that we'd cut down, and we put it over our heads. He said, "Let's go to the house." We took off to the house. They said some of them got shot down and they'd be out looking for us, and we'd be in trouble. And I didn't go out anymore. I don't know what they ever done with that wheat. But they was five acres of it. But that's the only two times. At night, after dark, they had a garden out there, and they had a bench in it. One night, Janine, the oldest girl, would take me out. The next night, the two younger girls would take me out, and I'd sit out there in the garden for an hour or so. But they was always somebody there at that back door, watching. So many Germans, they didn't trust nobody. I mean, they'd trust that one family across the street, and they'd give me bread and give me clothes. And that's the only one they'd trust. They said, "You can't trust anybody." Said, "They'd turn you in."

PIEHLER: Now, after you got back to London—you told some stories about being very close to a rocket attack.

TOWLE: Oh, yeah.

PIEHLER: You also told a great story, off the record, which I think I can say this part, that you went up to your old friend from Knoxville and tapped him on the shoulder. And he just fainted because he was so shocked. It was like a ghost had visited him.

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah.

PIEHLER: What happened after you sort of said, “I’m done with my leave in London?” Where did they send you next?

TOWLE: I come back. I had two weeks vacation at home.

PIEHLER: So they sent you back to the States?

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: You didn’t have to fly more missions before coming home?

TOWLE: No. Uh uh. No, you couldn’t fly anymore.

PIEHLER: Once you were shot down, that was ...

TOWLE: No. You see, if you was shot down and then you go back, if the Germans know about it, they can get you for being a spy. I couldn’t go out of the continental United States without volunteering.

PIEHLER: And you didn’t want to volunteer?

TOWLE: No! I did try to volunteer to fly wounded back, ... but not in combat. No. Uh uh.

PIEHLER: So when did you leave for the States? When did ... you arrive in London, roughly, and when did you leave for the States?

TOWLE: Well, I stayed about two weeks, I guess. After that ... bomb went off, I left, and they flew me to Scotland. And I went up there. It was a holding tank for people going back to the States. And there was four or five barracks, Lord, as long from here to the street up there, full of people. I told the guy—I give’em, showed him my papers, and I said, “We was supposed to leave out of here in the morning.” He just died laughing. He said, “That’s what everyone of these guys say.” (Laughter) Said, “They’ve been in here two or three weeks.” I said, “Well, that’s what my orders read.” And he said, “Boy, I feel sorry for you.” Next morning, he come in and got us, said, “You’re going.” We left, we flew home on a C-40/54, with just them old, wooden seats along the sides of it. They was generals, and colonels, and I don’t know what. They had one boy, his mother had died, I think, and he was going back. And I had to come through Washington, to be interrogated. And I went from Washington down to Atlanta. All I had was the clothes I had on, a pair of pants and a shirt. Went down to Georgia and I got—told

that guy, the first sergeant, what all I'd been through with. And he ... got them guys on the ball, got me some clothes, and got my orders, and got me on the train in thirty minutes. I was headed back to Knoxville.

PIEHLER: And your parents were probably pretty glad to see you?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I got home—oh, it was early in the morning, before daylight. Yeah. All my sisters and brothers come to see me. [From] California and Florida. Alabama, my brother was down in Alabama.

PIEHLER: So, they all came back to see you.

TOWLE: Oh, yeah.

PIEHLER: Well, I ... need to take a break for just a second.

(Tape paused)

PIEHLER: Let me—you had a very, very nice homecoming. Let me just back up and ask you a few more questions about your Air Force service overseas. You mentioned sometimes, when men had really hard [missions], they'd start crying, in the ready room. You know, some of them would sit down on benches. Did you ever know of any ... members of other crews who just couldn't take it? They had to be washed out of the unit?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. Before we started flying, they was a plane landed on our base that had been shot up. We was all crazy to see something, you know. Hadn't been in combat or anything. We went over there, and we looked into the waist door, and they was two guys splattered all over that plane. I mean, splattered. And they was two crews that quit. You could quit flying. They was two crews quit. And on my crew one time, my tail gunner, which was from California—back in the tail, on each side of him, is a row of ammunitions. And the Germans, the Focke-Wulf 180, had a machine gun, a cannon, a twenty-millimeter cannon on it. And we couldn't touch it with our fifties, so he'd sit back out there and fire. And one come in and hit our tail, hit the tail gunner's ammunition, and it started popping off. (Laughs) And he come running up through the plane, and he went all way to the front. If they hadn't been closed, he'd went out the front of it, somewhere. And on another crew, they tell me, and I believe it, their radio gunner, they said when they'd get into flak areas, that he'd get his coat and sit down in the floor and put his coat over his head. And I could see why some boys couldn't take it. But, it never dawned on me, ever, that I was gonna get killed. Never.

PIEHLER: Really?

TOWLE: Never.

PIEHLER: Even though you saw—didn't you see other crews not make it back?

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah. Never dawned on me. My pilot, he told us, said, “I never do get scared.” And one time, we was flying, I forget where on a mission, and fighters was coming in from everywhere, and they was coming in right over us, and they was coming in from the tail. And I was protecting our tail and he hollered at me, he said, “They’re coming in twelve o’clock high!” Said, “Get’em!” I said, “I thought you wasn’t scared.” (Laughter) I said, “Let’em come on in, they won’t hurt you.” (Laughter) But, I just never did think about it, getting killed. I don’t know why, but it never did bother me. But some people, I know, and I can understand why. None of my crew—incidentally, while I think of it, my tail gunner, as I say, was shot down with the rest of us. I didn’t know it ‘til I talked to my radio gunner.... They’d gathered all my crew up in one spot, and the tail gunner was there. And my radio gunner said he never seen him after that. And when he got home, I don’t know how long afterwards, he said the Air Force intelligence called him, wanting to meet with him. And he met ‘em in a hotel and he said they wanted to know if he knew anything about Fenton, my tail gunner. And he said, “No. All I know is the last time I saw him was when they captured us, rounded us up.” And he said, “Of course, I went to the hospital, and I assume that they took him off with the rest of the crew.” And he said, “Why are you asking all this?” They said, “Well, we have no record of him returning to the United States.” And they haven’t heard from him since. I don’t know. I don’t know what he done. But knowing him, hell, he just liable to told’em that he wanted to be on their side. (Laughter) And joined up with them. He was nuts.

PIEHLER: Any other incidents, you know—why you thought he was nuts?

TOWLE: Well, just a lot of things he did. He was kind of a loner, and did funny things, just little ole things, you know. If I’d had a pistol when he run up by me, I would have shot him, for leaving his post. But, we used to carry a .45 on missions, and boys would get shot down and as you were coming down, they had, in Germany, they’d trained these little ole young boys—anywhere from twelve to fifteen years old. And they’d get out and capture, you know, a guy coming down in parachute, and a lot of them started shooting [Americans] before they hit the ground, and they’d get killed. And it was optional where you could carry a pistol with you or not. So, most of us turned ‘em in.

TAYLOR: Well, then back once you got ...

PIEHLER: Oh, just one more. Or a few more.

TAYLOR: Okay.

PIEHLER: What about chapel? Or chaplains? Do you ever encounter any chaplains on the base or did you have a chaplain?

TOWLE: No. We had a chaplain but I don’t ever remember ...

PIEHLER: Did you go to chapel while you were ...

TOWLE: Never did go to the chapel.

PIEHLER: What about church in, say, town?

TOWLE: I never went to that.

PIEHLER: How was the food on base?

TOWLE: Mostly, if it was a regular base, it was good.

PIEHLER: So, in England, you were a little cold, but the food was okay?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah.

PIEHLER: You were going to say something about chapel, I thought.

TOWLE: No, no.

PIEHLER: Did you ever carry any good luck charms or anything?

TOWLE: No.

PIEHLER: No? You didn't do that? How often did you write home?

TOWLE: Uh, not as much as I should, I guess. (Laughter) But, no, I guess I'd write home every ten days or so. I don't know. You just—a period you didn't think about anything much. Just what was going on right then, you know. But, I'd get letters from home, from my sisters writing, sending stuff, you know. But they was a lot of boys, they never got anything from home. Sad.

PIEHLER: And you never, you never—how did you like—you liked wine, sounds like you liked wine over beer.

TOWLE: Well, I don't drink either one anymore, but ...

PIEHLER: But at the time when you were overseas ...

TOWLE: Yeah. I don't know where they got that beer. I never did see any more beer after that. It was always wine. But, the old man told me—he didn't tell me; he told Janine—he'd made some—it's kinda like champagne, I guess. He'd made it himself. He had four bottles and he'd drank one of them. And he said, "I'm saving the rest of them [for] when we get free." And, so, after the English come, why, he opened one of them bottles up. Boy, it was good stuff. (Laughter) You can drink it, just like water. Boy, it would kick in! (Laughter) We drank two of them bottles that night. But, when I went back over there, this [Fernand] Lebrun, that give me light bread and his clothes, why, he had give the farm to his son. He had one son. And he moved over—oh, it was just a half a mile. A little old house. And the day before I was to leave to come back home, why, he invited us over to eat. They was serving, you know, how the French do, two or three different times during the meal. And he said, "Now everything you're

eating tonight, including what you're drinking, them wines," he said, "was grown on my farm." Boy, it was some meal. And they give you different kind of wines every meal, different with each meal. And he said, "I'm gonna get you drunk before you leave." (Laughter) But, he was something. He was some fellow.

PIEHLER: Sounds like you have very fond memories of that French family that took you in.

TOWLE: Yeah. I just got a letter from him here the other day. And he's had something done with his heart. I got to send him a card. Incidentally, last year or so, there was a German girl moved across the street from me. And, I got to talking to her. Her father was in the anti-aircraft ... battalions in Germany. And they lived in Stuttgart, Germany. And she said, "My father and mother's coming over here not long," and said, "I want you to meet them." I said, "I want to meet that rascal." (Laughter) I said, "I'll shoot that rascal." I said, "He shot at me." I said, "I bombed Stuttgart twice." And I said, "Now, I'll get him." She said, "Would you shoot him?" I said, "Why sure." I said, "He shot at me." (Laughter) She's real nice one. In fact, she teaches German over here at UT. Night class.

PIEHLER: Oh, okay.

TOWLE: She's a real nice girl. She's got, since she lived there, she's had two babies, a little girl and little boy. She has a brother. He's coming over the last of this month. I've met both parents; they've been over here a couple of times. And, when they was over here, I took the old man, I'd asked if he'd like to see where I used to work in Oak Ridge, Y-12. He said, "Yeah, I'd like to see that." I took him out and drove him all around, and I said a few cuss words, I guess, driving around. Finally, he got around to saying, said, "I'm a Methodist preacher." (Laughter) I said, "Well, thank you very much." "Oh," he said, "think nothing about it." In fact, he brought me a fifth of wine from one town in Germany. But he's a nice fellow. But, buddy, I don't know what preachers done in Germany, but he wouldn't hit a lick outside the house. His wife, she gets out, works just like a man in the yard. But he won't hit a lick; stays dressed up all the time. (Laughter) But, he is as nice as he can be.

PIEHLER: Michael, you had some ...

TAYLOR: Oh, I was just going to take off back into the States after we got ...

PIEHLER: Yeah.

TAYLOR: Um, you talked earlier about coming back and having to go through retraining on B-17s.

TOWLE: Yeah.

TAYLOR: Well, once that was over, how much longer were you in the service before—when did they finally let you out?

TOWLE: Oh, well, it was after—they let me out after—it was soon after Japan surrendered. But, I went to this school in Long Beach on A-20. From there, I went to Sacramento, and I was a line chief up there, getting planes ready to go overseas. And there was a general from West Point who was taking a crew overseas on a B-24. And I happened to be on that shift, that night when he come in, and he says, “Anybody in here know how to transfer gas from gas tanks to the bombardier? The bomb bay?” And I said, “Well, sure. I know how.” He said, “I’m fixing to go overseas, the Hawaiian Islands, and ... my crew don’t know how to do that.” I said, “Lord a mercy, fellow!” I said, “You got your insurance paid up?” (Laughter) I said, “You wouldn’t have got half the way there.” And he said, “Can you get me somebody?” And I said, “Well, I’ll go up with your crew and show them how to do it.” He said, “Boy, I’d sure thank you.” He said, “I’m scared to start flying over there.” I said, “I don’t blame you.” I said, “You wouldn’t get there.” (Laughter) But, I took them up and showed them how.

But, up at that base, they didn’t have any discipline or anything, to amount to anything. In fact, the captain of our group, he’d throw a party for us out in a park there in Sacramento. I don’t know who furnished the food; I guess it was the Army did, Air Force. And he’d just do about anything you’d want to out there, ‘cause everybody there was veterans, you know, who’d been overseas. In fact, before when I was at Long Beach down there, why, on that A-20 school, why, they had a bunch of guys over at the camp. A lieutenant, he’s a smart aleck. He’d march us down to one of the buildings, where they built P-38s there. And we was all standing in line and the firing, they took ‘em out firing those things, right out not far from where we was at. And, boy, they turned loose with them that morning, and all them guys that’d been overseas, boy, we hit the ground just right quick. Boy, he just died laughing. He said, “See? You didn’t win the war.” (Laughs) And, buddy, he had a little old football team. And he got a bunch of us together to play against ‘em. We made it up, boy. We broke his leg. (Laughter)

It was funny. The guy that was over the calisthenics and stuff, up at Burbank when I first come through on B-17s school, why, he was over that whole area, taking care of physical training. And he come down there and he said, “Boy, I remember you.” He said, “I see you got back.” I said, “Yeah.” I said, “You over this whole area?” He said, “Yeah.” I said, “You over that sorry thing there?” He said, “Yeah.” I told him what he’d done and he said, “You let me know if he does anything like that again.” He said, “We’ll send him overseas.” I said, “I’ll sure do it.” And I told that lieutenant, I said, “Buddy, your days are numbered if you try that crap again.”

TAYLOR: So, um, when did you finally end up out of the military? Go back to Tennessee?

TOWLE: Oh, I got out October 30. In ‘45.

PIEHLER: Did they try to talk you into reenlisting?

TOWLE: Well ...

PIEHLER: And had you thought about it?

TOWLE: Well, yeah. Yeah, because they was losing so many. And I told 'em—I was a tech sergeant—I said, if you'll give me a—it's not a lieutenant's, it's a—you're an enlisted man and an officer, too.

PIEHLER: Warrant officer?

TOWLE: Warrant officer. I said, "If you give me a senior warrant officer job." I said, "I don't want no permanent—I mean, just temporary." I said, "I want it to be a permanent thing." And I said, "I'll stay." And they wouldn't, couldn't do it. But they come around—that's when they was having trouble in China, and they come around wanting enlisted people, mechanics to go over and teach those Chinese under Chiang Kai-shek, his Air Force, to teach them. And there was a tremendous amount of money you could make. They furnished everything and they couldn't—you didn't have to pay income tax on it. And I told 'em, "Hell, no! I'm not going over there." (Laughter) But they just begged us to go over there.

PIEHLER: But you turned it down?

TOWLE: Yeah. I turned it down.

PIEHLER: The money wasn't tempting?

TOWLE: It was tempting, but ...

PIEHLER: Not enough to ... (Laughs)

TOWLE: I figured ...

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

PIEHLER: This continues an interview with John Towle on March 20, 2002 in Knoxville, Tennessee with Kurt Piehler and ...

TAYLOR: Michael Taylor.

PIEHLER: And you were saying that you wouldn't—you would have done this as a civilian, to work for Chiang Kai-shek?

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah. It would have been ...

PIEHLER: So, I have a feeling this was with the OSS?

TOWLE: Huh?

PIEHLER: Do you know who was making you this offer? Which government agency?

TOWLE: I don't really know.

PIEHLER: Oh, okay.

TOWLE: I don't really know who.

PIEHLER: You never checked into the details.

TOWLE: No, no.

PIEHLER: So what base were you actually separated from?

TOWLE: Well, it wasn't in Mather Field, [which] is where I was stationed.

PIEHLER: Yeah, you ...

TOWLE: But I went to another base there. I don't know which one it was.

PIEHLER: And that's where you formally left?

TOWLE: Yeah. I got relieved at Mather Field, but I went to another place to get all that stuff.

PIEHLER: And you actually returned to college.

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: And how important was the G. I. Bill?

TOWLE: Oh, it's real important. It paid my way.

PIEHLER: You think you would have gone back to college without the G. I. Bill?

TOWLE: I doubt it. I'd have went back to the aluminum company. And I could have went back to the aluminum company after I got through college if I'd have wanted to.

PIEHLER: Had you thought about going back to Alcoa?

TOWLE: Well, not really. Because what I'd majored in, at landscaping and whatnot, I decided to try that. And we went into business with two of our professors for a while, and at that time, it just wasn't a good enough demand for tree and lawn service here in Knoxville. There just wasn't no market for it.

PIEHLER: So you were, in a sense, ahead of your time?

TOWLE: Yeah. So, I started working for a nursery, here in Knoxville, Kent-McClain's nursery, and worked for there for five years, and then I went from there to Y-12, Union Carbide. Worked out there for twenty-eight years over all the grounds, [on] roads and grounds.

PIEHLER: So, in other words, you did landscaping at ...

TOWLE: Sir?

PIEHLER: Roads and grounds. In many ways, you stayed in the same ...

TOWLE: Yeah. Yeah. It was the same thing. Yeah.

PIEHLER: Just backing up a little, what was it like to be back on campus? Particularly after having some close calls?

TOWLE: Well, it's pretty good. 'Course, it'd changed a lot. 'Cause lot of your veterans were back here, and whatnot. And, the professors—out at the farm, they understood. But if you come over here to school in the English classes and what not, they didn't understand us. One of the English professors, they said, "We read about these stories, you know. Some sex and stuff in it, and whatnot." Said, "These farm boys, in Agriculture, ... it doesn't do anything for 'em, doesn't excite 'em or anything." The professors out there said, "Why, heck! They know all about that; they live on a farm, most of them." Said, "That's the reason it doesn't bother 'em any." And, you always had a guy in charge, you know. What do they call him? Directs you in your schooling. What do you call it? Anyway, they said that the boys that'd been in the service come back and they're a lot different. Said, "They know what they want, now." Said, "They go after what they want." Said, "It's not just taking a little bit of something."

PIEHLER: I guess, why landscape? What led you to that after you came back?

TOWLE: What happened to my landscaping?

PIEHLER: No, I mean, why did you decide to ... specialize in agriculture, and landscaping, and landscape design?

TOWLE: Well, for one reason—see, we ran a dairy. And Prof. Wiley was head of the dairy department. And ... we'd sold milk to the University of Tennessee and we'd had a run in with him several times. (Laughs) Otherwise ...

PIEHLER: (Laughs) So, dairy was out for you?

TOWLE: Yeah. So, I got into landscaping and what not. And, Prof. Galey, he come down here from Ohio State and taught landscaping for a few years. And a boy that was in my class, two of them—Brogan, Devon Brogan and John Hammett—got ... you know Calloway Gardens? Down in Georgia? Calloway Gardens, you ever heard of that?

PIEHLER: No, I haven't been there yet.

TOWLE: Oh, Lord! It's a big outfit. Got all kinds of landscape stuff. Anyway, they called us and asked if we had anybody in mind to take on that job down there. That's been years ago.

And we give 'em Galey's name. But he was—oh, he was sharp, and he went down there and really put that thing on the map. And Brogan worked at X-10, the same job I had at Y-12. And John Hammett ended up as state—well, he was over all the nurseries, entomology, bugs and shrubs and whatnot. He was over that for years. John's dead, now. He passed away. Brogan's still living but both of us are retired.

TAYLOR: Coming back to Knoxville, you were married in May of '45, is that correct?

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah.

TAYLOR: Did you meet your wife at high school? Did you know her before you went to the service?

TOWLE: We went to the same high school. But she was a little fat chubby girl. (Laughter) As a sophomore when I was a senior. Anyway, I knew her, is all, in high school. But, I told you about my brother-in-law, when he got shot down? He come back, and my wife lived with some of his cousins. And when he come back, one of my cousins that lived next door had a little party for him, when he come back, and he brought my wife down to that party, and I met her. And, when I got shot down and come back, why, when I got home, she called me, and I got a date with her and we ended up getting married. And he ended up marrying my sister! (Laughs)

PIEHLER: But you hadn't really courted that long, formally.

TOWLE: Yeah. (Laughs) No. We hadn't. Uh uh.

PIEHLER: But you had know each other for years, but ...

TOWLE: But, when I come back—I was in Sacramento when I decided to get married. And my brother-in-law was in California, and he had a Lincoln Zephyr. And he ... told me he'd bring me home. And he wanted to know if I could get any gas tickets, and I said, "Well, I'll try." And I got some and he rigged it up—he was a good mechanic—and he put an extra gas tank in the trunk of his car. We was coming home and in Arkansas, before you get to the Tennessee River—it's all lowland, kinda swampy-like in there—there's a boy hitchhiking. Out there in nowhere land. And we stopped and picked him up. And we got to talking, and he lived on a farm. I asked him, I said, "Farm? Farmers got—big farms, they got all kinda gas tickets." I asked him, I said, "You got any extra gas tickets you can loan me? I'll probably need some to get back to California." He said, "Oh, yeah." And he give us a whole book of gas tickets. (Laughter) ... I got back to California and we had a lot left. I got married and I took my wife back with me. She stayed out there 'til—well, as soon as the Japs surrendered, why, I got her a plane ticket to home 'cause I knew everybody'd be trying to get home, and she'd have trouble. But she had to layover one time coming back. She got back and she worked. Before she got married, she worked for the telephone company.

PIEHLER: So, did she work for Southern Bell?

TOWLE: Yeah. Worked for them. Well, she worked for ‘em ten years. And worked for ‘em ‘til we had our first child, and I told her to hang it up. She’d stay home and take care of the kids. She hadn’t worked outside of the house. Well, she worked a little at church, where they have school down there. She worked down there some. But, other than that, she hasn’t worked anywhere except at home. And she does a good job.

TAYLOR: What church did you all attend here in Knoxville?

TOWLE: Central Baptist. Bearden. Yeah, it’s got too big.

PIEHLER: It’s a huge church.

TOWLE: Yeah. Biggest thing I got against it is that Dickey belongs down there. I told Joan Cronan, I said, “If you get rid of him down there,” I said, “I’d come to church more often.”
(Laughter)

TAYLOR: ... I’d like to ask you some questions about working at Y-12. I worked at Eastman’s Kingsport plant ...

TOWLE: Oh, did you?

TAYLOR: ... for three or four years. And I actually worked on the Yards and Grounds crew, myself, and so I was just wondering some of your remembrances of doing landscaping in an industrial setting. That’s kind of a difficult thing, at times, to do.

TOWLE: Well, especially where you have a union. We had some blacks out there that they’d have [made] money if they’d have paid ‘em, let them stay at home. They just—you couldn’t do nothing with ‘em. But, all in all, we had some pretty good workers out there. But, we had a couple of ‘em—well, we had three blacks that was terrible. And I had all three of them at one time. And they was one of them, he’d sit around and read the Bible all the time. He’s from Alabama, and he left when he was a little ole kid. And hadn’t kept in touch with his parents or anything. His mother, I don’t know. He probably didn’t know who his daddy was. So, he got a letter from her or something and I told him, I said, “J.K.,” I said, “Why don’t you go down and see your mother?” And he said, “You know, I’d like to.” And he went down there to see her. James Knox Polk Robinson was his name. And he hadn’t seen his mother in years and years and years. But, he was contrary. He’d go out, after his job there in the plant, he’d go out and mow peoples’ yards and stuff. And, Lord, he’d drive around in a Cadillac. I mean, a new Cadillac, wasn’t no old one.

TAYLOR: Well, how many, say, acres of landscaped area did you all have to maintain?

TOWLE: 250.

TAYLOR: 250.

TOWLE: 250.

TAYLOR: And you had to also keep up with the roads and clean them?

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah.

TAYLOR: Did you have to do re-tarring and things like that?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Worse thing I hated about it was when it would snow. We'd have to go in early and clean the sidewalks off, the roads and what not.

PIEHLER: Did you have to go through a security clearance to work there?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

PIEHLER: All your workers had to get ...

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah. And every five years, they'd check up on you. They still do that, I reckon. But that, a lot of people saying how bad it is to work, that's one of the safest places in the world.

TAYLOR: Did you have any kind of safety drills that you had to do regularly?

TOWLE: Lord, yeah. A meeting you had. You had a safety meeting every Monday morning. You'd go through all kinda fire drills and stuff.

TAYLOR: That's the way it is at Eastman. Safety meetings every week, and fire drills, and ...

TOWLE: But it got to where security was so tight out there, you couldn't get any work done. You'd have to get permits to get into a certain building, get a permit to take certain tools in. When you got through with 'em, they might be contaminated. You had to take 'em to the back door and leave 'em. The health people would come by and check 'em. It was just terrible. You couldn't get nothing done.

PIEHLER: Sounds like you have to be very patient if you wanted ...

TOWLE: Oh, yeah, you did. Just had to live with it.

TAYLOR: Was it hard to keep plants and things living there, with all that kind of stuff going on?

TOWLE: No. It's not that—as I say, that's the safest place in the world. They try to talk—I went up, a man did, and took the radiation of a box they was gonna ship out. And, you go outside and they check your shoes. And they's more on my shoes than they was that they used in these electric—where they make electricity out of that stuff. It's safe. They done everything in the world to keep you safe. And you had ... a checkup out there better than you'll ever get in any doctor's office here in Knoxville. Check your eyes, everything about you.

PIEHLER: ... Did you ever join a veteran's organization?

TOWLE: Yeah. I did. I used to belong to that Am. Vets and the Veteran's Administration and all that. I don't know—don't go to any of the meetings or anything.

PIEHLER: So, you've never been active in a post?

TOWLE: Not really.

PIEHLER: How much of the war—when did you start telling your children about the war? Or you wife?

TOWLE: When my sister started bugging me.

PIEHLER: So, it wasn't until then. In other words ...

TOWLE: No, I never told 'em.

PIEHLER: So, let's say your coworkers at Y-12, would they have known you, for example, were shot down over France?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah.

PIEHLER: They would know?

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, they'd know.

TOWLE: (Looking at pictures) There's a picture. That's the girl that took me in. And that's her niece.

PIEHLER: Oh, okay.

TOWLE: They come over and spent a month with me.

PIEHLER: Oh, this is "The Towles and the French Visit." And this was in the Knoxville Journal in Friday, July 14th, 1978. "I don't know whether I could do it again. I just don't know." Oh, this is a wonderful, a wonderful story. So she actually made it to the United States? To visit?

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. In fact, she wrote me a card here just the other day. Said she couldn't telephone me. Said they'd changed the first three numbers, you know, and she couldn't get me. Wanted me to write her and tell her my phone number. But, her niece worked at the American Embassy in Paris. And, you know, they got Marines that guard those things? And she married one of them. (Laughter) And, she come—he lived in Oak Alley, Florida, and they're living down there, now. She come to see me, she had two babies.... Her mother married a Frenchman

in Southern France and had a big farm, and she owns that. And she's still got the old home place.

TAYLOR: I have one other question. I was wondering what your reaction to the whole bombing of the World Trade Center was on September 11?

TOWLE: Well, I thought the FBI really screwed up. And what's the other outfit? You know, to me, they talk about the firemen and policemen up there being such heroes? I think some of them was plain stupid. I would have never went in a building that quick. And why would you drive up beside a building been hit by an airplane and park a fire truck? I can visualize a few people, you know, a'running in.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

TOWLE: But, that many—it's not lookin' over your job, to see what you think could happen, and just rush in there and kill yourself. To me, it's stupid but—I feel for them, but I just don't understand that.

PIEHLER: Your son would serve in the Reserves. Which unit did he—what branch did he serve in?

TOWLE: My what?

PIEHLER: Your son, [who] served in the military. John Warren Towle.

TOWLE: John Warren? Oh, he was in the Reserves. Yeah.

PIEHLER: In the Air Force? Army?

TOWLE: No, he was in the Air Force. I mean, the Army.

PIEHLER: Army.

TOWLE: Yeah, yeah. He was heavy equipment. Yeah.

PIEHLER: But he didn't go to active duty?

TOWLE: No, no.

PIEHLER: Would you have liked him to have done active duty?

TOWLE: No, I wouldn't have wanted him to. That was during the time [of] that Vietnam War. It was before—he got in before that, but they never did call him up.

PIEHLER: And your one son went to UT, briefly, for a year.... But your daughter got a B.S. in Child Development.

TOWLE: Yeah. She works at Oak Ridge now. Yeah. She co-oped out there, during her college days.

PIEHLER: And what does she do for them, now?

TOWLE: She's a lab technician.

PIEHLER: And your son, what does he do for a living?

TOWLE: (Laughs) He's a president of England Transportation Company in Marietta, Georgia. He makes more money in a year than I made in four or five.

PIEHLER: So, both your children are doing quite well?

TOWLE: Oh, real well. Real well. My son's got two boys, and my girl's got two girls. My oldest granddaughter, she's in college up here at East Tennessee State, I believe it is.

PIEHLER: Is there anything we forgot to ask you, particularly about your military service or Knoxville?

TOWLE: Lord, I don't know. It's been so long. Elaine used to—she used to quiz me all the time, every time she'd come up here.

PIEHLER: Well, she's done a very good job. And I'll be curious to see what we might have gotten that she didn't get, and vice versa.

TOWLE: She graduated from UT.

PIEHLER: This is your sister. Your sister also graduated?

TOWLE: Yeah.

PIEHLER: What did she do during the war?

TOWLE: I think she taught school. Down in Florida.

PIEHLER: I guess, a Knoxville related question: what of the old Knoxville that you grew up with, what do you miss the most? And, what in Knoxville has changed for the better, since you were a kid?

TOWLE: (Laughs) I don't know if it's changed for the better.

PIEHLER: Or some things—I think you probably appreciate electricity.

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. That kinda stuff. What I miss most is not knowing your neighbors. Back then, when we was going to high school, Bearden and Farragut—they had a high school in Farragut. And I knew everybody that went there, and knew everybody that, nearly, went to Central and knew lots of their parents. And back then, I knew everybody that lived in Bearden. Now, you don't hardly know your next-door neighbor. But, as far as everything is—you know, it's growed up. You just don't—back then, your neighbors helped you, and you helped them, and now, it's—when I went to California one time, why, we had a cousin that lived out there. And we asked him about his next-door neighbor. He says, "I don't even know 'em." And it's got just about that way out here.

We had a guy that lived next door, where this German girl lives. And back when Carter was president, why, he was checking up on these people who was running HUD [Housing and Urban Development]. A lot of them, he said, wasn't qualified or something. And they sent a man around to check on all of them, what they done. And the guy that lived next door, he worked for them. And, they come to my house and was asking about him, and they said, "Does he drink?" I said, "I think he takes a drink," but I said, "he don't get drunk or anything. I never seen him drunk." I said, "I knew his boy in Little League Baseball," and I said, "they're nice people." I said, "As far as I'm concerned, they're stand up citizens." I said, "Why you ask all this?" He told me why and he said, "You know, you're the first person, family in this neighborhood that knows anything about that man." (Laughs) But, it's that way now. People just don't get out and mix and know people.

PIEHLER: So, it sounds like, growing up, there was a lot of socializing. Informally.

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

PIEHLER: You would chat with people and ...

TOWLE: Oh, yeah. We used to have—going to church, we had, down at the foot of the hill, we had a big spring and a big area out there. And the church, every year, would have a big church picnic, and everybody'd come to church. I mean, this picnic. You knew everybody. And they'd do anything in the world for you. If you got in trouble, they'd help you. But nowadays, you just don't get anybody around to help you, unless you just go ask 'em.

PIEHLER: Well, thank you for so much of your time. We really appreciate it.

TOWLE: Okay. Appreciate you all—I told your cohort there that you get these things put together, I'd like to have a copy.

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

Edited by Patrick Leverton 7/2003
Edited by Gregory Kupsy 9/19/2003
Reviewed by G. Kurt Piehler 10/21/2003