

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
FRANCIS N. KOEHL
Mechanic, Air Force, World War II

OH
2046

OH
2046

Koehl, Francis N., (b. 1920). Oral History Interview, 2015.

Approximate Length: 2 hours 51 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Francis N. Koehl, a resident of Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin, chronicles his life leading up to being drafted in May of 1942, his service in the European Theater as a mechanic in England, France, and Germany as part of the 9th Air Force, 96th Repair Squadron and his civilian life after his discharge in November of 1945, including his Honor Flight to Washington DC in 2013. Koehl, a Mendon, Missouri native, recounts his time in the Army at Camp Pendleton, various places in California, and finally Patrick Henry Air Base, VA prior to shipping to England August of 1943. Koehl describes his time at Bishop's Stortford, Reading, and Southampton as an Air Force mechanic working primarily on P-57 fighters, B-26 bombers, and P-61 night fighters that returned from raids across the Channel. He landed in Normandy in late June 1944 and continued to work as a mechanic through the battle of Saint-Lô. Koehl recounts witnessing the carnage wrought upon the German retreat from France on a main highway north of Paris by continual Allied strafing runs. Once stationed at Reims in autumn of 1944, he continued to serve as a mechanic during the Battle of the Bulge and remained there for the duration of the war. Koehl provides a sketch of French and German civilian life after the war, and provides several anecdotes describing his encounters with former German soldiers and POWs. He details his life after his return to the U.S. and describes his Honor Flight to Washington DC in 2013.

Narrator's daughter, Betty Koehl, was present during the interview and can be heard on the recording. Identified in the transcript below as BK.

Biographical Sketch:

Koehl (b. 1920) served as an Air Force mechanic in the European Theatre of World War II from May of 1942- November 1945. He was stationed in England maintaining the U.S. and Royal Air Forces until D-Day where he joined the Allied invasion of France. Koehl remained at Reims until the end of the war, where he then returned to U.S. and moved from Missouri to Wisconsin.

Archivist's Note:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript.

Interviewed by Ellen Bowers Healey, 2015.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2017.

Reviewed by Matthew Scharpf, 2017.

Abstract Written by Matthew Scharpf, 2017.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of OH2046.Koehl_file1]

Healey: And it's started recording. So, today is Friday, November 20th, 2015, and this is an interview with Francis Norbert Koehl, who served with the Air Force, parentheses Army, in the 9th Air Force. And you can provide more information on that a little later. You served during World War II, from May of 1942 to November of 1945. Now, this interview is being conducted at Mr. Koehl's home in Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin. I am the interviewer, Ellen B. Healey. This interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veteran's Museum Oral History Program. All right, that's the introduction. And you go by Francis, is that correct?

Koehl: Yes, that's right.

Healey: Okay, Francis, would you tell me where you were born?

Koehl: I was born in Mendon, Missouri—I guess on a farm, about six miles east of Mendon, Missouri. That's in north central Missouri. I was born on the farm out there.

Healey: What was your birth date?

Koehl: June 10th, 1920.

Healey: Tell me a little bit about your background. You said you were raised in Missouri, on a farm.

Koehl: Yeah.

Healey: Were your mom and dad there with you?

Koehl: Mother and dad were both there with me. That was—I started at school, at a little country schoolhouse. One room country schoolhouse in—they called it North Newhall, and there was also a South Newhall. But we were at North Newhall. And Newhall was a little town—or a little country store, actually, just about a mile from our house at—out in the country. They, of course, had a few of the essential things that we needed for living, you know. And you could take your eggs there and trade them for sugar and—you didn't get nothing in the package. You went down, got a quarter's worth of sugar and maybe—quarter's worth of beans and traded eggs for them. I started school in this—North Newhall schoolhouse, and that's where I went to school for—until I got that eighth grade, and then I went to Mendon High School, where I graduated in 1937. I graduated there. And—

Healey: And how many people were in your family? Did you have brothers and sisters?

Koehl: I had my mother and my father, Annie and Frank Koehl. Then I had an older sister, Merrie [sp??], or Mercedes. She married a [inaudible] boy. I had Bernadine, who was the next to the oldest, and she married Larry Finer [sp?]. The next daughter—and then I

was next. Then the—and I married Marion Quam [sp?]. Then, the next daughter was Loretta, and she married a Finer [sp?] boy. The next one was the youngest one, then—youngest daughter was Kathy, and who'd she marry?

BK: Monica.

Koehl: Oh, Monica, that's right. We—and I—getting ahead of myself. Monica, and she married Merlin Mogg [sp?]. Then, I had the sister Monica—was the youngest. Who did she marry?

Healey: Well, that's not necessarily—now, all right, we might as—

Koehl: But she's divorced now. Then, I had a brother who was twelve years younger than I am. And he was born on Christmas Day. And he lives down in Missouri, still has a farm down there—still on the home farm, actually. After I got out of high school, there really wasn't any work around. I went to work—during the harvest, I would go out and drive a team of horses with the haul—what they called bundles from the—to the threshing machine. I would get up at five o'clock and go down and get—about a mile, mile and a half and get these horses hitched up to the wagon and go to thresh. We would thresh all day, and I'd bring them home again at night. I did all that for a dollar and a half a day. That was a part-time job.

[00:04:57]

Then, in the fall—oh, in the meantime, I had decided I'd take me a correspondence course from an Omaha, Nebraska company. It was a mechanics course. That cost me thirty-five dollars, which I saved from farming. I got—for that, I got the six hardcover books—nice, bound books, and then they would send me questions on one book, and then I would answer these questions and then send it back. Then, they would send me another—the book and so forth. I finished that course, and—during the summer, when I didn't have anything else to do. And in the fall, the guy said, “Well, let's—we're going up north to pick corn.” I went with him—I'd never picked corn in my life, but I—we went up north to—clear up into Iowa, up around Storm Lake and [inaudible]—and a place called Clara Highway [?]. There was four of us fellahs, worked with four teams, and we picked corn for this one fellah. He had a big farm. We picked corn up there, and we got seven cents a bushel for picking corn, and our room and board. And, of course, we had to take care of the horses and everything, too. I still managed to save about three hundred dollars picking corn that fall. The next year, we went back to do the same thing, but I didn't get work for the same fellah. I worked for a fellah and his mother, and he—the fellah was about forty years old. That—I was the only guy working for them. That was the year of the big storm out to—in Wisconsin. It was noted for—no, it wasn't either. That was —

Healey: That was in 1938, '39?

Koehl: Yeah, that wasn't the storm, then. Yeah, but it had to be. So, anyhow, a big storm hit there, and we had a lot of duck hunters. Three guys from town were killed. Of course, I didn't know them. [Coughs] They were duck hunting down on the Missouri [inaudible]

Mississippi River. But it got so cold—I was—that—in—evening, when we went—the guys all went to get—we had one car up there, and the four guys—we went to Fort Dodge roller-skating, and the fellah—and his mother told me, “Well, when we come home, you stop up at the neighbors. They’re playing cards up there, and we’ll get something to eat there, then come home.” I stopped off there, and it was raining pretty hard. I came home with them, and I got up in the morning—the windows were all frosted over, and I thought, boy, we all overslept or something. I got dressed and went downstairs, and I said, “Well, you guys oversleep?” I said, “Well, look out there.” There was a snowdrift about four feet high, right in front of the garage. The temperature had dropped down to about zero. And it was a devastating storm, really. He had forty head of pigs out there, and when we opened the hog house—went out there, the steam just rolled out of there. And every—even the pieces of straw hanging down had frost on them, until the—about the size of a pencil. We—and the wind was blowing so hard that we rigged up a—lariat ropes, two or three of them, and he went over to one barn and he would tie a bundle of hay onto it, and then I would pull it over to the hog house and put it in a—in there with the pigs. Then, he’d pull the rope back, and that’s how we got some straw in there for those pigs, to keep them from—and he had forty of them. We had—but you know, I never picked an ear of corn for about—it was almost two weeks—about ten, twelve days. Then, I left about a quarter of the field and started picking it there. But—

Healey: Were you picking by hand?

Koehl: Picking by hand, yeah. Yeah, that was before we had pickers. This storm, one—I remember one of the things that stuck with me was the guy had three hundred sheep. They run, and people didn’t know it was going to get that cold, you know? We didn’t have the radar and stuff like we got now.

[00:09:58]

Those animals run to the corner, and they piled up, and the—there was about—thirty of them got smothered to death in the corner. The rest of them run over the top of them, and they found them over in the rock quarry, where they got out of the wind and everything. There was something like six thousand white turkeys—fell off the roost. They—it rained on them, and then it turned so cold, and they froze—and ice, and they fell off. But I think the Salvation Army came and got all those turkeys and butchered them the next day, because they just froze to death, fell off [inaudible]—that’s a lot of talk about corn picking. Well—[laughter] Where were we now?

Healey: What else did you do —

Koehl: Oh, then—

Healey: —after [inaudible]—

Koehl: —this was the—this place at Newhall—they called Newhall—was about a mile from us. They—a little store. They used to have a—they would—grocery stores and stuff, and they had routes that would run out through the country—maybe one day this way and

one day that, maybe a route that run ten or twelve, fifteen miles. They had a truck, and the truck had little doors on it, and—that had sugar and all kinds of canned stuff in each side and everything. Then, we had some chicken coops, and we had some egg cases. So, the people would call into the store and give their order. They want a sack of flower, they want this and that, and they'd write it down and put it in one of these egg cases. That was all loaded on my truck, and I would take off on these routes. I'd unload the groceries, take them out of the egg case, and the—give them to them, and then put their eggs in and pay them the differences if there was a difference. That was what I did for quite a bit—a while there, maybe six or eight months in the wintertime. Then, in 19—then, I started driving a truck. I would—driving truck, hauling livestock. I would haul them to St. Louis or haul them to Kansas City, either one. That was a rough job, because you had to drive all night, you know? But I stayed with that job until 1940. I got the job of taking the census, in Salt Creek Township. That was our home township there. I took the census in that—that is a thirty-six mile square township, and the census; I got paid for taking the census—ninety dollars for the whole job.

After that, I got a call from a state representative—and wanted to know if I wanted a job in Jefferson City. That was the state capitol. I went to—went down, took a job at the state capitol, running a passenger elevator up and down—they had six floors in the state office building, a new state office building. I run this passenger elevator, and there's three of us guys that were elevator operators. We rented the third story of a house. We had three beds up there in one big room. Then, this woman cooked us one meal. We worked five days a week, and each week, one of us had to stay Saturday morning. And she would cook us one meal, a supper. That—for—and I think it was seven dollars and a half we paid her for the room and the one meal, where—a week. I kept that job until it came time—the draft. That was a pretty good job. I went all over that capitol. I'd go over to the capitol every day and walk around, look at those—all those paintings, and look at all them old war things, and just look across the river at—there. But I did get to meet Harry Truman there, and got to know him pretty well. He would come in there and he—at that time, he was a senator, and I think he was head of what they call the Dies Committee at that time. And he was a nice little guy, kind of, a cocky little guy—had kind of a chip on his shoulders. But he was a nice little guy. I got to know him pretty well. Well, then, I got drafted, so I went home and drove—truck for this company again for about four or five months until I had to go—and then, in the eighteenth of April—or May, I guess it was—

Healey: When did you get drafted?

Koehl: That's when I got—that's when I had to go, was, I think the eighteenth of May, wasn't it? The—and—

Healey: But you had a couple months' notice before that?

[00:15:00]

Koehl: Oh, yeah. Well, I—we knew—they drew numbers, and we knew what our number was, way ahead of time. We just didn't know when it—when they would call you. But we knew what sequence we was going to go in. We knew that we was going in May.

Healey: Where was the induction center? Where'd you have to go?

Koehl: Well, I—we went down to the county seat, which was—that was at Sheridan County. We went—my dad and my brother—and my uncle took me down to the county seat. We got on a bus, a Greyhound bus, and they took us to Jefferson Barracks. That was in St. Louis, right down along the Mississippi River. I'll never forget that my dad gave me a carton of cigarettes for—going away present.

Healey: Were you a smoker?

Koehl: I was a smoker, yeah at that time. So, then, we got down there, and the first thing they did was took all the liquor away from us that some of the guys had. I didn't have any, but they had to put it—I guess that's how the officers' mess kept in supply, [laughs] was taking different, like—but anyhow, we went into the Jefferson Barracks, and we were inducted, and took the physical. I got turned down. I said—they said I had one leg longer than the other, and I couldn't come in. I argued with them, because I really didn't want to go home. I always felt that if it came time to go to the Army, why, I'd take my turn and go with them, because I didn't want somebody else to get wounded or killed in my place. So, it was—I was going—if I could get in.

Healey: Did you know that one leg was longer —

Koehl: No. Well—

Healey: —than the other?

Koehl: No, I had a back injury at the time, so I argued with them and they said, Well, we'll let the specialist look at you. We went out to see the specialist, and sure enough, the specialist says, "Well," he said, "you've got a back injury there," he says, but—he said, "Your spine's—grown a little bit crooked." But he said, "We'd take you, but you'll be on limited service. You'll never get to go overseas. But," he says, "you'll be in the Army," and something. So, due to that course that I took in mechanics, they put me in the Air Force and sent me to Flint, Michigan for a three month course in aircraft overhaul. A special engine that was a—R-28 Pratt & Whitney engine that was a big engine for fighter planes. We lived in an armory up there, and we marched back and forth to the General Motors factory where we did our studying. When we got the three months done—oh, well, when we got our papers back to [inaudible] I had—they had a schematic drawing of a carburetor [inaudible] on this engine. And it was—the carburetor was a high-altitude carburetor that—it adjusted itself as you went up and down. The—adjusted the amount of air that that—and gas kept them even, so you got the most efficiency out of the engine. And on that paper, when it came back, the guy wrote, "Private Koehl. This is an excellent piece of work." That was—had to draw that carburetor and all that stuff. I didn't think much of it, but it turned out to be a pretty good thing he wrote there, because when we left there, we went over to Dayton, Ohio. We stayed there for about a week, and they were deciding what to do with us and everything. Then, one day they said, Okay, these—so many people, you're going to ship out. Then, two days later, why, they were shipping out. I wasn't on the list. But then,

they came along and they said, And you four guys are going to be supernumeraries—never heard of the word before, but that’s what we were. They—we were the guys that were going to take the place of anybody that was AWOL, over-the-hill or sick or couldn’t make the trip.

[00:19:38]

We went down and sat in our orderly room with our barracks bag packed and our records. They said we didn’t have our records. The records, ordinarily, as you went—got on the train—all the guys got on the train. The records were in a great big trunk, like, and locked in there. And so, they were all shipped. We saw the band go down the street, and we saw all the guys march down the street. And pretty soon, it was nice and quiet, and nothing happened. And all at once, a jeep came up, and they called two guys’ names. One of them was mine. Said, “You’re going, too.” We had to grab our barracks bags, and then they handed us a manila envelope with our records in it. And he says, “You carry that and take it to the next place, to where you go.” We didn’t know where we were going, but we took off. We went down through Illinois and in through Missouri and out through Kansas and up through Colorado. And it took us about two days on that trip. I remember one night, we—one evening, about four o’clock, we stopped at Denver, and they had a kitchen there for us. We—everybody unloaded, and we all got something to eat. I happened to have an uncle in Denver, and he was the only guy in our family, in my dad’s family, that was in the Army. And so, I called him, and he said he’d come—said, “I’ll come out and see you.” I said, “Well, I haven’t got time.” We—I said, “But I just wanted to talk to you.” He said, “Okay, well, good luck.” I took off, and at this time, I—it was night, and I decided, well, I’m going to see what these records were. I got these records out, and there was my clothing record of one yellow sheet, and a sheet of—my physical record. I got to thinking about it, and I took them—took those two sheets out of the thing, and I tore them up into little dinky pieces—little tiny pieces. I went back in the back end of the train, and I threw them out, on the—

Healey: What were those sheets?

Koehl: Huh?

Healey: What—why did you tear up—

Koehl: My physical—

Healey: Oh, your physical.

Koehl: —sheet, physical and my clothing records. I threw them off of the train. We went on, and we went up to—finally ended up in—damn, I can’t think of the name right now. Where’d they have the—oh, [inaudible] finally ended up in Camp Pendleton, Oregon. That was up on a mountain—oh, about a mile and a half out of Pendleton, Oregon. That’s where they had the big rodeo. And so, we were unloaded there, and the next day, we were sitting in the barracks and the guy came in, and he said, “Koehl?” I said, “Yeah?” He said, “We didn’t get all your records.” I said, “Why not?” Well, they didn’t know why not. They—“I don’t know where you get your records.” “Well,” he said, “do

you know what" [inaudible] I said, "Sure, I know what's on my record." He said, "Well, we'll just fill one out here." We filled one out, and then I gave him all the dope on all my clothes, and everything was—same, I had them. Then, I come to the physical record. Everything was perfect in that until they got to the bottom line, and it said limited service, and I said, "No." And so, [laughter] then that went through like a charm. The next day, they—we went to the barracks down there, and they came in, they said, "Hey, you guys, we got to get out of the barracks." So, "What are we going to do?" And so, said, "Well, go out and march out there some." I—they said, "You!" I happened to be sitting on the end, there, and I don't know why me. But they picked me for the sergeant. I had these twenty—these forty-eight men in that group that came from Dayton, Ohio. And he said, "Well, take them out and take them"—so, I—"Okay, fellahs, fall out." I just, like—of course, we had been marching. We'd never really had any training, but we'd been marching for three months, up and down—out to work and back, you know, and to eat and back. I had—pretty good idea of what was—what I was doing, I guess. And so, I took them out there on the drill field, and I was running them through their drill, and we were really doing some fancy stuff that we learned. Just the—horsing around, you know?

[00:24:32]

This lieutenant came over, and so I got the guys stopped and told them, "At ease," and saluted him. I said, "What can I do for you, Lieutenant?" He said, "What are you guys doing out here?" I said, "Well, hell, we're"—I said, "They kicked us out of the barracks." "Well," he said, "this is just for recruits." He says, "You guys—pretty good march." He said, "You don't—you're not this." "Well, I said, "we got to get out of the barracks." He said, "Take them for a hike, or take them someplace. Get them off the drill field, you're"—I said, "Okay." I brought them to attention and took them down—marched them down the road, clear down to Pendleton, Oregon. Got—told them—take fifteen minutes and get writing material and something to eat, and we're going to stay out here all day. We went down, and I think it was the White River. I'm not too sure. We went down to the river, and we set—it's a pasture down there, and a big wheat field. So, that's where we spent the whole day, down there. The whole crew—was forty-eight guys. We went back about four o'clock and marched up the hill, and nobody act like they knew anything about it. Just—everything went good, so—some guy said, "Well, hey, if you guys taking trips like that," he said, "go over to the mess hall and tell them you want lunch for the guys." We—was going through the line, and—for lunch in the morning, and I told them, I said, "I got forty-eight guys," I said—up for—myself. I said, "We're going to take them out on a hike." I said, "Can we get that?" "Sure." Said, "You come back in an hour." We went back in an hour, and they gave us—each one a bag of lunch.

So, down the hill we went, marched, and this time we—found a big barn down there with the—with a lot of haystack—hay bales in it. So, a lot of them went in, writing letters and reading books, and anything—just had to spend the day. [Coughs] We did that for about three days, and we got by in good shape. Nobody—and then one day, they called my name out. That was because I had said—I wasn't going to—I wanted to go overseas. I was kind of picked out to go. I was shipping out with four different guys, and we were—and I'm limited service.

Healey: Okay, before you go on, there, what was your purpose? Why did you go to Camp Pendleton in Oregon? What were they—was it a training place? Or no?

Koehl: That was the training place. But I guess it was kind of a separating center, too, where they took guys to the infantry and guys to the Air Force, and here and there. They shipped them all over from there. It was—and the—so, the four of us got shipped [coughs]—from there, we went down to Stockton, California. Shipped us down through the mountains, and the snow up in the mountains and everything. We got down to Stockton, and it was a racetrack, where they raced horses. We were billeted in the stables. They cleaned the stables all out, and there was bunks, and that's where we had to live. And so, then we did what they usually do in the Army. They make you go fall out and march, and they—calisthenics and that stuff. And on—then, the day before Thanksgiving, [coughs] excuse me.

Healey: Okay, and this is Thanksgiving—

Koehl: The day before Thanksgiving—

Healey: —in 1942? You're still in '42?

Koehl: Yeah.

Healey: Okay.

Koehl: —then they loaded us on trucks and they shipped us north up to Sacramento, and to a place that—a—to go on the range. We went on the—had to go on the range and fire the different guns up there. Then, we—that was on Thanksgiving Day, they—we had to do that. We went up there in a truck and stayed, and then they—so, we went out and fired—the game[??]—and we were all bitching and complaining, and—because it was Thanksgiving, and they come out there at noon with a cup of coffee and a bottle of pop and a turkey sandwich. We thought that's it, you know? [Laughter] So—and it started raining along about four o'clock, and so this place where we were, that was up on the rifle range, for the prison guards up there. That's where we were. So, they loaded us on these trucks about—as it was starting to rain, and about dark. We got on the trucks and, boy, we were unhappy. We were going to be ten o'clock getting home. But we went down the road and we—only going—gone maybe twenty-five miles, and they pulled into another camp. [Coughs] This camp was all made up of little houses. I don't know what the name of it was, but they were six-man houses—and if—six men sleep in one. There was—big, long, street, and these little six-man houses.

[00:30:02]

So, they stopped and said, “Okay, you six guys, you're—this is where you're going to stay tonight.” Then, they said, “When you get cleaned up and ready to go,” he said, “go down the end there.” He said, “There's a meal waiting for you down there.” We went down there and, jeepers, that's probably the best meal we ever had. They had turkey, they had everything. We were right up in the wine country, and it was the only place that

I ever went in the Army camp where they gave you some alcohol to drink. They gave you a glass of wine or a bottle of beer when you got through there. We went through there, and we had a great Thanksgiving dinner. We slept there that night, and the next day they took us back. Well, then about a week later, they moved us from Stockton, which is—oh, probably fifty miles from a place called Tanforan. That was south of San Francisco, just a little ways, and it was another racetrack. That was a—just a little way out of San Francisco. But we—the guys—I remember very plain, they had the stables there, and the guys got a couple boards loose on the back of the stable, and they walk out there and they wouldn't have to go past the guard. They're wanting to get on the trolley and go into San Francisco and come back and everything.

And it worked great. [Coughs] They asked for volunteers one time that had—driver's license. We all had driver's license—and they had three hundred vehicles: trucks and cars and everything else that were going to ship overseas. They had to go to a factory down in San Francis—or in Los Angeles. We took these—took—in two big convoys, we headed south, to drive them down there. When we got down there a little ways, after we got almost to San Francisco—or to Los Angeles, this one guy came up to me. He was the guy that—just a truck ahead of me. He said, “You know,” he said, “My folks live down in Hollywood.” And he said, “I called them and told them we'd be coming down that street.” [Coughs] Excuse me. And he said, “They'll be waiting for me.” So, he said—he—of course, that was where he was from. He said, “When we get to this fork in the highway where we're supposed to turn left,” he said, “I'm going to lag way behind.” And he said, “I'm going to go straight ahead.” And he said, “You follow me.” I said, “Okay.” [Golly?]. So, down the road we went, and sure enough, by gosh, we went right down through Hollywood. There's a great big sign that says Hollywood, and down past his house—and all the neighbors—and he had a congregation like you never saw out there, clapping and hollering and waving. And down the street we went. And about that time, two policemen on motorcycles came up and said, “Where are you guys going?” We told them. “Okay, follow us.” Then, they gave us a motorcycle escort [laughter] right out of town. And, you know, we pulled right in behind the convoy, right where we would have been otherwise. Nobody ever knew the difference.

Well, we stayed there that night, then we went back. But then, shortly after that, the—oh, let me see. The—Max Baer. Remember Max Baer, the—a fighter? You probably don't remember him. He and his brother were both boxers. And he had a date for Thanksgiving. And he had a nice-looking blonde and—

Healey: Was he in the service with you?

Koehl: Yes, he was in the service with me. He slept about two bunks down from me. And so, oh, he wanted to take that—so, I said, “Well”—he couldn't get a pass. I said, “I tell you what I'll do. I'll trade with you. I'll stay in, because I got nobody I know anyhow.” I said, “You just bring a bottle of whiskey in here and put it under my bunk,” I said. “When—and when I get up in the morning,” I said—“I look in there and see that bottle of whiskey under my bed, I'll just take that sign that says that you're on KP [Kitchen Patrol].” And he—that's the reason he couldn't go. And said[??] put him on KP—and so, I went down there, and sure enough, in the morning, I got—come in there to—this thing was under the bed. I knew that he got the pass, and he took off and I did his KP for

him.

[00:34:56]

So, it was New Year's Day, and we were on KP. We peeled a bunch of potatoes and we cooked a bunch of eggs, and we did everything. We got it all done, got the dinner all ready, and we went back—I remember very plain, we were sitting back there in the place where the—is a kind of a bin there where the potatoes were, and there's about four or five of us sitting back there, and we'd had a few drinks. And so, these officers came through, inspecting this thing. They saw us in there, and they kind of looked at us and they [inaudible] and we got troubles, you know? But they went out and they looked at the meal and they thought it looked like—pretty good to them. So, the four of them walked out and then got outside, they laughed—I can't—like we was watching them. They were laughing. We thought, well, we're out of trouble. So, that was a pretty good deal. But then, one of my buddies—he just slept a bunk—two from me. One day, they called and got my name and—roll call, and they said—there was four of us. Lined us up and they said, “Now, we've got a guy that tried to escape. And he was going over the hill and we caught him with his clothes.” And he says, “He's a prisoner.” And he says, “You guys take this forty-five caliber pistol.” And he said, “You each one are going to guard this guy, twenty-four hours a day.” And so—

Healey: Was this another soldier you're talking about, that tried to go—

Koehl: Another soldier, yeah, okay. We line up and we got our orders and everything, and what shift we were going to work. And it come my turn—I don't know what the hell [inaudible] down there. And here it was, my buddy, he's about two beds down from me. They made both beds on each side of him—they—nobody slept in them. They didn't want anybody around. You had to sit on that bed and guard that guy. What he was doing was, he'd had his laundry left in town, and he was going in, and he got—he was getting shipped out, so he wanted to pick up his laundry. So, he went out those boards that we had kicked out the back, they—picked up his laundry and was on his way back to camp when the MPs picked him up. We just—what the hell are we going to do? We—they had him on orders to ship out. And so, we'd take him, we'd march him up to the mess hall and we'd sit down and take a table, and everybody'd stay away from us. We were sitting there looking like mean men—

Healey: [inaudible]

Koehl: —you know? And he's a buddy of ours. Then—people to serve us our meal and everything, and we'd take off, and that went on for two days until they finally shipped him out. [Laughs] Then we—they just turned in our gun. They—and I got shipped—at that time, I got shipped to Texas, yeah. A big, long train ride it was. You remember that we were way out on the desert, and this is in the wintertime. And by gosh, that train broke down [inaudible] someplace, somebody's train broke down. And on the desert, I can see four different trains lined up, waiting for—to get that one train that broke down off of the track. We got off the train, and it's sitting in the shade. This is Christmastime, you know? We're in the shade, out there in the desert. [Coughs] But I ended up in Texas, in North Texas, in a little camp. I didn't stay there—about a week. Then, they shipped

me down to San Antone, [sic] Texas. There—of course, there’s a lot of air bases around San Antone, but I got sent to the city airport. That’s where we made the outfit up that was going to go overseas. And so you went—

Healey: Now, all of this time when you were in California, were you getting any training?

Koehl: No, not much. Just—

Healey: Not much.

Koehl: No, not—

Healey: No mechanics training or anything—

Koehl: No, no mechanics training—[inaudible] so then—but we got down there, and that city field—that was Stinson Field, they called that. That was the city airport. Really, is only about two miles out of town. So, they ended up—they used the field mostly for—there was two or three different airfields around there, and they used—this [inaudible] this Stinson Field, the guys, the pilots, they—trainees were using it to land on and take off. They just practiced all day long, one—landing and taking off, landing and taking off. [Coughs]

[00:39:53]

And so, we got our organization in, and they had a carburetion department up there of five guys, and they were—they had what they called at TO, and that was a—you had to have so many of this kind of mechanic and so many of this and so many of this and—before you could ship overseas. And so, in that carburetion, that was—but I went back to that time when I took that test, and the guy said that was pretty good. They must have looked that up, because I went right to the carburetion department. Then, we trained from—that was about the—May until about the—August, we trained. Then, one day, they just walked out and they said, “Okay, you guys take over.” And said, “Koehl, you’re in charge.” I was corporal, then. I got promoted to corporal. I was in charge of the—they had—the carburetion department had a big—oh, it was a big thing. It was about eight feet tall and about, I would say, ten feet long. [Coughs] They would test these carburetors on them, and they were quite complicated to adjust, because they had to—as the air pressure—as these fighter planes went higher, the air got thinner and they had to cut the gas down accordingly so they wouldn’t flood them up in the—the autom—we had to set them automatically so they would adjust as they went up and down with that sort of pressure.

So, that was our job. We got trained and packed up our stuff, and in August they shipped us—we didn’t know where we were going. But they shipped us and we ended up in Virginia. Way up on top of a mountain—a hill, I guess it was, there’s a place called Patrick Henry Air Base. That’s where they shipped us to, and they put us in there. The train backed in there and we unloaded, and they—the next day or two, they checked every one of us and—health-wise and clothes-wise and equipment-wise, and loaded us back on the train. And, at night, we could look off down as—at the bay and the Atlantic

Ocean and it was—Newport News is actually where we were in Virginia, and that train backed in there and loaded us up one day, and we just—took us around down the hill—no place that—I suppose about ten miles around, and took us down, pull on the dock, and we got on that boat down there. There was—at that time, was—that’s when we decided there must be a war on, because we—they had these anti-aircraft balloons up, you know, and all—and the lights were all off at night. It’s dark and the—so, we got on this boat, and—the S.S. Argentina. And it was made—it was a passenger boat that we—ship, I should be saying—that—for tourists, and we got on it and we headed north up by New York and on up, and they pulled into St. John’s Bay, Newfoundland. And it—we pulled in there and there was a whole bunch of other ships there, and we waited four days for them to make up this convoy to go across the ocean. This convoy was escorted by different ships and things. I think there was something like thirty-two ships in the convoy that we had. This was in August. And after four days, they had enough and we pulled out onto the ocean and headed across to England.

Healey: Let me ask you—at this time, all along, you were in the service. You’ve been in for about a year now.

Koehl: Yeah.

Healey: Were you keeping up on the news and—what’d you hear on the news about the status of the war?

Koehl: Oh, we had pretty good news. The—you could get out and get papers. They usually had newspapers around. You didn’t—we didn’t have any radios to speak of that I know of, but we could read from the paper. We knew pretty well what was going on, yeah.

[00:44:44]

Koehl: But we went across the North Atlantic. [Coughs] We hit a storm, and we hit a snowstorm in August, up around Greenland or someplace up there. But then, one night—we don’t know whether they attacked or whether they—what, but all of a sudden, these two little ships—they were Canadian—took off, and they run back behind there, and they drop some depth charges. Like the—that’s what they did when the—toward—where the submarines would come in close, they would drop these depth charges and these big explosions would stop the things. We thought that maybe they were just practicing. We don’t know. But after we got out there in the ocean for a while, well, then the guys up on—they had big gunships, and they practiced with them, the guns, and this—fire them a few times and everything. And it took us eight days to get across there, all told. I remember we pulled into Liverpool at night, about ten o’clock. Maybe nine o’clock. I remember we had to walk up a hill from the boat to the—probably a block and a half. We walked up that hill, and I remember looking up and there was a great big wall of a building that was probably four stories high. And you could look right through it and see the moon, as—everything was gone. It was all blowed—and then we said, wait, there’s been—must be a war on here, you know? [Laughs]

So, they loaded us on ships and took us down into—or loaded us on the train and took

us down to a place called Bishop's Stortford. They put us in six-man tents. So, you—six people sleep in a tent. We got to bed about eleven o'clock. The next morning, we heard a hell of a noise, and we got up and looked out. And across the fence and the hedge from us was probably the most ancient threshing machine I had ever seen in my life. It was all wood, and—wooden, and they'd—the straw just fell out of it. There's a—they had land army girls that were doing all the threshing, and they—the straw would come falling out, they would take it away. And as the grain'd come out, they'd catch it in a bag and carry it away. And it was just crude, you know? There was one guy there with a one-horse surrey or buggy, and he had a tie on, a black suit, and a black hat, and—a top hat. I said, "Who's that guy?" He said, "He's the overseer." I said, "What do you mean, the overseer?" "Well," he says, "some guy someplace [coughs] owns four or five farms, and this guy is the guy that goes around and—the overseer." And, at the same time, I see a big International tractor—big red International tractor. I knew that it was new, and I see that sitting there. I said, "Well, what is that?" They said, "That's a tractor from—that's an American tractor they sent over here." And he said, "They do all the plowing." Said, "That's the first one we've had like this." The guy was out there polishing it. He's polishing that tractor—and then covered it up with a canvas after he got it polished [inaudible]

So, anyhow, we sat in this one place, Bishop's Stortford, and there was—another fellah and I volunteered for a—doing electric job. They had a mess hall at the—where they were—at—it was already built, and they—were another mess hall, and they wanted the wiring put in there. We were going to put the wiring in there. Well, of course, we had to go up to the other one and look and see how we did that. The way we'd go up there—and then, that cook said, "Hey, could you guys move that potato peeler over to the other side of there?" And said, "Sure, we could do that." We come up—and hell, we was all over that place. And anything we wanted to eat, we just got it out of the storeroom, you know? So, that's how we spent most of our time there, and found—that was about thirty miles north of London. Then, we got—our outfit got—we were the Eighth Army at that time, and they shipped us—they changed us, and we were the Ninth Army. Kind of broke us up and put us in the Ninth Air Force. [Coughs] That was over at Reading, England. That was a little more action, there.

[00:49:48]

They had a whole bunch of C-47 airplanes, and they pulled gliders. We would, on our day off—we got a half—we'd get a half a day off every week to do our laundry and everything. We would go over and ride these—ride in these airplanes, because there'd be nobody in them, you know? But they would hook on, and the gliders would sit on the runways. And it was just like a goalpost sticking up there. They put a big lope or loop around here, and a nylon rope. That rope went down and it zigzagged like this, all the way down the runway. When that plane took off, it had a hook in the tail, and they'd circle around and get up a good line of speed, and they'd come down over this thing and hook that rope with that tail. They jerked that glider right off of the ground and take it right up. The—sometimes, they would take two gliders at one time, one longer rope and a shorter rope. [Coughs]

Healey: And you were in the airplane, not in the glider?

Koehl: I was in the airplane. Yeah we were just riding, you know?

Healey: Was anybody in the glider? Or no? Those were—

Koehl: Sometimes, yeah.

Healey: Sometimes.

Koehl: There was a glider pilot, they—

Healey: Pilot?

Koehl: They would take them up and they would—probably pilot and copilot. They would take them up and cut them loose. Then they would ride clear around, come back, and land. Then, we'd land with the airplane, and then they'd hook up some more, tie up another one.

Healey: Was that your first time in an airplane? When you were back—

Koehl: No, no.

Healey: No.

Koehl: I had ridden in a small—in an airplane. Yeah, I'd—at the—but that was the first big airplane I'd ever been in. Then, across the field from us was the guys that were going to ride these gliders. They had cars or trucks and guns, cannons, small cannons and stuff like that that they would load into these gliders when they took off. And so—

Healey: About what time was this now? What month and what year are you talking about when you're seeing this glider—

Koehl: This was—

Healey: —training?

Koehl: This was in—let me see, that was probably about in the spring. I forget now where we were.

Healey: So, the glider training was near Reading?

Koehl: Yeah, that—yeah. It was right on—yeah, right on the—there. But this was in the summertime, and getting—it get—pretty good weather there in—just early, and it was probably February and March that we were doing this. They had a lot of soldiers congregating there. I remember one place, they had a—evidently, they were going to go—they had some spots—or one spot, anyhow, that they wanted to hit especially before the invasion, going across the Channel. So, they got these twelve guys that had

been arrested in England, soldiers, and they called them the Dirty Dozen. They were—most of them were life in prison. They got them to volunteer.

Healey: These were British or Americans?

Koehl: American soldiers.

Healey: Americans, okay.

Koehl: They were volunteered for this job over there, and I don't—and they had some lieutenant that volunteered to train them. I guess they were probably the toughest soldiers that was around. But they were going ahead—the day before, and disrupt communications and every other thing that they could. That's what their job was going to be. I never heard how many of them ever came back, that—but they did take them over there. Then—

Healey: Let me ask: we've been going for almost an hour. Would you like to take a break?

Koehl: Not especially, but—you do?

Healey: We can take a break.

BK: Yeah.

Healey: We're at fifty-four minutes and thirty-three seconds, and I'm going to pause it.

[End of OH2046.Koehl_file1] [Beginning of OH2046.Koehl_file2]

Healey: [inaudible]

BK: You want to go from Reading to—down to your—Southampton, I think is where he went, before—

Healey: I've just turned on the recorder again. So, this is the second track of this recording of Francis Koehl—and is an interview being done November 20th, 2015. One of the last things you were talking about before I took a recess here was twelve guys that were known as the Dirty Dozen. Then we talked about that during the break.

Koehl: Yeah.

Healey: You didn't actually know or see those guys?

Koehl: No, I didn't know or see them, but I knew they were there. They were—

Healey: At Reading.

Koehl: —across the field, yeah. And a lot of the—that's where a lot of the gliders took off from during D-Day and everything else. While we were there—

Healey: And also, when you're talking about gliders and going up in the planes that would tail-hook the gliders—

Koehl: Yeah?

Healey: —we're probably talking in terms of spring or so of 1944 before D-Day?

Koehl: Yeah, probably—all—probably from March up until D-Day. [Coughs]

Healey: And also, during the break, you talked about—seeing somebody from Missouri.

Koehl: Yeah.

Healey: Where was that, in the [inaudible]

Koehl: His dad owned that store that I was talking about, the little store where they got—where we got the groceries.

Healey: What was—

Koehl: His—

Healey: —his name?

Koehl: Bud Elliot, Wayne Elliot. Yeah. I guess he still lives in—south of Los Angeles, someplace out there.

Healey: Also, you mentioned you were just north of London. Did you get to go into London?

Koehl: Yeah, I went into London. I guess twice I went to London. I was—wasn't much there. There's all—every—they always—you know, we were—at London, in there—they always were bombing London. And, of course, when the air raid sirens would go off, they would also go off in our area, where we were. And you'd—had to get out of bed and get in this—we had trenches dug behind our tents, and you had to get off and get down in the trenches and sit in there until the all clear sounded.

Healey: And you said that happened as often as—

Koehl: Quite often.

Healey: —it did in London?

Koehl: Quite often. That—so often that we—lot of times, we didn't even get out, you know? But anyhow, when you went to London—and there's always air raids or—some place in London. The sirens, they'd go off and the people'd run and go underground.

Healey: Was this during the day or at night or both times?

Koehl: Usually during the night. And, of course, being wide-eyed Americans, we'd stay out and say, "What's going on?" Then, you'd see these floodlights. You'd see—maybe seven or eight floodlights going around, and get—and pretty soon, they'd find an airplane up there, and all the floodlights would go right on that airplane. [Coughs] Those anti-aircraft guns would cut loose, and all at once, that airplane would just explode. Shoot it down. But the danger was, you standing out there looking up, and all this stuff that they're shooting in the air, these shells, it's—is—are coming back down. They'd go cling, clang, cling, cling, cling. You'd get under a roof someplace, you know, [inaudible]—keep from getting hit with them.

Healey: Did you ever go underground?

Koehl: I've been down, yeah. They had—they have an underground railroad there that they—it's just like any other place. It's just—a subway's what it is, and it's—really complicated subway. You can go anyplace in London in the subway. While we were at the Bishop's—or at Reading, we worked on a lot of fighter planes there. We got to work on a lot of fighter planes, put new motors in them, engines in them, and I remember one time there was a guy—the P-47 fighters were—I don't know whether—you probably don't know what a P-47 fighter was. Is that—

Healey: That's okay. That's okay.

Koehl: That—a P-47 fighter had two engines in it, and they were out here like this, on each side. The pilot sat in between them. It was a twin-tailed airplane, and the pilot sat in between them. They were a fast plane and everything, but I never worked on them because of the engines. They had a different type of engine in them, but—

Healey: You said you did or you didn't work on—

[00:04:57]

Koehl: Didn't work on them—

Healey: Did not work on—

Koehl: [inaudible]. We would—if they came in, we'd take—hell, we'd work on anything, you know? But this guy was flying—they had a squadron of them flying across the Channel, heading for France or Belgium. They went through clouds. And he either rose up or they rose—fell down, one of them planes, and they came together, up and down. The two engines on his plane—the propellers hit somebody else's plane. The result was they hit hard enough that the one engine was completely knocked out. The other one was bent in a curve—but about the first eighteen inches of the propeller was bent in a curve. But he still managed to fly it, and he turned it around and they come out—got in the clear. He turned it around and headed back for London, or England, and the first airport he could find was ours, so he landed it there. I—it's a—well, I don't know how he ever flew it back, but he did. But we had the—so, they—like I said, I—we never worked on them before, but we did. We ordered two new engines and—shipped new engines from the

base there. The next couple days, why, we went up and we were putting new engines in it and new propellers on it. [Coughs] And in England, at the—in the evening, it doesn't get dark until ten o'clock. You're way up to—you're north, you know? The sun don't go down until—we ate supper about six o'clock, and we were back out putting new engines in this airplane. We remembered this one plane—it was the same type of plane that they pulled the gliders with. But there was twenty guys and two pilots and the crew chief. And he was the only enlisted man. Then, there was the rest of the guys—were all just graduated. They were engineers and pilots and copilots and stuff like that that just graduated, and they were going out on assignment. They stopped in there with—they had landed, and they stopped and had supper there and, I suppose, went to the officers' mess.

[Coughs] But along about eight o'clock, they're—decided they had to go wherever they were going. So, they came out and they got in their airplane and they took off, and as they came over us, the guy that was a crew chief, the enlisted man, they had—that was a pilot that you could—airplane that you could jump out of—paratroopers, you know? They had a rope across the big door. This guy was standing there, waving to us, as he turned around. But they were flying low. And as they came over that mess hall, they started to make a turn. There were some big trees there. When you turn a plane, you've got to have some speed up or else it—gravity'll pull you down and slide—make you side-slip. They didn't have enough, and it clipped the—one of the wings clipped a tree, and the airplane went flipping down on the ground. And all we saw—and it was about—I guess it was a quarter of a mile, maybe a little farther than that from us. And all we saw was just a big black ball of smoke come up out of the trees. The only guy that they took away from there alive was that enlisted man that was standing in the door waving at us. And he must have got throwed out and into the trees or something. And he was alive, yeah, when the plane crashed. And all the other twenty guys all got killed right there in one mass, you know? We thought—and I kept thinking how hard we're getting, we'd say, "Oh, twenty guys just got killed there. Let's get back to work and go"—we just were getting—the war was making us just tough, I guess. We didn't —

Healey: Were there a lot of planes flying out of Reading on bombing runs or not?

[00:09:49]

Koehl: Not on—no. We were repair—we were more of a repair place for [inaudible] where we were, on our side of the field. On the other side of the field, they had the gliders and stuff like that. And so, then we packed up and we were ready to go across the Channel. They shipped us down to this—

Healey: When was that? Do you know?

Koehl: Pardon?

Healey: When were you getting ready to be shipped across the Channel? Had D-Day occurred yet—

Koehl: No, it was—

Healey: —or not?

Koehl: It wasn't D-Day yet. It was probably—yeah, it was probably about the 20th of June [inaudible]. They shipped us down to Southampton. When this war was—when they were starting this invasion, the plan was that—I—that Patton and his men and his—all his tanks and stuff would stay in North Africa. And—[sneezes] excuse me. Would stay in North Africa, and that way the Germans would stay in Italy, because they—and France, because they'd have to guard that south shore of the Mediterranean. They—

Healey: Did you know that as—at the time that you were in England, did you know that that was the plan, or—

Koehl: No, we didn't know that that was the plan. Yeah.

Healey: So, that's something you learned later on.

Koehl: That—learned later on.

Healey: Again, when you were in—repairing planes—and what kind of planes did you repair?

Koehl: I—mostly was—there was two planes—three planes, really, that used the same engine. That was a P-47 fighter and the Martin B-26, which was a light bomber, two-engine bomber. Then, they had a new one that came out, and it was a night fighter, a P-61. They all had this engine in it, and that's how we were picked to work on them, you know? But we'd work on—hell, we'd work on anything, you know?

Healey: Now, these planes that you were working on, had they—where did they come from? Had they—was somebody—

Koehl: Oh, they were —

Healey: —flying in them?

Koehl: —planes that had been flying across the Channel. They'd come in—planes that had bullet holes in them or one engine shot out of them or something. They would come to our place and land. At one—we had a B-26—we used to go out—the B-26 is a two-engine bombers. We used to watch them. They had a hydraulic system—everything was hydraulic. But they had one fault: if you hit the hydraulic lines and stuff in them, then you couldn't get the wheels up or down or nothing. And you had to manually move everything. So, these B-26s landed in our place quite often. What they would do—they would come in—if they had hydraulic problems, they couldn't get the wheels down. These guys would—they'd pull the wheels up and they would get ready to land. The guys would inflate their rubber rafts or—they had rafts, you know, in case they landed in the Channel. They would inflate these rafts, then put them up against the bulkhead, the front of the plane. Then, the guys would get up and sit up against that rubber raft, in the bomb bay. This guy would bring that plane in and slide it on its belly. They'd slide right in on the dirt. The first thing that went was—the bomb bay doors would buckle up when

they hit the ground. And it would start scooping dirt. And, of course, that was really a good thing, because it slowed that plane right down. They—of course, they got dirty, but it would get them on the land, and then it didn't tear the plane up too much, either, because it just—the belly part, the doors, bomb bay doors and stuff—so that us—that's what they did with the B-26. It was this—hydraulics. But this one time, we were out there watching them, and the pilot came down—I don't know how I got to see the pilot—anyhow, I said, "That's—pretty nice landing." He said, "I'm getting pretty used to it." He says, "That's the fourth one I landed this month." So, they were quite often the—

Healey: Without hydraulics?

Koehl: What? Yeah, yeah.

Healey: Landed without hydraulics.

Koehl: Yeah. So—

Healey: So, did you get much opportunity to talk to the crews?

[00:14:58]

Koehl: Oh, yeah, we could talk to them.

Healey: Were they at the same base or [inaudible]

Koehl: No, they weren't usually at the same base. They were usually guys that land—had to land there to—because their plane was shot up. And, oh, I remember one time that I was kind of amazed they called me in. They said, "Francis, come over to tower." And so, I went over to tower and they said, "There's two pilots here that's going to"—we had worked on some planes, these P-47 fighter planes. We had worked on them, and they were going to fly them back to the base where they were going to use them. I went in there, and there was two women pilots. The—so, I was a little amazed[??] but I covered it up, I guess. I said, "Where are you from?" They—talked and everything. But they had been sent down there to pick these two fighter planes up. They had been ferrying planes from New York to Newfoundland and Greenland and—clear across the ocean. And now they were ferrying planes from one airfield to the other. So, they were pretty knowledgeable, but they wanted to know—because they had never flown this kind of plane. So, they were asking me all the questions and where everything was and what you did with them. The result was that the—they got their parachutes, and we went out on—took the jeep and went out on the line, and I took them out there and got them on—up on the plane. They got in it—and showed them what to do. They started her up and I—they took off, and that's the last I saw of them. But they—I was kind of surprised to see women out there with that.

Healey: These are American women?

Koehl: American women. Yeah. So, then, we—shortly after that, one night, along—we knew

that the—we knew something was happening, because we got orders—all these different patterns and everything came in. We had to start our planes—all our airplanes and everything had to have the big star on the side. And maybe you haven't seen them, but they're—there was a big long thing, and then the big star in the middle, on each side. The tail had [coughs] this American emblem on it. And every plane had to have that painted on it, and then it had to be kept covered up. We started painting them, and they'd put them in the hangars—and storing them with a—find a place to cover them up. We were painting all these airplanes, and then all of a sudden, one day, they pulled them all out. Then, that night, about—long about eleven o'clock, I guess, we were—just got in bed, and we hear these planes warming up. We said, "Uh-oh," because Eisenhower had been over to our field, across on the other side where the operation was going on. And he had been down there that night before; his plane had landed there. We knew he'd been there. We heard the planes taking off. They were pulling gliders and dropping paratroopers across the Channel over there. Well, they did a pretty good job, I guess, far as they could. But we lost a lot of men, too.

Healey: That's D-Day that you're talking about.

Koehl: That we're talking about—

Healey: Yeah.

Koehl: —D-Day. Now, that was the day before D-Day. Well, then they—those guys—as those guys moved out of those marshalling areas and the—then they moved us other guys in. We moved in, and we were scheduled to go [coughs]—we were scheduled to go across the Channel. I don't know, that must have been—D-Day was in—early part of June, and then we—probably about the twenty-fifth, we were scheduled to go, and—but, like, before—Patton was supposed to stay in North Africa to make the Germans keep people down there, keep their people down there. Well, the minute the invasion started, they knew it. So, then Patton had already loaded up his tanks and loaded up everything, like he was going to invade Italy. Instead of that, he turned around and he came up around France and landed in the landing zone where we were supposed to go. He pulled in there and he landed there.

[00:19:58]

But that—so, that made us hole up around there for a while. We—I guess it took about four or five days for him to get all this stuff there and get lined up and everything. Then, we were in this marshalling area at Southampton. And all this time, we had what we call buzz bombs. The Germans had a bomb—do you want to take a break?

Healey: No, go ahead.

Koehl: And it—they had a bomb that they would load with alcohol, and it would—it had a one-cylinder engine in it. And it would take off on a—it had a ramp and it'd take off on that ramp, and then the wheels'd stay there, and it would keep right on flying, just like a rocket. And it would go put-put-put-put-put-put-put-put-put. And as long as you heard it popping, you knew it was still flying. But when it stopped popping, then you had to do

something about it. Well, these tents we were in, they all had great big trenches in them for you to get into, you know? So, this—well, we heard them bombs go over and going across, and they were still firing them things after—that was after Patton had started coming across there, and they were still shooting them. This—they usually came over two at a time. This is about five o'clock in the morning. Here they came. The guys were getting up and getting—and I thought I'm not getting up. But pretty soon, it shut off, and I said, "I'm getting out of here." We had our tents—sides up, and I just got out of bed and jumped right in the tent. And it was full of men, and I jumped right on top of them. This bomb—one bomb shut off, and it hit our mess hall. It was about—I don't know, our mess hall was probably as far as from here down to that big light pole down there. It hit the mess hall, blew it up. But, of course, the people were out of it, in their slit trenches. The other one went over the fence, right at the gate, and lit between houses and blew both houses up. And one old man was killed in that house. But we all rushed down there and out the gate, and it's just—and then we pulled—one little gal, she must have been about five years old, little blonde-haired gal. They pulled her out of the wreckage, and I guess she was all right. I don't know. I always remembered—was these guys that were driving these trucks, and they were bringing equipment into camp. But they were waiting until breakfast time or something, when people got up. So, they were all parked along the edge of the camp, and there was a big barbed wire—rolls of barbed wire there to keep people from coming into camp. So, they were all parked along that barbed wire there, and they were—these guys were curled up on top of their trucks, sleeping, in those—on those canvases, you know? Those—had those canvases over the truck. They'd lay up on top of there—and sleeping. This bomb hit that house down there and blowed them off and into that barbed wire.

Healey: [Gasps]

Koehl: And boy, they really got scratched up, those truck drivers did. I supposed they all got Purple Hearts. Where'd you find that?

BK: In the [inaudible].

Koehl: As I crawled out of that trench that night, that morning, I put my hand on that and it burned it.

Healey: Okay, and you just handed me something that looks like a piece of metal that's about —

Koehl: Yeah, I—

Healey: —triangular and black and—

Koehl: I—

Healey: —about one-by-one-by-one.

Koehl: I ought to take it someplace and have somebody look at it, see what they thought it was. Because I got a suspicion that that's part of this camp—or part of the kitchen stove from the kitchen. We had a big—I remember we was in that kitchen one time, and they had

those big iron stoves. They also had big potato peelers that were cast iron. I wonder—when that thing hit that mess hall if it didn't blow them up, and if that isn't what that is. But I don't know how to find out what it is. Don't make much difference. [Laughter] But then—

Healey: Let me ask you, how'd you get that back?

Koehl: Oh, the—you can bring it back—you wanted, yeah. Yeah, you—all you had to—

Healey: Did you just bring it back when you came back? Or did you ship it back?

Koehl: No, I brought it back when I came back. But I shipped back—I brought a couple guns back with me. But you had to get a permit. They—but your officers'd give you a permit, you know, no problem. You—

Healey: What kind of guns did you bring back?

[00:24:55]

Koehl: I brought back a P38 automatic revolver, German. Then I brought back a .32 caliber Italian Beretta. I sold the Beretta to somebody, and I traded the German gun for a double-barrel shotgun. [Laughter] Because I didn't want the pistol around, you know? So then, we got ready and it was time for us to go across the Channel. We went across on a—I don't know, it was a small fishing boat of some kind. And it went about—right straight across to France. And as we got ready to land—you could see France there, of course, and a great big bluff, you know? Then big gun placements up there. But when the invasion took place, they went along with some old ships, and they sunk them. They run them up until they got into the sand, then they'd turn them sideways and they sunk them. They'd go up here—maybe they'd leave a gap as big as this house. Then they'd sink another one, and the first thing that they did—the Navy did was sunk them ships like that. That's what we landed in. You're going to cross with this boat, and you got behind this big ship. This big ship was your protection. Then they had landing craft. They'd pull up beside you and you crawled into this landing craft, and it would go around you, and it came out—come out from behind that ship. They went right to the beach and dropped—the front end of it dropped down and the guys charged out of there. They'd probably be in water and sand and everything, but they charged out. But that's what—they protected you.

Healey: Now, are you talking about when you landed there, or—

Koehl: Yeah, yeah. When I landed there. But the—that's about the only way they had—landed. But they had—by that time, they had the bombs and the—they had bombed everything, and they had a road up to the top of this bluff, you know? And it—

Healey: So, when you landed, was there any fire coming from the—

Koehl: Not from—we didn't have—

Healey: —France?

Koehl: —any fire coming, no.

Healey: No, okay.

Koehl: [Coughs] Had—the closest fire to us was—well, at night you'd see—I don't know whether it was American fire or whether it was German, but you'd see the tracers going.

Healey: Did you go across at night or during the day?

Koehl: We went across in the daytime. Yeah. We got up on top of that hill and looked, and the first thing I see is a great big cemetery. Row after row of crosses and stars, you know—Jewish stars. And it sure was something to see. But we went inland about ten or twelve miles. But the Germans had been—the Americans had stopped when they got about—in there about ten or fifteen miles. They stopped—and was reloading and getting stuff—people in there and everything. So, the Germans were about—at a place called Saint-Lô. That's where the Germans were holed up, and that's where our fighter planes were fighting—going to, and they—and we—the first thing we got was they had an airbase—they laid down—the engineers laid down a floor mat, and it had circles in it. And it was steel one, and it interlocked, and they interlocked this thing. It was probably as wide as this house. Then, it led for at least a half a mile. That's all—that steel interlocked, and that's what they landed on. And any plane that was hurt in any way, they wouldn't let them land on that, because they would tear it up. We built another runway over here in the dirt and then put a big pile of dirt here so they could—if they liked these ones without a—had the hydraulics out on them, they could land on that dirt and go in—if they got to the end, they'd hit that dirt pile.

Healey: When you say we built, is that something you built, or—

Koehl: No, the engineers did that—

Healey: The engineers did.

Koehl: —ahead of us, yeah. And so, we had this camp, and we had our planes in the—and everything ready to go. Then, one day, they decided that this is the day to do it. Then they—Saint-Lô is where all these Germans were. These planes came across the channel, and they say there was close to three thousand planes in the air that day. Excuse me.

Healey: And you were already in France?

Koehl: We were already in France and our planes—

Healey: What were you doing?

Koehl: What?

Healey: What were you doing when you got to France?

[00:29:58]

Koehl: We had a bunch of fighter planes and pilots. When this thing started, then—when they would—a plane would come back, we would right quick put the gas and the—and reload it with ammunition and load it with bombs. They had a pilot that had been into interrogation and tell him what to do. So, he would get in that plane and he would take off, and he knew where he was going. And in the meantime, when—it wouldn't take him fifteen minutes to fly down there to Saint-Lô and back, you know. And in the meantime, they had another pilot they were talking to and telling what to do. They'd land that plane, we would fill it up with gas and ammunition and bombs and take it off again. They would—that plane, every half hour, was making a trip down in there. But there was also big bombers and everything else—just isn't that terrible—and so, they finally—we lost—we—the Air Force was—course, was blamed. They had a line—the infantry had a line drawn, and they were supposed to put a—they had these smoke bombs, and all along that line where these infantrymen were, were these smoke bombs. They set these smoke bombs off, and we weren't supposed to bomb anything on the back side of it. But the wind changed, and evidently, some of them got it—and they got—one general got it, a fellow by the name of General McNair, he got killed. I think he was an Air—[coughs] a pilot—a paratrooper. So, the Air Force was—the—well, it looked good at that time, but they did—they couldn't help it anyhow. But any—

Healey: When you went over to France, what unit were you with?

Koehl: I was with the Ninth Air Force. The 96th—

Healey: You're Ninth Airborne.

Koehl: —96th Repair Squadron.

Healey: Now, let me ask you: you said when you got up to the top of the hill, and—that was at Normandy? Is that where you landed?

Koehl: Yes, that was at Normandy, yeah.

Healey: You saw a large cemetery there. What other impressions did you have of France? Did you have any contact with the civilian population?

Koehl: Not at that time. We didn't get to see any contact. Weren't no towns—and the farmers—and they stayed away, evidently we—I guess the first Frenchman we really saw—when we had that big invasion of the Saint-Lô, when they finally got all them planes and everything headed in that way, they—the Germans then headed for Belgium and for—and Germany. There was one main highway that went just north of Paris. That's what they—that's the main road back there. And our planes were just going up and going down that road, and they were strafing and strafing and strafing. Everybody's trying to get out [inaudible] Germans trying to get away there. They were bombing and strafing them. And so, it didn't take long until they had them all run back to France. Then, we had to move because our fighters couldn't go that far. I guess there's the pilot and a

copilot and six guys. I was one of them. By that time, I was a staff sergeant, and I sat right behind the crew chief—or right behind the copilot as we flew—and I forgot about that old—we had an old B-26—we talked about this—twin-engine plane. And it was obsolete. The fact that the newer ones had a longer wings on each side. They were just a lot better planes. So, they were just obsolete. We had this old one. So, in our spare time, when our planes would be gone or something, we took all the guns and all the bomb racks and everything that—weighed on there—weighed anything at all, threw it all away, and we made that plane just as light as could be. We had these two big engines in it, so we started hauling the mail when we were still in England, and we were sending mail over to there—we'd haul the mail in it, and they would go so fast that the fighter planes couldn't keep up with them, because—two big engines, you know?

[00:35:00]

So—[coughs] as—we decided then we'd have to move. We moved over to Reims, France. That was what they called the West Point of the air. And just north of Reims—and right along the Reims Canal was a big airport. That's where we moved to. We—the crew—I took this one crew and the pilot and a copilot, and we flew that area with the plane. This plane, we took—and we flew real low, of course, and we were looking—and all along that road, that was the terriblest mess—it had everything. There was wagons, there were dead horses, dead cows. There was trucks, cars, tanks pushed off the road. When we went down—when our infantry went through, they just bulldozed everything right off the road, and we just kept right on going. And, of course, we flew into Reims, France and landed there. We were the first guys there, so we took over that airbase there. That's where we stayed until the war was over. That was in that airbase in France.

Healey: What was your—did you continue with your mechanic's job [inaudible]

Koehl: Yeah, I stayed right with the mechanic's job, and we—they had—that one Christmas, while we were at Reims, they had the Battle of the Bulge. That's when the Germans gathered all their forces, and they pushed into the—this big forest in Belgium and Germany. They had the Battle of the Bulge, and we almost—the—lost it there. But Patton was a—was down in the southern part of France—central part, anyhow. So, when that happened, one night they took Patton and told him to take his force and go up to that—where that big battle was. The paratroopers were in there, and they were getting—they were surrounded and really in bad shape. They were already thinking about surrendering. Then Patton came, took his tanks and mobile equipment—and that one night, we were on guard duty. Had—we'd had—well, no planes—you couldn't fly. It was snow and cloudy and just perfect for the Germans. We couldn't get any planes off the ground, so we had to be on guard duty up—and Patton was heading north to get to that Battle of the Bulge. We heard him coming, and you could hear him for miles with all them motors and tanks and everything. And he went through that night, and from then on, he got in position and he got his tanks caught up and pushed the Germans. That was the end of the Germans, actually. So, the guys—at that time, then, it was pretty well over with. I and two other guys—now, these guys were twins—volunteered to be infantry lieutenants. We were going to a school, and so—the school was south of France, south of Paris, about fifteen miles. And it was in Napoleon's old camping ground, where Napoleon's castle was and all his army was. We were up in the area where his horses

were, some of the horses, anyhow. They had cobblestone everywhere. The —

Healey: Was this during the war or after the war?

Koehl: Well, this was still during the war. They had—or this was—yeah, that was still—on the war. They even had brick stables for the horses.

Healey: Was this place called Fontainebleau?

Koehl: Fontainebleau, yeah. And so, we were in that, and then we signed up and we went into that thing. We signed up and we would stay in Germany and fight for another year after we got out. So, that meant that I would have to stay in Germany, so I stayed three months in that school. I'd have to stay there fifteen more months.

[00:39:56]

So, that sounded all right at that time. We started taking the training, but all at once, the war was over in Germany.

Healey: [inaudible]

Koehl: And—

Healey: How does this relate to the two twins that you were talking about?

Koehl: They were with me—

Healey: They were with you.

Koehl: —in this officers' training school. I don't know [inaudible] but we came home with points. If you had few—very few points when the war was over in Germany—if you didn't have any points to speak of—the guys that just got to Germany didn't have any points. They shipped them right over to Japan. The guys that had quite a few points, they shipped them back home and they got a furlough and then they shipped them to Japan. Now, guys like me who'd been there for so long, we had enough points to come home, except I'd signed up to stay fifteen—so, I talked to one of the guys and he said, "Well," he said, "they don't need you anymore in Germany." He said, "That's for sure—as officers." So, he said, "They'll ship you out of there for some reason—any little old reason at all." I forget what I used for a reason now, but either I took a button off my shirt, I didn't shave, or—I did something that wasn't right and went out there, and old lieutenant [inaudible] "Did you shave"—or whatever—"today?" The—and guy wrote it down, and by eleven o'clock at night, or in the morning, I was on my way out. They said, "You've been discharged. You didn't make it." I thought, God, how lucky can you get? I already had enough points to come home, so—but I got sent to a repo depot, which is a replacement center. Then, at that replacement center, I—they saw that I was a staff sergeant. So, they sent me to Germany. Yeah, the war was over then, you know, and—

Healey: So, you—repo depot, where was that? Was that in Europe or was that—

Koehl: That was in France, yeah. So, they sent me in there and I was going to be first sergeant. I went in there and the first place I went was in the hospital. They—there was evidently a medical school there, and we had a nice little apartment up there. There was five guys who shipped in there, and they told us, Stay here, we'll come get you. And so, we went down, looked around, and about the first thing we saw was we went down the basement, and the floor had fallen down. We looked in there, and there was a couple cadaver laying in there, you know, pickled. We decided we didn't care about moving—going any further.

Healey: That was in Germany?

Koehl: No, that was—

Healey: No?

Koehl: Yeah, that was in Marburg, Germany. Yeah. And so, then they send me over in Marburg, then they sent me over to a place that had, I think, four hundred Italian conscripted laborers that—they had been shipped up there from Italy. They were working at a gas depot out there where they shipped gas in the railroad cars and then put it in these five gallon tanks. By this time, the army had—the American Army was in there and running things. We had those guys—now all I had to do was just be first sergeant. I had to see that they had food and clothing and—place to sleep and everything. And keep records. So, pretty easy, and had pretty easy going, but—

Healey: When you say conscripted Italians, were they soldiers? Were they good or bad?

Koehl: No, they weren't soldiers. They were just guys—

Healey: [inaudible]

Koehl: They just—the Germans said, Hey, you're going to go to work. They'd just pick them up and make them come as—for labor, you know? Forced labor, really, what it was.

Healey: Forced labor.

Koehl: Yeah. [Coughs] And so, we didn't have to guard them or nothing. They just didn't have no place to go, and we were feeding them. But they were Italians, and they were—they would—we would go to the food dump, you know, to get food for them. For four hundred people, it'd take quite a bit of food. I'd go down there with them to—food dump, and get what we want. They would be trading. They'd take—trade something— oranges, maybe, they'd trade for extra flour. They had extra powdered milk, and extra powdered eggs, and extra hamburger—then tomato, onions, extra stuff. They'd trade everything else they had for that. Then they'd come home, and they had—we had this big hall. At one time, I think it was probably a university.

[00:45:00]

They were all—they'd be cooking in there, and they had racks, and they would make the spaghetti out of all this food that they got. It—hanging—just hanging in there, just on these clothes racks, you know—all spaghetti, strings of it, all up and down. Then, they'd be cooking this stuff. "And you come over for supper, we're going to have spaghetti." That's all they ever thought about. Boy, if they didn't make some good spaghetti! But they—we got that—we got them taken care of when we shipped them out, and then they shipped me down to—where was—oh, then—this place called Mannheim. It was Sandhofen, really. We had a group of guys there. They were Polish—free Polish army is what they were, and they were people that had escaped from Poland into England and formed an army, a Polish arm—a resistance, you know? So, they were going home, and they were in this—it was a school of some kind. But that's where they had been billeted. They had their women with them, done—doing their cooking and making their beds and everything. And so, I got to be first sergeant. I was doing the same old thing, the—ordering food and keeping records and everything of them—and one night, about the middle of the night, the kid came in there, about seventeen-year-old kid. And he said, "My dad just took poison." He said, "He mixed a bunch of arsenic up and drank it." He said, "I got to take him to doctor." I run downstairs and got my jeep, and we got him in there, and we took him into Mannheim and pumped his stomach. I don't know how he turned out, but he was—they were going to keep him there, anyhow.

Healey: Was he a German or an Italian?

Koehl: No, he was a German, yeah. Anyhow, these Polish had a hell of a party. They were out there dancing in that dust and dirt, you know? And dancing in that—and cooking, and that—just carrying on all night. And burned—they even burned their beds and made a bonfire out of them. We just—I don't know, what the hell? We'd give a damn. The next morning, why, here come a farmer, and he said, "Hey!" He said, "What are you going to do about this?" I said, "What's this?" He said, "Well, somebody stole two of my sheep!" I said, "Well, we can't help that." They'd stole his sheep and butchered them, and that's what they were cooking out there. So, they roasted the sheep. Well, then, we shipped them out. We got them shipped out, back to Poland. The next place—oh, I went—then I went to get the mail, and I was in Mannheim. I get—Heidelberg Castle, the—and I went to get the mail, had to go to Heidelberg to get the mail. And up on a hill was a great big castle. I said, "Well, God, it seems like I've been here before." And it dawned on me: my mother had a big picture, big as that one, of the Heidelberg Castle hanging in the front room. It was the same castle, exactly as I had been—I don't know how she got it, I never knew the history of it. And it was in pretty poor shape when I got back anyhow. But then, my next trip was—and all this time, I'm trying to get out of there, to—but they're shipping people out, and said, "Your turn's coming. We'll just ship you out as soon as we got"—so, the next thing I got was—got a German prison camp. We had about two hundred German prisoners. And another group had to take—be—take the guard duty. They had to take the food and clothing, everything—and all I did was I'd take care of the records and see that they got healthy and everything else, that everything was in good shape. Every once in a while we'd have an inspection because we were looking for SS troopers—that was the elite German army. They all—they had a tattoo on their arm, and we'd get them up in the middle of the night and look at them and see if we could see that tattoo, because they would cover it up with everything. [Coughs] And

so—

Healey: Now, when you were first sergeant, what unit were you with?

Koehl: Still with the—

Healey: Still with—

Koehl: Well, I don't know what unit I was with. I just—I think it was the First Army. I remember one time that they told me I would go to the First Army, but they just—I was just free, that's all I was. I was still the Air Force as far as I was concerned.

[00:50:10]

Healey: Did you still have—did you have other people that you were supervising as first sergeant? Did you supervise other men and soldiers?

Koehl: Well, yeah, we had—usually had a crew. I had this—when we went down to this German place, this German camp, I think there was about two hundred German soldiers there. We went down and we took a—we took over what they call the Wasserhaus in a little town called Kleinlinden. We went into the Wasserhaus and we took that over. There was two lieutenants, and then I was the first sergeant, and then we had about four—three or four guys. There was a camp—the camp was outside of town. And so, I was in the officer one day and a guy came in, he was a German officer. And he told me that—he gave me a story. He had been on the Russian front, and he got shot. They shot three fingers off, here, and he was a surgeon. They were going to cut his hand off, or they'd cut those fingers off, and he wouldn't let them. So, he made them wrap him up and he took off, and he came back to the American side. And here he was, then. He got them healed up, but they were shot off, you know? And he wanted to get back and get his hands operated on with good things. And he was just trying to get home up to a place called Jülich, [Germany] and that was in Belgium, I guess. Or Holland, I guess. It was in Holland. And he—and I said, "Well, I tell you what," I said. "You're a surgeon and you're a doctor." I said, "You wait for the weekend," and I said, "I'll take you up to Jülich." "Drive you up there in the jeep, and look"—he wanted to find his mother. And he—she lives in that town. I said, "You can come back," and I said, "You can stay with me here and take care of these soldiers here, these German soldiers." He says, "That's good." We went up there over the weekend and we went into town, and he found one of his uncles or something. And his uncle said, "Oh, his mother is okay," but she had moved out. They took her out in the country someplace. So, the guy said, "That's good enough for me." He went back with me. So, he stayed with me and then took care of the soldiers, then. Well, then—

Healey: And he was a German soldier?

Koehl: German soldier, yeah.

Healey: Was he speaking English to you?

Koehl: With him, yeah. He'd speak good English, yeah. So, then they picked me out—one day, they just gave me orders to get out. And, oh, I forgot what—we could—the guy had a—the guy in this Kleinlinden had an ice house, and they put up ice from the lake. So, one day I got to talking with him, and—oh, he gave me some German relics and stuff that I kept. But we got to talking, and I said, "Say, you've got ice." He said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, listen," I said, "I got salt and I got powdered eggs and I got powdered milk and I got sugar." Said, "Could you make ice cream?" "Yeah," he said, "ice cream." I said, "Oh, yeah!" We took the—got the ingredients and took them over to him, and he made a freezer of ice cream. And if we didn't have a feast, I'll tell you now, we did. But then, they took me out, they said, "You're going home." And so, they shipped me out of there and—

Healey: Before you go any further: while you were in Germany, as the war was winding down, what did you do for liberty time, your spare time?

Koehl: Didn't have any spare time. You just—you'd—usually got a half day off to wash your clothes and do what—but there wasn't much in there—after the war was over, you could kind of travel around and see a little stuff, and one thing—

Healey: What were your observations of Germany?

Koehl: Yeah.

Healey: What did it look like? What was the condition?

Koehl: Germany was pretty well beat up, but they were a pretty good civilization of people compared to France. The French—of course, they had a rough time, and they had been under the German army all this time. But France was in a bad shape, far as I was concerned, you know? The people were just down. But the Germans, they were up, and when you'd go down the street where the Germans, you know, had gotten bombed, they already had all the bricks piled up and everything cleaned up, and they were ready to start building. But the French, they were—they weren't quite that far along yet.

[00:55:03]

[Coughs] Now, I don't know—that is—whether that was because that's just the natural—or whether it's because they'd just been under the German thumb so long, you know, that they lost all hope, so—but that's what—that's the way it was.

Healey: Okay, we're talking about traveling around. Did you get an opportunity to go into Paris or see any of the French —

Koehl: Yeah.

Healey: —cities?

Koehl: I was in Paris—I spent one night in Paris. But I wasn't too impressed. The—all—when we were in Reims and the—Eisenhower had his headquarters in Reims, also. We used to

go into Reims, and they had nightclubs and stuff running pretty good then, and the Red Cross places. But in Paris, yeah, got to spend one day there and look around. Saw the Eiffel Tower, saw the cathedrals and stuff, and the—then we went down to—

Healey: Were there people on the streets?

Koehl: Oh, yeah.

Healey: Were they busy?

Koehl: Yeah. Yeah, they were doing pretty good in there. Yeah, actually, I guess. But it's old. It's just plain damned old. [Laughter]

Healey: Okay. And did you get to—did you talk—were the people nice or—

Koehl: Oh, yeah, if you—

Healey: [inaudible]

Koehl: —if you could find someone that could talk French—you had to feel sorry for them. When we were over in Reims, France, of course, our food—we'd have a lot of time—we'd have French toast, you know, on—the guys would dump their—we have a garbage can here, and they'd dump the French toast in there. They didn't like it, and this and that. There was a—French man standing right there with a bucket and dipping in there and getting that French toast, whatever they could find that was solid to eat. They were dipping it out of there, and they were destitute, you know?

Healey: Sure.

Koehl: Those people were—

Healey: Did you find the same thing in Germany, too? Were the Germans hungry?

Koehl: And not so bad. Those German people—well, when we were in this Wasserhaus, everybody who lived on this one big street and the—they had a house here, and right behind the house was a little barn where they kept a cow and maybe a horse. Then, right next to that was an outdoor toilet and a cesspool in there. Then, out there was a garden, out there. They put their garden—and they usually had a big thing here with about two dozen cages with rabbits in it. That was their main food, you know? So, then most of these people seemed like, to me—owned maybe ten or twelve acres, out in the country, something—because in the morning, you'd see them. They would take a load of manure or pump—dip it out of that septic tank into a tank, a big—it was actually a big barrel is what it was, big wooden barrel. When they'd go out on the farm, they'd pull the plug and they would manure their land. But then, they'd also—they also had a wagon they'd put—then, they had a horse. And one horse would pull that thing, and they'd—had a wagon behind it. [Coughs] The old lady and a couple kids—there was no men. They would go out on the farm someplace, and when they'd come back at night, they'd—liable to have to a load of hay on it, and they'd have a bunch of stuff that they picked up

in the garden and stuff like that. But they were getting along, yeah.

So, then, from there on, I got shipped to a place where they were gathering a bunch of men. The whole bunch of us—and, I guess, it must have been twenty or thirty were—had so many points to—we're ready to come home, when they could make it. So, they put us on a train, and we had what they call C-rations. They'd have cans—like, a half-gallon can of bacon, cooked bacon, fried down in lard. That was one of the things—we'd get some little cheese. [Coughs] We had some of this bacon, and I remember on our way back, we were riding—coming back to France to get on the boat, and we took—melted the lard off of that bacon.

[01:00:03]

We were on the train, and we got off the train and we stole a sack of onions about that—about a ten-gallon—ten-pound bag of onions. And you could buy wine everywhere. At the railroad station, the guys were—they were always buying—selling wine to you. And French bread. That's all we ate, all the way back on that trip was French bread with onions and bacon. And so, we got back into France. We were—came to Marseilles, and we were up—Marseilles was—right down there was the Mediterranean Sea. We were way up on a hill, and we could see our boat down there in the harbor. But the longshoremen in New York were on strike, and they wouldn't unload us. We stayed up on that hill, and we practiced landing in the boats and everything, and played cards and everything else. It—we were up there two weeks. I'll tell you, we weren't too happy sitting up there two weeks, knowing them longshoremen were on strike. [Coughs] But finally, they got us down there and on the boat, and away we went. We—remember we're going through Gibraltar, and then we got into a storm and we had to get behind an island and stay there for two days until the storm passed. Then, we came into New York Harbor. The middle of the night—at least ten o'clock, it was just dark as could be—and they pulled up to a great big, monstrous warehouse. Empty. There were just a few lights burning here and there. It was dark on—kind of an eerie place to be unloading, and didn't see any longshoremen, but—[laughter] but—

Healey: Is that a good thing? [Laughter]

Koehl: Yeah, that was a good thing. And—but there was a whole row of tables. There was everything on this table that a soldier might need. They had hairbrushes, combs, toothbrushes, toothpaste, writing material, pencils, pens, candy bars, cigarettes. Everything you could think of that a guy might've lost on the ship, they had it there. The Salvation Army—and we never saw any Red Cross people around any place. It was all Salvation Army. And—

Healey: Is that true when you were overseas, too?

Koehl: No, no, we saw—then it was Red Cross. It—but you had to pay for—then you had to pay for it, too, over there. You had to pay for—nickel for a donut and a nickel for a cup of coffee, and—so, we thought the Salvation Army was a great outfit from then on. But they told us to go up and get in some trucks. We got in those trucks, and they took us over to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. We went to bed that night, and the next morning we

got up and called home and told them we was in the States. The next day, they shipped me out. I was supposed to go to—I didn't want to go back to Jefferson Barracks. And so, I told them I wanted to go to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. But on the way back, they decided Fort Leavenworth, Kansas was going to quit discharging people. So, the next place to Missouri was Little Rock, Arkansas—Camp Chaffee. We got on the train the next day. We was only on—in Kilmer just two days. And day and night, we traveled, and we got to Arkansas. I—one day, I was discharged, and they said, “Well, you could stay the night.” I said, “No, not me. I'm done.” [Laughter] I got out of there. I went over and got me a bus and caught a bus to Kansas City. I got into Kansas City early in the morning, and then after it got daylight, I had some relatives there—and so, they said, Well, you're heading home? Said, “Yeah.” “But your sister works here in Kansas City.” I—that was my youngest sister, so I called her and she said, “I'm going home tonight. This is Thanksgiving. Tomorrow's Thanksgiving.” And she said, “I'll meet you at the Union Station, on the train.” And she said, at certain time—and said, “The train leaves”—and said, “You be there.” I said, “We'll go home together.” I spent the day in Kansas City, and then I was at the station and—that night, and there was a load of people there. I see one of these guys, red caps, you know, the attendants or something.

[01:04:57]

I see this kid, he's a red cap, and I say, “Can you get me on that train?” I give him fifty cents, and he's—took off with—grabbed my bag and took off, and me and my sister—down the stairs we went, run like hell down there, got on the—got—run down the dock and got on the train. Then all the people started coming. We just made it, that's all. But this car we got on was so old it had a wood—a coal-burning furnace—stove, a potbelly stove in one corner and a potbelly stove up in the other corner. And it didn't have seats—these chairs, it had a seat—it had davenport and chairs like this in there. That's the kind of car it was. We rode that thing home, and that's how we got home. I got home the day before Thanksgiving.

Healey: Let me go back a little bit. When you were overseas, did you get mail? How was the mail for you?

Koehl: The mail was tough coming. At—we—what we got was—we got E-mail. They would take a picture of it, and so that—it'd come to you about like this, a letter. And it's hard to read. And it would take—sometimes take two weeks, three weeks. I had a sister get married in the fall, and she wrote to me and said she sent me a box with some cake in it and everything else in it. I thought, well, I'll get that. That was in the fall. That was the fall that we moved to Reading and then Southampton, and then to France. I didn't get it until about three or four weeks—we'd been in France. And here come that—and the barracks [??] bags were—we—when we went into France, we just took—carried what we got with the little barracks bag. The rest of our clothes and stuff, we left there. I got that barracks bag and that package is in the mail, then, same time. [Coughs] But it had been dropped in the water—ocean, sea—salt water. That cake that she sent me, wedding cake, which by now was probably nine months old, was green. Now, I can't [laughter] take a—so the—that's what—but packages didn't come worth a damn. Like, the—

Healey: Did you write her a thank you letter?

Koehl: Huh?

Healey: Did you write your sister a thank you letter?

Koehl: Yeah, sure. [Laughter] I told her I was—I could take that and make penicillin out of it. [Laughter]

Healey: Okay. Well, did you do much writing yourself? Did you correspond back home?

Koehl: Not a whole lot. But maybe a—every two weeks, a letter. But you couldn't tell them where you were. You—they'd blank out anything that was—possible to tell where you were. So, what you going to tell them? Tell them you're okay, that's about all, you know? Yeah.

Healey: Who'd you write to?

Koehl: I had a girlfriend and my mother. I had a buddy, and he said to me one day—he said, "Francis," he said, "read this letter." So, it was a letter from his wife. And his—no, it—yeah. No, it was a letter from his mother-in-law. And he and his wife lived upstairs and his mother-in-law lived downstairs. And his mother-in-law had written to him to tell him that his wife was running around with a sailor. He says, "What am I going to do?" I said, "Well, you can't do a hell of a lot." I said, "Just hold on." So, about a week later, he got a letter from her, and a lawyer—and it was a request for a divorce. And he—she wanted him to sign the papers. So, he said, "What am I going to do?" I said, "Forget it. Just hang onto the papers." Said, "She can't divorce you if you're overseas." So, he hung on for about a month, and all at once, the sailor must have moved out and she wrote a letter to him, "Do not sign the paper that you"—she wanted to stay married.

[01:09:58]

Now, I said, "Sign the damn papers." [Laughter] But, you know, when I was in—when I was up in the—Washington, a guy was with us—now, it's—he was a recruit, now, and I run into a lot of guys—like, we were an outfit that had been in the Army quite a while. And here was some recruits that—you get mixed-up, and he was in the bunk beside me. And he said, "Francis," he said, "can you read this?" He said, "Is this my letter?" I—"Why, [inaudible]—what's your name?" [Inaudible] Well, he said, "Yeah." Said, "That's your letter. He said, "Can you read it to me?" I said, "Can't you read?" He said, "No." He said, "I can't read." I said, "What did you do? Did you go to school in the wintertime?" "No." He said, "In the wintertime"—he said, "In the summertime, I picked cotton and chopped cotton in Texas." And he said, "And in the wintertime, my dad and I would find someplace where they had some pine and we'd go out and cut fence posts and make fence posts all winter." He said, "I never got to go to school." And he was in the Army now. And so, I said, "Well, hell." I'd read his letters—embarrassing as hell, because—girlfriend was writing him, you know? Then, I'd read them to him. Then, he'd want to write back. I'd—had to write the letter back to the girlfriend. About a month later, he got a letter, his girlfriend was pregnant. "So, what are you going to do?" Well, I said, "We'll go get the chaplain." We went and talked to the chaplain. He said, "Well,

I'll tell you what we'll do." So, he fixed her up. We got him a three-day pass, in town. We got the Red Cross to pay for the hotel and the trip up there. She came up and they got married. I stood up with them. They stayed in town for three days, and she went back to Texas and he went in the Army. I don't know what happened to him after that, but that's just the way things were in the Army. What else?

Healey: Well, I interrupted. You were already back in the United States, and you were getting discharged and home for Thanksgiving, day before Thanksgiving. How was Thanksgiving that year?

Koehl: Thanksgiving was great! I had—my sister wrote, she said, "What do you want for Christmas?" I said, "Buy about a fifth of whiskey and put it up on the shelf and we'll drink it when we get home." I was sleeping in that Thanksgiving morning, and here come my sister. She got married in the meantime, while I was overseas. And so, here she had that bottle. Well, my dad had some—rented some land up on the neighbors'—and he had some cattle up there. We went up to look at the cattle. My mother was death on drinking. [Laughter] So, but she knew that we had it, you know? We went up to—there to get—looked at the cattle, and we opened the bottle and we all had a big drink for Thanksgiving. That was what Thanksgiving—oh, then my—then I decided I wanted to go see my sister's—up in Wisconsin, here. I had a suitcase that I used to—when I was working down in Jefferson City, I had a suitcase, and I had a big tiger plaque that I put on it. I would hitchhike with it. I'd turn that tiger and people say, oh [inaudible]—college student, and didn't pick me up, you know? Well, then I got me one with the—Wisconsin on it. Put it on the other side of the suitcase. So, if I was going up here, I'd get that so I could—so, I made it both ways. I headed up here and I stopped in Cedar Rapids. I had a cousin that—

Healey: So, you hitchhiked?

Koehl: Huh?

Healey: You hitchhiked.

Koehl: Yeah. I had a cousin there in Cedar Rapids, and I stopped and saw him. Then, I came on into Madison and saw the girls. I guess I'd been up here about three days, and a buddy of mine came in from the Army. He give a call and said to come home, he's got a furlough.

[01:14:58]

I hitchhiked back to Missouri, and he and I partied for about two or three weeks. And in the meantime, when I was up here, I went over to the Ford garage. They were looking for a mechanic, so I said, well, hell, I'll put in an application. Sure, I'll [inaudible] so, I—when my brother and—brother-in-law and my sister came down for Christmas then, they said, "Hey, that guy called from the Ford garage. He's got a job for you." I said, "Well, better than nothing." And said, "Better than nothing." I went back with him, from Christmas, and took the job. They—he would pay me—I think he paid—

Healey: The job was where? Where was it located?

Koehl: It was in Prairie du Sac at the Ford garage. And so, I—they said they would pay me. I think it was 67 cents an hour. The government would—something on a G.I. Bill or something, I could get—that I'd get a—up as—my total wages would be a dollar eighteen or something like that. So, that was pretty good wages, I suppose, but—don't know.

Healey: Okay. Were your sisters living in Prairie du Sac?

Koehl: No, now —

BK: No, they were in —

Healey: How'd you end up applying for a job?

Koehl: One sister was still working in Madison. The one that got married, she lived at—was living out at plain [??] at that time. I stayed with her, then. When I went to work for—in the garage, then—

Healey: How'd you get back and forth?

Koehl: I'd—he'd bring me in there on Monday morning, and I'd—I had a room in town. I'd stay in that room until Friday night. He'd come pick me up, my brother-in-law would. Then—now you'd go out and we'd work on the farm at one thing and another. Then, my sister came up with—my sister came up, she had the—wanted her car overhauled—we overhauled her car, in the barn, and did a good job on it, too. So, she was happy.

Healey: Did—now, you mentioned you met a buddy, went back to Missouri, and spent about two weeks with him until you got called back here. Throughout your life, did you keep in contact with other soldiers and airmen that you knew?

Koehl: No. There were—I did—this one guy I did, because he was a neighbor. And some of the other guys that were soldiers, I kept in contact with just to—not because they were soldiers, but just because they were neighbors, you know, when I got home.

Healey: Neighbors from Missouri.

Koehl: But I always wondered—or wondered this—there was a four-square-mile area in there of farmers. And of that group, there was fourteen boys that went to the Army.

Healey: Oh, four square mile in Missouri, where you came from, okay.

Koehl: So, there was a—in fact, I just heard—got a card from one the other day. My wife passed away in August, and he had heard about it. I hadn't heard from him in forty years, and here this kid wrote to me that he's living in California. I don't know how he found out, but he found out, so—but there was a lot of—

Healey: So, you got a job at the Ford garage here in Prairie du Sac—

Koehl: Yeah, I stayed there, and then I had saved some money, but I didn't have enough to buy a new car. So, one of the guys that owned the Ford garage over there, he was an old soldier from the World War I. He loaned—he was insurance man, and he loaned me the money, and I bought me a car. Bought me a new car, and then I had a government check come in, so I paid him off pretty quick with that government check. So, then I had me a new car and I had a way to get back and forth. But —

Healey: What kind of a car was it?

Koehl: A Ford Coupe, I bought. Yeah, and then I had transportation, I gave up the room. And another guy that worked at that Ford garage, he wanted transportation. I said, "Okay." He lived with his mother-in-law. Him and his wife lived with his mother-in-law, and I said, "If she's got a room, I'll go down there and just stay and you can ride to work, back and forth to work with me." And so, that's what we done then. We got a deal in the—then, I guess my wife—we—I got married then.

[01:20:01]

Healey: Where'd you meet your wife?

Koehl: My wife, she—her aunt worked at the Ford garage, and she had lived with her. And so, I met her there. And so, we got married in—[coughs] I guess '47, I believe it was. And—

Healey: And is your wife from—was your wife from Prairie du Sac? Yeah?

Koehl: She—yeah, well, really, yeah. She was—she went to high school there, yeah. So—but she was working at the Dean Clinic in Madison, and riding to work. I went to Madison and I—there was a Kaiser Ford Motor Company in Kaiser's—and I got a job there, and it was a pretty good job. I quit my job out here and I went to work at the—at Kaiser's, and she worked in the Dean Clinic. That was just on Carroll Street, there, in Madison. So, then we lived—I guess we lived in Prairie du Sac, but we drove back and forth to work, yeah, the two of us then.

Healey: Oh, okay. So, you—

Koehl: Yeah.

Healey: —worked in Madison, but you drove out here.

Koehl: Yeah.

Healey: Okay. How long have you lived in Prairie du Sac? Since 1947?

Koehl: This—here?

Healey: Yes.

Koehl: No, I built this house in—well, we lived in Prairie du Sac—I guess we lived in Prairie du Sac ever since then. But—

Healey: Since you got married.

Koehl: Yeah.

Healey: Okay. All right, tell me a little bit about—you mentioned your wife. How many children do you have?

Koehl: Got four children. I got three girls and one boy. I got an older—my oldest daughter was—she was a high school teacher. I guess she was the high school principal up at Hartford. Then, I got a son that spent thirty-two or thirty-three years working in the power company over here. I got this daughter that taught school for [inaudible]

BK: Thirty-plus.

Koehl: Thirty—yeah, okay. Then, the youngest daughter is working in Baraboo now. She's the youngest one, and she's about three years from retirement. But she's working for the Sauk County up there—the public defender, I guess. She's a paralegal or something like that. So, then we got—

Healey: How long'd you work for Ford Kaiser, Ford company?

Koehl: I worked for them, but then—I worked for them about a year and a half. I got a job driving an oil truck out here in town. But I didn't go for that. That didn't make any money for me. I had had this Air Force license to tear airplanes down and fix them up, and motors and so forth. I went down to Madison and talked to American—guess it was American Airlines. I got a job as a mechanic. I could either work in Mad—no, I guess I had to work in—I could work in Milwaukee or I could work in Seattle. I said, "Well, hell, I'm going to go to Seattle." They paid good money. But in the meantime, my in-laws, my wife's folks—well, we had the baby. And so, they said, Oh, wait until fall and go. Well, this is long about July, and I said, "Well, hell, I can't wait until fall. I got to do something." I went to Badger Ordnance and applied for a job, and I got one there. And from there on, it was Badger Ordnance, and I stayed right there for thirty years. I retired there in 1984. I've been retired almost as long as I worked for the Badger—for Badger, yeah. [Laughter] But it was a good job, and I worked my way up. I was—ended up as a supervisor up at the plant. Then, the last four years, the plant shut down during the winter because they had no heat. But in the summertime, they would open up and they would—laying away the equipment and cleaning it up and painting it and everything.

[01:25:05]

And so, there was no job. You had to take a layoff for the winter. But, well, the first—there's four winters that I worked for the company. That was Winchester I was working for then, that same thing—same company—old one. I went down to Illinois and—to see if—they had a place in Sycamore, Illinois, the—Winchester had a factory, and they

needed some work done. I went down there and looked it over, and I asked the guy where I could hire some men. And he said, "I don't know." He said, "We're twenty-seven men short now." I said, "Forget it." I said, "You know, we—I can do this"—I said, "I—bring you a crew down here and we'll do it." I negotiated a crew, where we would work fifty-four hours a week and they would furnish us a motel room and give us some meals. I don't know if—what it was, but we didn't charge overtime. But we were getting pretty good money. I took my son and one of his buddies and two other guys from the plant that were on layoff, and we went down and we worked all winter in that place down there. We did them a great job. They were—they wanted to hire me down there, but I wouldn't leave the company, you know, because I wouldn't have no seniority. So, the next year, when it come closing-up time, they said, "We got a job for you in Alabama, at a place called Sylacauga." He says, "South and east of Birmingham." That was a plant just like this one up here, except they were putting it away, too. We had to look at everything and—they had—we had a crew of about five guys that went down there. We looked at everything we could sell. We even took the pipe, we wrote all of it down, had everything down, and then we hired a crew to come in and tear it down, and saved the equipment. And in the end, they were going to burn the building as [inaudible] so, we worked—I guess I worked two years at that job in the summer. They wouldn't let us work in the winter down there, because we couldn't burn stuff down there. It got so dry, the pine trees would burn and everything. So, they—so we were pretty good there.

So, then, the last winter, I was going to be sixty-five. They—I ask them what—if they had any work or if I should take layoff. And he said, "Hell, we got a job for you in Tallahassee, Florida and—for the winter." Tough place to go. I went down, and they had a—I stayed in Tallahassee, and they furnished me a car. I went down to the plant that they were—down there, it was an ammunition plant. I put in—some new building and some new power lines, and a lot of stuff that they wanted done down there. I worked all winter down there, and I'd fly home—every two weeks, I'd fly home and stay for the weekend and take off and go back. I was going to be sixty-five in June. So, this was about in April. I said to the boss, I said, "Well, I don't know." I said, "I think I'm going to—just going to retire instead of starting another job." He said, "Well, let's look at this." So, he looked at it and he said, "Well, you got four weeks' vacation coming," and this and that. When he got through figuring out, he said, hell, I got—"you'll be getting the paycheck up until July," he said, "if you want to retire now." I said, "I'm done, then, boss." I took off. That's in '90—in '84.

Healey: All right. Kind of switching now, I understand that you went to the Honor Flight recently. How'd you find out about the Honor Flight? Or why did you decide to go—your daughter [inaudible]

Koehl: I take my daughter. She went with me, and she did all the book work.

Healey: Had you ever been to Washington, D.C. before?

Koehl: Yeah, we'd—a couple times we'd taken trips to Washington. That—

Healey: Had you seen the World War II Memorial?

Koehl: Pardon?

Healey: Before—

Koehl: Before—

Healey: —the Honor—

Koehl: Before, yeah.

Healey: Okay. Before the Honor—

[01:29:57]

Koehl: Yeah, that was—when she was in high school, we went to Washington.

Healey: But not since the World War II Memorial was built.

Koehl: Oh, I went to that—yeah, that's what—

Healey: That's why you went to the Honor Flight.

Koehl: Yeah, that's when the Honor Flight went.

Healey: Okay. So, what was your impression of that trip?

Koehl: It was a long trip and it was a hard trip for us old people. But it was a great trip, too. We took—

Healey: What were you, ninety-two, ninety-three when you went? How old were you when you went?

Koehl: Yep.

Healey: [inaudible]

Koehl: —I think I was ninety-three. And it was great. That—and the memorials are great, and we got to see all the historical things and all—the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima and all that stuff, you know, that we got in—it was just great to see. But it was a long, hard day. Then, when we came back—got back in, it was—they held us up and they took us one—we were down at the airport, and they took—

Healey: Here in Madison?

Koehl: Yeah. They took us one at a time, and they had a soldier escort us. We were upstairs, and they escorted us down that steps. That whole area there was full of people. They had an area roped off in the middle for us to go to. We come down that—steps, and I tell you, the old tears come in your eyes when you see all them people down there, waving and

everything. I walked down all the way around there, and there's—there was some people there that had to be in the—ninety-year-old, sitting on—in wheelchairs and sitting in chairs along that—and you wanted to shake hands with all of them, you know? You shook hands with as many of them as you could. And one woman—when I got way down there, one woman came forward and she said, “Here, this is for you.” I said, “Well, no, what's that for?” She says, “I want you to have it.” And she forced it on me. And it was a blanket she had made. And she—and I gave the blanket to my sister, Betty. And it's got embroidery on it about the flight, and it's got a U.S. Army thing on it. And—but I didn't have a use—it'd just lay here, so I gave it to her. But I don't know who made it, nothing else. But a lot of people spent a lot of time—yeah, so it was quite a trip, yeah.

Healey: Now, you talked about your service—

Koehl: Yeah.

Healey: —in the military. Did that impact the rest of your life, the fact that you were in the service? Or not really?

Koehl: Well, yeah, I'm sure it had an impact on it. I guess maybe—I was thinking the other day, you know, like, I saw those guys get killed, you know, in that—twenty guys get killed in an airplane. You know, I mean it's just across the golf course—and you say holy cow, just—twenty guys just got killed in there. And you say, “Well, let's get back to work.” And you just think how hard we've gotten, that we—you could look at something like that and we wouldn't run down there and—course, you was in the Army. We [inaudible] there's a lot of people down there in the Air Force, but—and then the fire department. But you just thought how—just—you just get hardened. It does affect you. Like, we—when we were in Reims, France, the English always bombed at night. And so, they had a bomber—and their airplanes, instead of aluminum—the aluminum wings, I think, they were—but the body part of their airplane was fabric, you know? Airplane fabric and—like, a lot of airplanes are made out of fabric. This airplane came limping in there, and it was early in the morning. Had been out in Germany, and we were in Reims, France, so he was—he just got out of Germany, and that's all. They limped in there. But this plane had a German, I suppose, anti-aircraft shell—had gone in the side of this plane, right under the wing.

[01:35:00]

Made a hole about that big—and went down through the plane and came out the tail. When it came out the tail, the tail-gunner was sitting up in there like this. It took the top part of this here, and it dropped this thing down like a hinge, and he was hanging in there, looking out like this, down at the—whatever was going on down below. So, he tried to get up, turn around, and crawl back up into the plane, in the tail of it. That's where we found him, was right there. What happened was the plane caught on fire and that shell came through there and cut him loose, and that fire—as he—the air came in that hole and went out this one. That fire just was red hot, and it just burned him right there. We went out there, and there he was. “Well, shall we take him out?” Started to take him out, and his clothes and his skin and bones just stayed there. “Just leave him.

Cover him up with the blanket and leave him until his—tonight, when he freezes, then we'll take him out." That's what I mean. It made—you just get hardened to that.

Healey: As you were living in Wisconsin, what—the last—since the late '40s, did you ever talk to school students or others about your experiences in the war?

Koehl: No, no, I never did. No.

Healey: Were you ever asked to? Or was that something that you just—

Koehl: Never was asked to, I don't think. No, didn't really need to. You wouldn't forget it.

Healey: All right. So —

Koehl: But—and you wouldn't hardly believe this—there's a guy with me. His name is Camsey Burks [sp??]. And he was from Virginia, I believe. And Camsey joined the Army to be a pilot. And he went into pilot school, and he was taking school. They gave him a physical, and they found out that he was short one tooth on the one side. So, what are we going to do? So, they took X-rays, they found that tooth growing sideways up here. "Well, we got to get that out of there." In order to take it out, they pulled about four teeth, out of here, and took it out. But then, he had teeth missing, he had to have false teeth. And you can't be a pilot if you got false teeth. So, Camsey couldn't be a pilot. So, he ended up a mechanic. And Camsey, before he got into the Army, and just a week or two before the Army, he got married, and—nice looking blonde woman, he showed me his picture, but he never did tell her that he had them teeth. I don't know whether he did or not. I never did know. But Camsey, every so and off—one night, we—when we were in this barracks in Reims, France, we were setting in—right in the big Army barracks, and it was—I don't know, a modern one, you know? The—lots of heat and everything. But every once in a while, the Germans would come around, and they called him Bed Check Charlie, because he'd come about the time you got in bed—well, here he's coming. So, this one night, we were—when we got—so, the sirens are blowing. We'd say, now, like, "Jesus!" Down the stairs and into the damn trenches, you know, when—so, this one night, we hear the sirens blowing. And it's that—oh, no, so—when the sirens blow, the sergeant comes up and down the hall blowing his whistle and, "Everybody out and get down in the trenches!" Well, we get down—I and this other guy gets down and—Camsey, and I get down behind the bunks, and he goes on by. We crawl back in bed. We're in bed, and all at once we hear—[gun sound] and machine gun goes off, and we go, "Holy [inaudible]," so we get out of bed in a hurry and get downstairs. But we can't get to the trenches. But there was a great big pile of concrete—just rubble after buildings had been blown up. We come out, and we hear this airplane. We get behind that rubble.

[01:39:59]

What had happened was—there's a guy out there—was sitting in the field, and they had—I think they called them multiple .50s, .50 caliber machine guns, four of them, anti-aircraft guns. But for some reason or other, somebody must have had a light or done something to make—because this guy knew where he was with this airplane, and this

German come right down there and machine gunned him. The first damn thing he done was hit the seat underneath him here and broke it off, and it dropped the guy down. And he's—your guns are way up here. So, he wasn't shooting anybody. That guy was machine gunning the barracks. Well, he come around, he ducks outside, come around—he's coming around and going—[gun sound] we run around the other side. [Laughs] We got away from him. He never got us, so—and I don't know what he hit, but the—and the—but Camsey, that was my buddy then. So, Camsey and I—that time [inaudible] we—oh, I know what it was. We went down to pick up an airplane that had crashed down there. We went down to pick it up. We took a crane and all this stuff, and we went down and picked up the airplane. And on the way down there, we went through what was the champagne capitol of the world: Epernay, France. We got to—each one of us bought—I think I bought three bottles of champagne at Epernay. We had that stashed away, and we're—so, Cam and I had a half a day off, so we drank it, and drank most of it. We went over to town—I think—I don't know what. Some place, we got drunk as skunks in [inaudible]. But I know that I had half a dozen eggs in my pocket, and they were crunched. But we bought—

Healey: Where'd you get the eggs from?

Koehl: We bought them over town someplace. But when we got the—right behind our barracks was the canal—and a big wide canal. It was—it—what—that's—trying to think of the name of that canal. But anyhow, it had steps so you could go down into it or get out if you wanted to. But they had a walkway up there and you put a barge in there, load of stuff in there, and they had a donkey that would pull it down there and pull it along there. The—Reims Canal, they called it. And so, we were pretty well hooked up, and they got [inaudible] fall gate[?]. Well, we knew which way it was down there, but we said, "We're never going to make"—we had to walk way up and back around, and I said, "Well, Camsey," I said, "I guess we're going to have to swim it." He said, "I can't swim." I said, "We'll go down, see how deep that canal is." We went down there. That canal was just this deep. I waded out in the canal. Camsey got on my shoulders. I waded across the canal. He climbed up on the bank and reached back down, got a hold of me and pulled me up, and we made it—we could see the camp lights, there. You could—it's right there, you know? And so, that's when—I got up the next morning, got—had an awful hangover. We was going out, and you always had to go out for reveille, and you always—charge out, everybody charged out and got in line and stood at attention. I stuck my hands in my pockets. Three eggs in each pockets crunched. [Laughter] Goddamn [laughter]! So, that was that escapade that we went on. But we made it! But I never heard any more from Camsey. I wonder how he got along. I had a guy by the name of—what the hell was his name? I don't know, he was from New Hampshire, and he had his trigger finger cut off, right there, and we didn't know how he got in the Army. But they let him in anyhow. I said, "How'd you do that?" "Well," he says, "we were drilling a new well up at our schoolhouse, and we were turning the wheels and the gears as they go and everything." And he said, "I got my finger in between the gears and they crunched my finger off." So, they had to take his finger off. That's when he was in grade school.

[01:44:57]

Koehl: But he was quite a character. But he wouldn't take a drink for nothing. And he'd go out with us and everything. And his mother was an alcoholic, and I think it—the family worked in Portsmouth or something up there. But he wouldn't—he was death on alcohol. He just—he—I guess they told him that if he was—if he drank, it was in the family and maybe go—and—but he always had—he did go out, and we would have all these people around. We'd be eating or something, he'd go like this with that stub finger, like that. [Laughter] And just like he had his—stuck—finger stuck that far in his head, you know? People look at him [inaudible] and he'd laugh like—you know.

Healey: So, he got into the service without a trigger finger.

Koehl: Yeah, well he—

Healey: Did you ever [inaudible]

Koehl: —had enough left, I guess.

Healey: Did you ever tell anybody about your leg before you got out of the service?

Koehl: About my—

Healey: About the fact that one leg was shorter than the other?

Koehl: Oh, I knew that. I didn't have one—it's my spine that's—I—it's crooked, spine, makes [inaudible].

Healey: Did you ever tell the Army or the Air Force that?

Koehl: Oh, yeah, they knew that. You know, that's the reason they threw me out—wasn't going to let me in.

Healey: Yeah, but after that—

Koehl: After that—

Healey: —when you were in Germany and France, did you let them know?

Koehl: No, I didn't tell them.

Healey: No?

Koehl: No. As long as—[coughs] as long as I got in unlimited service, I was happy. I—because I wasn't going to get overseas or nothing. I—it—I just—

Healey: And you wanted to go overseas.

Koehl: Oh, I wanted to go overseas. Hell, I wanted to go all the way, you know?

Healey: Why?

Koehl: Well, I don't know why. It's just the—if you—if I got to go, then I want to do the big job. I got the—a bunch of guys that got drafted in with me that went [inaudible] the first day, when we got drafted. I got a notice from them afterwards, and one of them was—that was about the time I got out of aircraft school. One of them was out in Angel Island, California, and they were going to the Pacific in the infantry. So, maybe I lucked out by being deformed or something, you know? Otherwise, I'd have been in the Pacific.

Healey: Or drawing a good carburetor.

Koehl: Yeah, yeah.

Healey: Yeah, that's—[laughs] one of the things your daughter helped me[??]—

Koehl: Hey, do you want to go to the bathroom?

Healey: No. I'm good, thank you.

Koehl: Yeah.

Healey: Do you?

Koehl: No.

Healey: Do you need a break?

Koehl: No, I—

Healey: All right.

Koehl: —I go three times a day. I got a catheter and I go—drain it three times a day, and yeah.

Healey: Your daughter asked me to ask you about Henry Werla [sp??]? Is that—your insurance man? Somebody—

Koehl: Yeah, Henry Werla was an insurance man, lived down—about there—down the road here about a mile or so. And he was a German soldier. When the war was just about over and the Russians were crowding them pretty much—and Henry and his buddy were linemen. They run the line from headquarters up to the front line. They'd unroll the wire so they could—they'd—so, once—one night, they said—it was at night, said, "Take this wire from here and out to there." And so Henry said, "We were smart enough"—he said, "We took the wire and we started out," and he said, "when we got to the end of the wire," he said, "we kept right on walking until we walked right into the American lines," and he said, "got captured." So, that—so, Henry, he had one son.

Healey: How'd he get back to the United—or how did he get to the United States? He got captured, and how'd he get here?

Koehl: Yeah, he come some way or other he got here, yeah. No I don't know how he got—never did ask him.

Healey: Sure, yes, go ahead.

BK: I just always thought it was interesting as a kid, because he would come here for their insurance business, and here was this World War II American soldier and this German soldier. They were—they would just talk and be such—it was—I don't know, it was a very interesting thing to observe and remember, how—well, it was like the German people, like this guy that made the ice cream for us. We were just common old people. We didn't start any damn war [inaudible] but—so—

Healey: All right. Well, I think we're pretty well done. But before we wrap this up, I want to ask you, as it's almost four o'clock, and—

[01:50:01]

Koehl: Yeah, we've—

Healey: —we're going to have—

Koehl: —been at it a long time, haven't we?

Healey: —we're going to have our first Wisconsin snow here in a few minutes or hours. [Laughs] It's getting a little dark out there. But is there anything that I haven't asked you about or that you wanted to cover concerning your experience in World War II? You got a very good memory. You're ninety-five as you sit here today, and you—do you live alone?

Koehl: Yeah, yeah. My wife passed away in August. Yeah, and so—yeah, I've been here alone.

Healey: And doing very well.

Koehl: I don't think of anything that—I told you about everything I—all the way through, as far as I know.

Healey: Interesting experience.

Koehl: Yeah.

Healey: Well, I—

Koehl: Well, you see, I started out, the—in 1930, it was about, when I remember mostly. That was the Depression years. And it was a [inaudible] tough goal from 1930 to 1940 to make a go of it. My dad got sick and had to be operated on, and I was in high school. And [coughs]—and the—it was a drought. Everything was dry. The crops were no good, and the grasshoppers were a great—people, they don't even know about this, but when

we were—we had a wheat field, and they had what they call chinch bugs. They were little dinky black bugs, but there were thousands of them. They would eat up a wheat field. We would go around that field and plough a furrow, and then we would go drag it, so it was real dusty. They wouldn't—couldn't crawl in the dust. Then, we would take a sprinkling can, and the county would give us a mixture of tar or stuff, and you would get a burrow of that and you would fill the sprinkling can, and you'd walk around that field, and you would make a track all the way around, a black track to keep them little bugs out. It was my job every morning to go out there and walk around and make sure that some piece of grass or something didn't get over that line—and the bugs coming across it. I—was—that was tough—tough life. I—my dad was in the hospital. I was about fourteen. I was big enough to drive a team of horses. The cattle were down there, so—and the corn, with the grasshoppers had already eaten all the leaves off of the corn. I would haul out a load of manure and spread it on the fields. On the way back, I'd cut two rows of corn and dump it out for the cattle. They would eat those little old short ears and thing—whatever they could get off of it, they would eat it.

It even got so bad that I had to go down to the woods, and I'd crawl a tree and I'd cut limbs off the trees. Them cattle would eat those leaves. And it got so that when I would start to walk down to the barn—I'd get that saw and start walking—them cattle'd just come a running and they'd follow me right down to the tree, and I'd cut down a few limbs and—enough to keep them alive for another day. We were blessed with one thing: we had a good well. And my granddad told me that that well—there was a vein of water running this way and a vein of water running this way. They dug that well right on top of those two. It was down low, and it got filled up with dirt. So, the neighbor and my dad and I, he'd get down in there and dip[??] that out, and we'd pull the mud up and dump it. We got down to twenty-seven feet, and we said, "Well, boy, it's running in pretty good down here now." We got down to twenty-seven feet deep, and we split for the day, and we come back the next morning, she had filled clear up to about fifteen feet. We said, "We're not going to try to pump. We're going to start"—but, you know, people came for a mile and a half. They'd put four or five barrels on the wagon, and then they'd come down there and fill those barrels. We had a windmill on it, and we'd just let that run all the time and fill that tank, and people'd just keep dipping and dipping, and we never did go dry.

[01:55:05]

We were lucky that way. I would—and we had an old—one old horse, and I'd hook that horse onto a sled, and had two barrels. And one barrel I'd keep clean for house use, you know? The other one would be fed for the chickens and the pigs and the sheep and everything that needed water. I'd water them out of that barrel. But the other one is for cooking and doing the laundry and stuff like that. I'd go down there and let the other get filled up with the pump, and then up there you'd pull it up—the horse is up there, and right behind the kitchen and unhook him. That's where it would stay. And if you wanted water in the kitchen, you dipped it out of that barrel. But we lived through it—to—hell, was a lot of years.

Healey: Yeah. All right, well, I don't have anything else to ask you. You've done a very good, complete job. So, appreciate it, as well as your service—

Koehl: Well, I thank you.

Healey: —in World War II.

Koehl: I thank you.

Healey: Thanks so much.

Koehl: Will we get a copy of this?

Healey: Yes.

Koehl: Okay, that's all I care about, just—the lady up here, the banker's wife, she's been after me to tell somebody the story so it wouldn't—so it'd be known.

Healey: Sure, yeah.

Koehl: So, the only story I got to tell now is the one about the—all the different things about the Depression, and what things were like then. But that'll be another story, I guess.

Healey: Okay. All right, thank you very much.

Koehl: Good, I thank you.

[End of OH2046.Koehl_file2] [End of interview]