

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. E.V. DAVIDSON

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KURT PIEHLER: This begins an interview with DR. ELVYN V. DAVIDSON on April 4, 2000, at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, TN, with KURT PIEHLER...

JASON BOWEN: ... and JASON BOWEN.

PIEHLER: I guess I'd like to begin by asking first about your parents and particularly your father, when was your father born, do you know roughly?

DR. ELVYN V. DAVIDSON: Roughly it's kinda hard to tell. I think he was born sometime in 1870 something, 1860 something.

PIEHLER: And do you know your father's full name?

DAVIDSON: His full name was John Adams Hampton Davidson Sr.

PIEHLER: And he enlisted in the military, in the army?

DAVIDSON: He enlisted. He was a member of the Ninth and then the Tenth Calvary, which was an all-black unit. And he was a veteran of the Spanish-American War. And following that then he did some...prior to that they were stationed somewhere out west, which he never talked about a whole lot.

PIEHLER: Do you know when he joined the army?

DAVIDSON: I have no idea.

PIEHLER: And your mother's name?

DAVIDSON: My mother's name was Hattie Olizabeth Hargraves Davidson.

PIEHLER: And when did your parents marry and how did they meet?

DAVIDSON: They were both born in Charlotte, North Carolina. Evidently, they grew up together, and from what I can understand, they married when mother was like fifteen and dad was like seventeen. And she married him because he had on his blue army uniform with the beautiful yellow straps round ... He was a big time carrier, person at that time. And that's sort of what attracted...and they grew up together.

PIEHLER: So, your mother knew she was marrying someone who was a soldier?

DAVIDSON: Yes, she knew...

PIEHLER: In fact, that was, it sounds like that was somewhat...

DAVIDSON: That was part of, I guess, what magnetic attraction between the two.

PIEHLER: Now, your father passed away when you were very young...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, they both died. Mother and Father died when I was ten years old in 1934 within three months of each other.

PIEHLER: But, you, ... before we started the interview you talked a bit, you did get to know your father a little bit.

DAVIDSON: Yes, I got to grow up with him some, up until the age of ten. During that time, he never talked a lot about being a veteran, except that I knew he was a veteran of the Spanish-American War. They used to have the Veteran's Day parade before we got Memorial Day. We'd always go, he'd take us and we'd march in the parade with...which to me was thrilling ... interesting to get to march with all the old veterans at that time.

PIEHLER: So he would march with the veteran's from his unit?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, those veterans that lived in New York who were... Spanish-American and World War II vet- World War I veterans. And they would have this annual Memorial Day parade down Fifth Avenue.

PIEHLER: Was your father in any veteran's organizations ... that you knew of?

DAVIDSON: Not that I really know ... I *think* he was a member of American Legion, I'm not sure. I never knew a whole lot about him cause I was young and never got to ask him a whole lot of questions ... and that time I really wasn't that interested, I don't guess.

PIEHLER: Yeah...

BOWEN: When did you come to live in New York?

DAVIDSON: I was born in New York.

BOWEN: Okay, when did your parents...

DAVIDSON: My parents came to New York, let's see, my brother was born in 1904, in Charlotte, so sometime after that they came to New York, sometime in ... during World War I, they came to New York to live.

PIEHLER: When were you born?

DAVIDSON: I was born in September 6, 1923 ... at St. Joe's (Joseph's) Hospital in Rockaway Beach, Long Island.

PIEHLER: And your father was on retirement pay...

DAVIDSON: Yes, he was on pension, veteran. Evidently he'd been in the army long enough to receive a pension, and that's what he got. Even during the Depression, I remember we were the only people that had money coming in every month because he got a pension from the government.

PIEHLER: When did ... do you know when your father left the service? It sounds like you just knew him as a retired...

DAVIDSON: I don't know when he left the service. When I knew him, he was a retired, disabled veteran. He had some sort of respiratory condition, which he said was a result of the Spanish-American War. I never really knew what it was.

PIEHLER: Was your father able to work at all?

DAVIDSON: No.

PIEHLER: So, it was serious enough...

DAVIDSON: All I know was that he was disabled and he was always home. He never really did any work that I know of, except around the house. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: And your mother, did she work at all?

DAVIDSON: Yes, she worked out, she did, she was what (you) would call housework. She did a lot of laundry for people and she did ironing, washing and ironing. She did for several families in the area where we lived.

PIEHLER: Do you know what led your parents to pick up roots from Charlotte and come to New York?

DAVIDSON: Not really. My brother would have known, but he's gone and I never really got around to asking him.

PIEHLER: I get a sense they liked New York, though. Did they miss Charlotte?

DAVIDSON: Evidently they liked New York, I don't think they really missed it. They never talked ... they had relatives cause all the family was still back there and we'd go visit. Like once, maybe, I remember going once or twice when I was little, going to Charlotte just to visit and come back home.

PIEHLER: You mentioned over breakfast that you lived in a number of different places in New York.

DAVIDSON: Yeah...

PIEHLER: In fact you were counting them fairly ... you counted off a series of ... and maybe this would be a good time to ask you the different places you lived in New York growing up.

DAVIDSON: Well, I grew up ... we lived originally, when I was born, in Rockaway. Then we lived in a little town...township called Inwood, which is in Nassau County in Long Island. Until, I lived there until my parents died. When they died, then I moved to New York City in Harlem with my brother and his wife. I lived with them, I guess, we lived (on) 131st St. and Seventh Avenue in a large building while I went to junior high school. Then we moved from there further uptown, about a hundred and I'm trying to think of what street it was. We went from that to 135th St. When I was going to high school we lived on 150th St. New York people move from apartments to apartments. And that's when I got to high school, Stuyvesant High School, lower East Side. We lived there and then, by the time I graduated, my brother and his first wife divorced, and then I went to live with my aunt. We lived on 152nd St, I think, uptown, near the Polo Grounds. You got to see a lot of free baseball. And then from there, I went to college, and while I was in the army, we moved to Long Island again, back in East Elmhurst.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, it must have been really hard to lose both your mother and father at such an early age, I mean what...

DAVIDSON: To me it was it devastating. I thought that ... I guess growing up you always feel that someone upstairs doesn't like you ... that's what, God just sort of didn't like me cause He took both of them. My father died in January as result of, I think, some of his disabilities in breathing problems. And my mother died within May. She had not been sick, just died. We felt that they had been married so long that one just not going to live without the other one. Sort of put you footloose and you feel sort of lost, I guess.

PIEHLER: And your brother was the one that ended up taking...

DAVIDSON: My brother did, yeah, he was older. He was twenty-some years older than I was. He and my sister, he raised us.

PIEHLER: What did your brother do for a living?

DAVIDSON: He worked for the post office when I was growing up, and then he went into social work. He was a social service, like Department of Welfare ... that's what he did when I was going to high school. And then later years after I was in med school he went into the retail business, selling clothes.

PIEHLER: His own store?

DAVIDSON: Partnership with someone.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, your memories of New York ... this is an open-ended question. What memories do you have growing up, both when you were very young with your parents and then after, you know, when you...

DAVIDSON: Growing up in Long Island was interesting because everything was a closed neighborhood. We lived in sort of a, I guess, a mixed neighborhood, Italian and black. And we

all lived with each other. While my mother worked and my father wasn't really able to look after us, we stayed sort of with the Italian family next door. It was always interesting, my parents ... she would leave me with this lady, Mrs. Nappy ... and we used to eat at her house all the time. So, one day our mother kept me home and she asked me if I wanted some milk. I tell her, "Yeah." And she brought me a glass of milk, and I tell her, "That's not the kind of milk I'm used to drinking." She goes "What do you mean?" I said, "Miss Nappy gives us red milk." (Laughs) It was turning out to be, she was giving us wine ... (Laughs) Go ahead.

PIEHLER: Your mother didn't think that was...

DAVIDSON: Our mother was really upset. (Laughs) But we thought it was a great idea. Hey, this red milk is all right. We slept well every afternoon! (Laughs) But it was interesting growing up. It was a wonderful childhood and we just sort of, I guess, Laura Ingalls, sort of like small edition Knoxville ... single family homes ... people lived close to each and you knew everybody in your neighborhood, no matter how far you went ... five, ten [miles], you knew everybody.

PIEHLER: Did your parents in Inwood rent or did they own their house? Or did they live in an apartment, do you know?

DAVIDSON: They lived in a house, and I think it was our house, as far as I can remember. And after they died, I think my brother sold it and I moved to New York with him.

PIEHLER: Did your father take you ... since he was home all day, I mean, did he, for example, take you to movies or...

DAVIDSON: No, my mother did not believe that you should go to movies or play cards. She was very religious.

PIEHLER: She was very strict.

DAVIDSON: Very strict. And basically, we went to circuses and carnivals and stuff like that, but never movies. Only time I got to go to movies when I'd go visit my brother in New York. Then I could sneak off and go to the movies. But growing up as a kid my mother just didn't believe that those things were immoral and they showed things that you shouldn't see so...

PIEHLER: What was your mother, was she of Baptist faith or Pentecostal or...

DAVIDSON: She was a Church of God, sort of like Pentecostal and my father was Catholic, so...

PIEHLER: Was that any source of tension?

DAVIDSON: No, not between the two of them.

PIEHLER: Not between the two of them?

DAVIDSON: No.

PIEHLER: Which church would you go to growing up?

DAVIDSON: Both.

PIEHLER: Both.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, I'd go to Mass and then go to church with my mother. We'd get up and go to early morning mass with my father and then we'd come back and go to church with my mother. Stay in church all day on Sunday.

PIEHLER: They're also, the little I know, they're very different services.

DAVIDSON: Very different. But, you'd just ... you had no choice as a child, you know. Dad said okay, let's go to mass, and we'd get up and go to mass and then we'd come back home. Momma says okay, time for church and we'd go to church.

PIEHLER: I'm also thinking, cause when you were growing up it was still a Latin mass.

DAVIDSON: All in Latin. Yeah, all in Latin, so it was entirely different than what it is today. But I was born Catholic and raised that way. You know, I went to both churches. Just ... I thought that's what everybody did, you know.

PIEHLER: So you didn't see a tension between the two?

DAVIDSON: They never even talked ... two things my family always ... my mother said we do not discuss religion and politics in this house. And we didn't.

PIEHLER: So your parents never talked politics...

DAVIDSON: No, never. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: Do you know how ... so for example in 1932, do you know who they supported, was it Hoover or Roosevelt?

DAVIDSON: Roosevelt. My dad was a staunch Democrat. We lived in a democratic neighbor(hood) ... and Nassau County's democrat. We went to the Democratic rally. I went to hear President Roosevelt when he was governor, giving his campaign speech when he came to Nassau County to talk. And we all went, it was a big picnic. Everybody just got dressed up and we all went out there and listened to him talk.

PIEHLER: So, well, I mean, I guess, since he's now such a legendary figure, what did you think of him, I mean I know it's...

DAVIDSON: Roosevelt?

PIEHLER: Yeah, at the time, does anything stick out? It sounds like the picnic stuck out more than the...

DAVIDSON: The picnic day ... I wasn't interested ... I mean, we heard him talking but we ... kids just had a good time. We went to eat and play and had a good time. Parents were ... the only thing that stands out in my memory at that picnic was that we were at a table and some guy evidently got drunk and was going around using bad language and my father got up and told him, says, "Don't talk like that around my wife and children." And the guy cussing ... and I said I remember my daddy hit this guy, and knocked him clean across the table. (Laughter) And my mother says, "John, sit down and don't do that again." He says, "Alright. He shouldn't open his big mouth." I remember...that stands out 'cause I thought, man, my dad's great. He just K.O.ed that guy. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: So he was a tough, I mean even with...

DAVIDSON: He was an old ... yeah, he's an old time army man and you didn't use bad language around women and children. That's just ... he was that kind ... and he was rough and tough hisself, but that's what he believed.

BOWEN: You mentioned being raised partially with your brother as well. Which church did he tend to follow, or did he?

DAVIDSON: My brother would follow my mother. He was more of a ... he grew up ... uh ... I guess sorta under that tutelage and he ... really went to church and when he died ... this sort of Methodist church, I think.

BOWEN: Was he as conservative as she was, or...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, he was kinda like my mother, more conservative. My sister and I are staunch Catholics and they were sort of the other way.

BOWEN: Okay.

PIEHLER: How old was your sister when your parents died?

DAVIDSON: I was ten and she was eighteen.

PIEHLER: So she was also much older, I mean, not quite as old, but still...

DAVIDSON: I was an afterthought. (Laughing) My mother thought I was a tumor. That I remember. She was always talking about...yeah he was a tumor. I was a big mistake.

PIEHLER: I'm curious that you mentioned growing up in a mixed neighborhood in Inwood. What about your other neighborhoods? Um, for example, Harlem in the ...

DAVIDSON: Most Harlem was all ... mostly black and Hispanic area...

PIEHLER: 'Cause I know there were some Italian communities still in.

DAVIDSON: There were some, but they were on the Lower Eastside.

PIEHLER: Okay, so you...

DAVIDSON: And, um ...we sort of lived (pause) in from like 110th St to 125th St. was mostly Hispanic, from 125th St. on up was mostly black as far as Harlem was concerned. Further up that just sort of Irish and uh ... different communities like that. So, mostly I grew up either in Italian and black neighborhood or a black neighborhood.

BOWEN: What are your memories of Harlem during that period, because you're really just coming off the Harlem Renaissance when everything's going on there, I mean that was the center...

DAVIDSON: I remember the riots ... um...

PIEHLER: What do you remember?

DAVIDSON: I remember not being able to go out, having to stay in the house, looking out the window and the people storming and breaking windows out, and doing all sorts of weird things in the street. Uh, I don't ... I remember the riot...that I remember, the riots that they had at that time. Uh ... but I remember that as a teenager, and uh ... and of course growing up as a teenager belonged to different ... boys' club ... I belonged to the Catholic boy's club and Abyssinia Baptist boy's club ... to play basketball and uh, box...belonged to different clubs.

PIEHLER: So, okay, did you ever go to any of the services at Abyssinia?

DAVIDSON: Sure. Yeah ... my brother and Adam Clayton Powell were good friends, so...

PIEHLER: So you've heard ... you heard Adam Clayton Powell preach...

DAVIDSON: Oh yeah, I remember that very well, yeah, yeah, quite well.

PIEHLER: What are your memories ... I mean ... 'cause...

DAVIDSON: A dynamic speaker. Charismatic. Just a...he's a big tall guy 'round 6' 2", 3" and uh, real stately and a booming voice, just sort of uh ... magnetic personality. I remember a lot ... during the time ... I remember as a teenager ... uh ... working with the youth group ... he had ... organized kids in the ... I remember we had this jitney thing that we weren't going to ride the buses because they wouldn't hire black drivers. And we used to get out on the streets and pass out pamphlets and things [to] keep people from riding the bus. And he was one of the one that I think got my ... before I went into the service ... uh, or when uh ... between the time I did my first year in college, he got me a job in the War Department. And I worked down at number One Wall Street. I guess, oh, maybe six months before I went into the army.

PIEHLER: What were you doing?

DAVIDSON: Worked in the Photostatic department in the War Department down there, and uh, you'd have super secret clearance because you had to photostat all these different government documents. I'd almost forgotten that.

PIEHLER: Yeah, you had...

DAVIDSON: (Coughs) I remember I worked there for about six months. And uh, when I first got the job, Adam ... Clayton Powell set me down and said they gonna start hiring blacks so you need to go down there and apply for a job, so I did. And they hired me, just ... bam ... (Laughs) And I would ... and then they ... I went for an interview with the FBI and uh, they asked all the people what I'd did in school and all that. And evidently they got me clearance, 'cause I got a job...I had top-secret clearance. I could work with all the documents and things ... sorta...

PIEHLER: What do you ... do you remember what ... was this after Pearl Harbor or...

DAVIDSON: No, this was at ... this was ... yeah, it was after Pearl ... I worked there from ... 'cause I'd finished my first half semester in school and uh ... I dropped out because I ran out of money. So I said I was gonna work and go back to school, so I started working there, like in ... February of '42 and I worked there until September. Then I went in the army.

PIEHLER: And what was a typical day like, when you were working at the...

DAVIDSON: Working there ... you ...you'd go in and uh... we ... our building was number one Wall street, right on the corner of Broadway and Wall. And you'd go in and you had to have clearance. When you went in you had a badge. And uh then you got on the elevator and when you got up to the floor where War department was you had to uh ... also be identified again by security and then you went into ... sorta ... took your coat off and hung it up, then you put on this smock. And I worked in the Photostat department where we copied documents ... and war plans and stuff like that. It was supposed to be super secret, but you know ... today it's not secret.

PIEHLER: Well, I'm curious. Like what were the ... what kind ... was there anything interesting you were copying? Did you ever have a chance to look at..?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, there ... I mean ...it was deployment of troops, number of people in a army, and where different armies were going. And who was committed to do what and who was gonna be the general. We did a lot of that stuff.

PIEHLER: So the work was very routine. But the material was...

DAVIDSON: The material was very secret. And if you had something ... if they had the super secret on it, uh, the only two of us could do that. Nobody else ... the other guys had to leave the room and they'd lock the door. And he and I would do it. And uh, some pages I couldn't see, because I wouldn't have as much clearance as he did. 'Cause I knew what it said because I

copied them. And you had to develop ... that time we had to photograph...you'd develop it after you'd take the picture. You'd run it through the developer and then the fixer...

PIEHLER: Well, 'cause I've seen the old in the files...

DAVIDSON: Oh, the old...

PIEHLER: I mean you're basically taking photo... I mean very much like...

DAVIDSON: Actually ... basically was doing photographs. And you'd just go through the usual routine. You put it in the developer and the fixer and then you swing ... you hang it up to dry, and you run it back through and make a white copy and do the same thing all over again. And you had to stand all the copies that you didn't do had to be destroyed right there. We had a little furnace thing and they just stick in a few and burn 'em up. So it was interesting. We did that...

PIEHLER: Could you have ... uh ... you enlisted, but with that job could you have stayed out of the war?

DAVIDSON: I think I probably could, but I just...

PIEHLER: Yeah, I mean it wasn't an option...

DAVIDSON: I just... wasn't really an option once I registered for the draft, you know, and they said they're starting calling up people. And they were calling up people and they were calling guys ... And then I said I want to be in ... I wanted to go to the cavalry is why I enlisted. Like my father, I wanted to be in the cavalry, so I enlisted to go into the cavalry. And they did send me out to Fort Riley, Kansas, where I did my basic training, which was cavalry units.

PIEHLER: Well we're going to come back to that, I still want to have some ... ask you some a bit more. I want to ask a little about your schooling, because you were both in the New York City School system and particularly I'll ask you specifically about Stuyvesant, but you were initially in Nassau County in Inwood.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, I went to PS-2, in Inwood, Long Island. And when I left there, I was in the fifth grade. That was when my parents died. And I moved to ... uh, Harlem live with my brother and I went to PS-89, finished the sixth grade. And then after that, I went to Frederick Douglas Junior High, which is 139, for junior high school and I did that in two years instead of three. And then I took an exam in our senior year to see whether you go to either Townsend Harris or Stuyvesant. Those two you had to take an exam to get in. And I got accepted to Stuyvesant, where I did my high school three years.

PIEHLER: How good was ... I guess ... what was the difference between Inwood and ... the Inwood public school and the public school you went to in New York for...

DAVIDSON: Inwood public school I knew everybody. In public school in New York, you didn't know nobody except the people in your class...

PIEHLER: What was the size difference? 'Cause I know...

DAVIDSON: Size was dramatic, was much larger. 89 was on the same block that I lived in, but school was so much bigger and so many more students. And you didn't know a half of 'em.

PIEHLER: And what about your teachers, were they ... what was the difference between the Inwood school and the...

DAVIDSON: Inwood schoolteachers knew you and they knew your parents. And if you did something, your parents knew it before you did probably. If you got corrected in school, you got corrected again at home. And at that time, the teachers didn't spare you. If you were bad you got whipped and you went on to ... got home and got another one.

PIEHLER: Did the Inwood school have any black teachers? That you knew of?

DAVIDSON: I don't remember. I don't remember seeing ... at that time I don't ... I think they did, but I'm not sure.

PIEHLER: Yeah, you didn't have any in.

DAVIDSON: I didn't have any, no.

PIEHLER: What about when you came to Harlem?

DAVIDSON: Yes, they were mixed. Teachers were both black and white.

PIEHLER: And um, your success on the ... on a very competitive exam to get into Stuyvesant or Townsend Harris. What do you attribute it to? Was it, were you prepared well by your teachers, were you...

DAVIDSON: I think I was prepared ... We had a teacher, when I first went to 139 that had just started a program called Rapid Advance. And uh... our teacher was a man named Countee Cullen, who was a black poet. And he said I'm gonna make ... I'll take sixty boys in this class he said I'll make them good students. And out of that sixty, I remember now, only one turned out bad. Every one of the fifty-nine little boys either doctors, lawyers, policemen, judges, different things. But only guy out of that class that turned out to be a drunk. And I treated him when I was an intern. I remember him.

PIEHLER: Really?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, his name was Horace Groves. I remember...I'll never forget his name.

PIEHLER: And so he was part of...

DAVIDSON: He was the only one in that class that turned out bad. Everybody else went to some sort of professional school.

PIEHLER: And you attribute a lot of this to this...

DAVIDSON: To him, to Countee Cullen. Because he ... he had a method of teaching which probably unusual. He uh, taught us that you could, there's nothing that you can't read and there's nothing that you can't do. There's nothing that you can't figure out. And he says we're gonna teach you how to memorize things. And what he would do, take out class and we'd walk around a block, a city block and come back. He'd say I want you to write down everything you saw. Write down ... I can't even remember the street. (Laughs) And we did that every day for a month and at the end of a month we were supposed to be able to draw every building and write down every street number and everything we saw in that building in the windows. There were some stores and it was right down ... And at the end of the month everybody in the class could tell you exactly everything he saw in that window. He worked on your memory. He said you have to learn how to memorize without being aware that you're memorizing. I want you to look at something and be able tell me what you saw. I want you to read something and tell me what it says in your own words without repeating what ... and he taught us to ... he said you should be able ... Don't read this way, you read straight down a page. He taught us how to read fast, how to comprehend, how to give back what you read. Which ... hadn't been for him I don't think I probably could've made it through school, but ... He taught us ... I went from seven A to Eight A to nine A in like a year's time. And graduated from nine B so do ... Junior high school supposed to be three years, but everybody in class did it in two, which was what he promised that we would do and everybody did it.

PIEHLER: So did you have him for both...for the two-year stretch?

DAVIDSON: Two-year stretch. We had him straight through for two years. He was our mentor, our teacher, our confidant. He did...it was his class and he had us for the two years that we were there. And we were the first class, so...uh

PIEHLER: So did you have him all day for class or did you...

DAVIDSON: We changed classes.

PIEHLER: You changed classes...

DAVIDSON: Yeah...we changed classes. But he was our homeroom teacher and our English teacher. So, we got him...twice. English was what he felt that this was what you need to do. And he taught us grammar by you write the way you talk. And he says if you talk correctly, you'll write correctly and you'll understand correctly. So, this is how I learned to read and write. Basically because of what he taught us.

PIEHLER: I've...said to some people the most impressive thing on your whole record, I mean you have a very impressive record...is Stuyvesant. Because Stuyvesant at that time was...from interviewing...I knew a Stuyvesant grad and he talked about...he said I really...I'm just a run of

the mill...Stuyvesant grad and he became a senior executive at Seagram's USA. He sort of viewed himself as a run of the mill graduate. And he said there was a group at Stuyvesant...

DAVIDSON: It was way above, oh yeah, I wasn't in the elite group-

PIEHLER: Yeah, he said...

DAVIDSON: I was sort of in the middle, I just kind of floated through there...

PIEHLER: But it was a very...going to Stuyvesant, what were your first reactions and...

DAVIDSON: ...to me I thought it was as great school because I wanted to be a doctor. And I was fortunate enough to get a chance to study the sciences and the mathematics and I was...very good in math. That was my forte. Although I don't think I was as good in biology as I was in math. But I was really good in math and won a couple of medals and things like that. But that's what really attracted me and they really...we went math all the way up to calculus in high school. That was interesting. And the things that I learned at Stuyvesant my first year in college, I don't think I opened a book cause I'd already had it. So, it made a big difference.

PIEHLER: So you were in calculus at Stuyv...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, at Stuyvesant at that time. But that was the interesting part. The other interesting side effect was the guy that was...that's another thing I'd forgot...the guy that was in charge of the war department when I worked was a Stuyvesant graduate and when he looked at my resume and said, "Oh, you went to Stuyvesant, so did I." He says, "Well, you're alright." (Laughs) Which I think probably helped me get the job at the time because he, himself, Mr. Black, he was our supervisor. He was a Stuyvesant grad.

PIEHLER: ...my sense of Stuyvesant...is you're drawing people from throughout the city...

DAVIDSON: You get people from all over New York. It's not...it's a multi-borough institution. Townsend Harrison was our super-elite guys. They were really brainy. And Stuyvesant was brainy guys, but we weren't of the super-elite group. We just sort of tagged along behind. We felt that we were just as good as they were, but...

PIEHLER: But there was a rivalry...

DAVIDSON: There was a rivalry between the two of us. We sort of evened each other out. We did some things a lot better than they did and they did some things a whole lot better than we did. But it was that rivalry between the two.

PIEHLER: Did you develop any friendships with people from different parts of the city. I mean, what were the cliques in Stuyvesant?

DAVIDSON: East Side, West Side.

PIEHLER: So that was a big...

DAVIDSON: That was a big clique. If you were from the East Side you sort of hung out with these guys that were from the West Side and sort of hung out with this group. And you just sort of picked your groups, you know. There weren't really a lot of cliques. We had some fights, which is normal in high school. You're gonna fight. You're from uptown; I'm from downtown. You're gonna tell me...shoving and pushing and mouthing off. But just the usual things. Really, you didn't have a lot of...at Stuyvesant...you didn't have time for cliques. You had to really get your work and if you wanted to be in extra-curricular you had to make real good grades in order to play basketball or run track or be on the fencing team or gymnastics or whatever you...if you didn't make the grade they'd kick you off the team.

PIEHLER: What team...were you on any team?

DAVIDSON: I ran track and I played a little basketball. But you had to make good grades...grades fall, you got kicked off.

PIEHLER: Did you ever run into a problem any of your semesters?

DAVIDSON: My French. (Laughs.) French was my hardest subject. I had trouble with that little lady who taught us. A Mrs. Popo, a little short redheaded lady...I'll always remember her.

PIEHLER: Cause you said she expected you from day one to only speak French.

DAVIDSON: The first day I walked in the class. Parlez-vous Francais? Monsieur or Madame? NO! You know, I don't speak no French. And she told us from now on in this class you speak nothing but French. And that's they way you made your grade. And I learned to speak a little French everyday. I tried to make yourself unobtrusive in the class. But it was interesting. Very good, excellent teachers, excellent tutorial. I think Stuyvesant gave us also a chance to improve our cultural aspects, because as we got to be seniors you got to go to plays. They took us to the Museum of Art, Museum of History, the planetarium, all those a part of your fine arts course, what they call a course in fine arts. And we got to go to see operas and various stage productions...members of that class...but that was part of it. And you got a grade. If you didn't show up, you lost a point. So...

PIEHLER: So you really felt compelled...

DAVIDSON: Really felt compelled to do it and you learned a lot. Surprisingly it helps. I didn't realize how much it helped until I took the professional aptitude test, which you take as a senior. See whether or not you're ready to go to college and that really helped. Cause a whole part on there I never would have known had I not been in that class. It was an interesting experience.

PIEHLER: You mentioned...part of the desire to go to Stuyvesant was that you wanted to be a doctor. When did you want to become a doctor, do you have any remembrance of...

DAVIDSON: From the time I was small, I always wanted to be a doctor. I think it started when I was a kid. My mother used to have migraine headaches and she was always tellin' me, baby, rub my head and sit up in the chair behind her and rub her head, put mentholatums, some kind of eucalyptus stuff my grandmother had and she always said I would relieve her and she says you got the healing hands. And I said well, I'm going to be a doctor so I can discover a cure for headaches. And I think from that time on I just had that in the back of my mind, I wanted to be a doctor.

PIEHLER: ...I guess before leaving New York for college...because I want to follow up about being a doctor, I guess, I'm curious did you go to the World's Fair of 1939?

DAVIDSON: Yes. Certainly, absolutely. As often as I could. Yeah, it was interesting out at Flushing Meadows. We went to the world's fair just as, I think we went at least once or twice a week. It was interesting. I enjoyed a lot of it.

PIEHLER: ...there was a question on the tip of my tongue, but, um...did you ever work while you were growing up, when you were in high school or junior high?

DAVIDSON: Yes, when I was going to high school...in high school you know, we went to school half a day, from eight in the morning to twelve-thirty. And then you had the rest of the day off. Which is the way Stuyvesant...kids were in the tenth grade, ninth grade, really in high school, you had to go in the afternoons, and then once you got to the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth you went in the mornings, half a day. And I worked in the afternoons at a paper factory, which was...five blocks from school. And I'd stop there and then work down there for \$20 a week cleaning up and go on home. Yeah, I had a job. You had to have a job, keep you busy. My brother felt if you didn't work, you didn't earn your keep and that's what I did. I worked every day.

PIEHLER: So you contributed to the household budget?

DAVIDSON: Yes, yes. As part of my...I think my sister-in-law just saved it. I got it back, but...

PIEHLER: But it was expected that you would...

DAVIDSON: It was expected you had to come in and give part of your money to her every week and then...when I wanted to go anywhere she'd give me money to go, so really I wasn't losing anything.

PIEHLER: You mentioned that...your mother was very strict about...cards. What about dancing and music growing up?

DAVIDSON: Not dancing. Music, yeah, you could listen to music, but our mother was that kind of...she was very...she thought dancing and playing cards was just sort of not what the Lord would want you to do, so we didn't do it. We did it, when she wasn't around. (Laughs.)

Where Momma didn't approve, Daddy would never say anything. He knew we were doing it, but he would pretend he didn't know.

PIEHLER: Growing up, what music did you listen to?

DAVIDSON: I listened to big bands. I loved Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Jimmy Lunsford, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman. I liked big band sounds and I loved jazz. That was my forte. We used to sneak out, I guess when I was a teenager and go out and listen to the...at night time we'd kinda sneak out of the house and go listen to the jazz musicians play.

PIEHLER: You mentioned that your father's pension was pretty crucial, because your brother got...because you were a dependent still got money. How tough was it for your neighbors during the Great Depression, particularly in those early years?

DAVIDSON: As far as I can remember, living in Long Island, we lived in...during the Depression, is that everybody had some sort of garden and everybody grew vegetables. And whatever you had, you shared with the neighbors, it was a never...I don't think any of us ever went hungry. I can't ever remember missing a meal. You know, it may have been the same thing, but we never really missed meals and families in our street that we lived on, everybody exchanged whatever they grew. If you grew something different, we traded off with you. Um, I remember Mrs. Napisch, her husband used to grow tomatoes and greens and we had peach tree and we had potatoes and we traded off with them. Whatever we had, they had. It was never questioned that anybody ever went hungry. Nobody in our neighborhood went hungry. I can't remember anybody going hungry. And when my dad got his pension, we all went to town once a month and get loaded up and brought all this food back home. We had a big pantry; a room like, oh, about half the size of this one. Momma canned everything that we grew. Anything that grew in the ground she could can. And we ate well all winter long. Nobody ever...we'd share, you've got green beans? Yeah, I got greens; you can have this...trade off. Go over there and ask Aunt Emma if she's got any potatoes. Okay. Take a jar of tomatoes over there, you know, just sort of trade out like that so...nobody went hungry that I can remember.

PIEHLER: What about in Harlem, because it's still the '30's and you...do you remember how people were doing in your immediate part of the building?

DAVIDSON: Well, we lived...the apartment...my brother, cause see at that time he had a government job so it wasn't a real...we did very well. And my sister-in-law worked and he worked, so you know, as far as being without...we were just never...I never really...I knew people were having problems and I knew you had to be conservative. You couldn't waste anything, you know, but we never really went without. It was just kind of tough, but...in Harlem there was a lot of people...soup lines and things like that, but...when Roosevelt got in, he got the NYA and CCC and all different things.

PIEHLER: Did you ever have any NYA money?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, I worked for them, uh, used to work in the evenings out on Ellis Island. That was part of our job. That was one of the night jobs we had in the summer time and uh, we

had to go through all these old log books and try to identify these peoples names who claimed that they came over or their parents came over on a certain boat. Very difficult trying to cipher what they wrote, Polish names and Irish names and all kinds, Italian names, Greek names and the difficulty is this...my father came over in 1907 on such and such a ship. And we'd get the book out and we'd look and have to go through there trying to find the names that...if we did that you just had to copy them out the best you could to cipher what it was. But that was our job, we went through all the archives and tried to copy out the names so the people could identify their ancestor.

PIEHLER: How interesting.

DAVIDSON: It was interesting. Very fascinating, that was a fascinating job. I got a lot of jobs. (Laughs.)

PIEHLER: ...Ellis Island was still an active station when you were working there...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, and we did this at night when...and we didn't get into where they were. This was a nighttime job. We worked there during...going through the books.

PIEHLER: Well, I have to ask you now...what other...you worked in a paper factory...what other jobs...

DAVIDSON: I worked in the paper factory when I came out of the army.

PIEHLER: That was after the war?

DAVIDSON: After the war, yeah, but this, the Ellis Island was before, before the war. And the War Department, both of those were before I went into the army.

PIEHLER: Any other jobs before the...

DAVIDSON: Other than a local grocery boy, carrying groceries from the local grocery store.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, you mentioned being involved with Abyssinia, the Abyssinian youth group and it sounds like your brother was very involved...

DAVIDSON: Very active, yeah, he was very politically active.

PIEHLER: Was he an usher over at Abyssinia?

DAVIDSON: No. He was just sort of in the politically active group. He's on that committee, Adam Powell had a bunch of community activists who were on a committee and worked in trying to improve relationships in New York City.

PIEHLER: I'm curious because you had mentioned passing out leaflets, the boycott of the buses. And I'm curious if you could recollect, cause I think it's hard for students...particularly students reading this...even segregation in the south is a very distant and hazy thing they learned.

Even in New York, segregation is not legal, but there is a lot of sort of informal discrimination and informal segregation. Could you recount some of the rules and the rules that existed...and the ones that there were efforts to challenge them, cause you mentioned the bus drive...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, what they challenged in New York was the fact that people in Harlem rode the buses and the subways and they did not have any conductors or drivers who were black. So, the only way they could fight this and still keep their job would be to form what they call a jitney committee. For a nickel, you could ride with somebody who had a car and you'd ride four or five blocks. And somebody else get in and you'd pay and you'd pay the jitney driver so he could buy gas to keep us going. Instead of riding the bus, you'd ride the jitney. And we'd pass these out, people would want to get on the subway and we'd stand there and block it and give them papers, Ride the Jitney, Don't Ride the Subway. And New York City finally came across. They started training guys to be conductors and engineers and bus drivers. But there was sort of a subtle segregation, it wasn't any overt segregation, you just, if you were black you wouldn't get hired. Uh, then the old saying at that time was if you were black you were the last hired and the first fired and that's what the discriminatory actions were in New York at that time as far as I can remember.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, what about accommodations, places like restaurants and hotels and others...what sense did you have growing up, I mean....

DAVIDSON: Growing up, you know, we didn't go to a lot of big places. If you went downtown they'd wait on you but you sort of had to get at the end of the line, you know. They didn't refuse you, but they made you uncomfortable, so you never really went down there. You just sort of stayed in your neighborhood. And we had movies and everything else in Harlem. So you really had no where to go, why would you want to go down there, other than to go down to the Paramount or something like that. Big shows and they have a big time band and you want to go see them, but you buy a ticket, you know...

PIEHLER: So you didn't feel...

DAVIDSON: Sort of a subtle segregation. It wasn't really overt like it was in the south. When I first came south ...my first trip to North Carolina was that I got off and said I need a drink. I went to the fountain that said White; I didn't pay any attention to it. My uncle said you can't drink out of there. I tell him, why, it's water? He says, "It's a white fountain." I said, "No it's not. It's just like..." But anyway he squared me away. He says, "That says white and that says colored." I said, "What's the difference? You drink out of the water fountain you want to drink." He says, "No, we drink out of that one." And that was my real first brutal exposure to segregation in the south. I thought, dang, this is ridiculous. It's just water and they both came from the same pipe. What difference does it make?

PIEHLER: ...in terms of becoming a doctor...did you think you would be able to pay for it financially? Cause you even mentioned that you...

DAVIDSON: No, I didn't think that I...if it hadn't been for the war or the army, I doubt very seriously if I could have afforded it on my own. It would have been a piecemeal, go now, work

now, go now, like that. Probably not, didn't have any parental backing at the time. My brother probably couldn't have afforded to send me to med school if I wanted to go, so going in the army was a blessing, because it paid for the rest of my college education and also the rest of my...four-fifths of my medical school education.

PIEHLER: I'm curious...just some general...before going to Lincoln and then the war...any New Yorker of the '30's, I always like to ask any memories of Fiorello LaGuardia? Cause he's become such a legendary figure?

DAVIDSON: The little Flower? (Laughs.) Oh, yeah, Fiorello LaGuardia was a dynamic little short Italian guy, and...everybody liked him. He did things in a flamboyant manner...to me he was a little short...he wasn't any bigger than I was...I thought this little, bitty guy. But he was a dynamic person. He was a real good orator. He had a sort of charismatic attitude. And people liked Fiorello, he just did a lot for New York. It think he was mayor during the time...during the boycott - he was one of the reasons things went so well, cause he agreed, yeah, let's do it! But he did a good job, as far as I can remember. I wasn't into politics, just doing this as a sort of a little teenager something to do, you know, get into the middle of all this mess. But he evidently was a good man.

PIEHLER: ...and another...you were very young when it occurred, but I'm curious...the Garvey movement, the followers of Marcus Garvey, did you have any sense of that, in the '30's?

DAVIDSON: I vaguely knew about it. I remember people talking about it. My thought was, why the hell would you want to go back to Africa? You know, you're here in America, why you want to go...

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DAVIDSON: ... I thought that Marcus Garvey was just sort of a you know, one of these fanatical people who wanted to get...let's all go back to where we came from. I thought, well hell, I wasn't born over there. I wouldn't know what the heck to do if I did go back. And I just sort of...you know about it, but you really weren't that interested in it.

PIEHLER: Yeah, I'll bring that back up because you had said to me once earlier that you had thought of going to Ghana...after independence. But I'll save that...what about W.E.B. DuBois? Because your brother was fairly active with Adam Clayton Powell.

DAVIDSON: He knew him and I knew he was you know...I guess I wasn't that interested, you know, politically and being active other than...only thing I did those things because that's what everybody else did.

PIEHLER: The youth group...

DAVIDSON: The youth group and it was something to do. Just sort of hanging out.

PIEHLER: ...in terms of going to college, why Lincoln? What led you to go to Lincoln Memorial?

DAVIDSON: I went...not Memorial...

PIEHLER: Excuse me, Lincoln University...

DAVIDSON: ... University in Pennsylvania. I guess the reason is one of the doctors who was a fan of my brothers, one of my brother's real good friends was a graduate of Lincoln. And he used to always tell me when you go to school; you got to go to Lincoln. That's the best school in the country. And I just grew up with the idea that Lincoln was the place I wanted to go as a school, because that was where Dr. Wahlberg went. He was a doctor and I thought, shoot, that's...if I get to go I can do the same thing he did. And he says if you do good I'll help you go to med school. He always told me that as a young kid coming along. I just sort of...and that was another one of my little extra jobs. I used to clean up his office on Saturdays. And get a chance to read the medical books. I was the neighborhood authority on female anatomy. (Laughs.)

PIEHLER: Well, you actually had some real knowledge from reading...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, I had some real...reading his books I could tell them what a woman looked like. But that was part...he was the reason I went to Lincoln University. He was...he said, you need to go to Lincoln. It's a good school and you need to get out of town and I always grew up with the idea that I wanted to go to Lincoln.

PIEHLER: ...I probably asked you the first time we met, and we talked about it. I said, hadn't you thought of going to City College, particularly having gone to Stuyvesant?

DAVIDSON: I thought about it, but I did not want to go...it's like going to high school. I thought that going to City College was just like going to Stuyvesant. Every morning get on the subway, go to school, come home, and get ready to go, go back to school tomorrow. There's no campus life, nothing to do, because I live here. And I just wanted to go away and see what it was like. Even though I didn't think I could afford it, but I was going to go anyway.

PIEHLER: And you did get into Lincoln...

DAVIDSON: And I did. I went down there and...(laughs) interesting, I went down to apply...my grades and everything, said yeah, you're accepted. So I went down to register and the registrar's a Dr. Keener. He was a German who taught all the languages there. And he asked me what did I want. I said I wanted to register. He says how much money do you have. I said \$35. (Laughs) He said, son, what are you going to do with \$35. I said that's what I brought to register. He said \$35 won't even buy you a book. I said, well that's all I got. And he said...he hit himself in the head, he says my God, where do they find you guys at? He says all right, sign and fill out these papers. We'll give you a job. And I got a job as a waiter in the freshman dining hall. And also played football so that helped a little athletic scholarship, a little work scholarship and what money I had on my own.

PIEHLER: What year did you enter Lincoln?

DAVIDSON: I went there in September 1941.

PIEHLER: September '41. And you...did have problems paying in the end...

DAVIDSON: Oh yeah, couldn't pay it. So, I didn't go back when I finished my first half-year. Didn't have enough money to go back to school and I didn't want to put a burden on my aunt who was trying to help me, so I said well, I'll just drop out this semester. And I'll work and of course, while I was in Lincoln, Pearl Harbor came along and I registered for the draft. That's when I came out and I went to work at the War Department. And I enjoyed the War Department, it was a nice job and good money and you had to dress up everyday and be important. But then I felt, well, they drafted everybody in my neighborhood. And I thought, God, I'm going to be next and they're going to send me somewhere I don't want to go. And I wanted to be in the cavalry. So I told my aunt, I'm going to join the army. And we talked about it for a month, finally she says okay. Cause I wasn't old enough to in on my own. Somebody had to sign for you. So she says all right, I'll sign. So she signed, I got in the army that way.

PIEHLER: Just before...asking you about the army I just wanted to ask you a little about Lincoln before the war, because you would go back to Lincoln on the GI Bill. What was Lincoln like?

DAVIDSON: Lincoln was a very small, traditionally black college. Student body at that time was like 250.

PIEHLER: And you'd gone to Stuyvesant. Just to get a comparison, what was the size of Stuyvesant roughly?

DAVIDSON: Oh, god, at Stuyvesant I had more students in my senior class...I graduated we had 500 in my class.

PIEHLER: So 500 just in your class...

DAVIDSON: 500 in the senior class, so that...and Lincoln had 250, 300 at the most in the whole school. So tremendous difference. You go to Lincoln, you knew everybody from seniors to freshman, from dishwasher to the gardener, everybody knew each other. So, it was like a big family. And Lincoln had students, black students from all over the country. Either their grandfather, their father, their brother, somebody related to them went to Lincoln.

PIEHLER: And how well prepared were you for Lincoln?

DAVIDSON: Excellent. I went to Lincoln my first year; I didn't really have to study. Cause everything I had, I'd already had at Stuyvesant...if you passed your senior year in Stuyvesant, you could pass your freshman year at any college in the country, cause you'd already had preparatory. I took all the advanced studies anyway, so I was very well prepared.

PIEHLER: You mentioned you played football. What position did you play?

DAVIDSON: I played running back and guard.

PIEHLER: And did you play regularly your freshman year?

DAVIDSON: A freshman team, yeah.

PIEHLER: So you played on the freshman...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, freshman team, sort of substitute. We had two teams. Basically just upperclassmen and freshmen. Course if somebody got hurt in upper class, you played.. That's how you got a chance to play.

PIEHLER: What schools did you play against?

DAVIDSON: Morgan State, Howard, Virginia Union, um, who else? There were a couple more, Cheney State Teachers College, Shippensburg, some little small colleges in Pennsylvania, and then a few smaller black colleges in the south.

PIEHLER: And how important were fraternities?

DAVIDSON: Very important. Every ... you belonged to a fraternity.

PIEHLER: Did you...

DAVIDSON: I didn't pledge, until I came out of the service. I was going...I knew what I was going

PIEHLER: But, you knew you were going to pledge...

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah, I knew which one I was going to pledge to anyway.

PIEHLER: Which one were you going to...

DAVIDSON: Omega Si Phi. Because that was the one that Charlie belonged to. (Laughs) I did everything he did.

PIEHLER: The doctor that was your mentor, his name was...

DAVIDSON: Charlie...Charles Wahlberg.

PIEHLER: Charles Wahlberg. He was a pretty important mentor then.

DAVIDSON: He was. He was just sort of...he and my brother, good friends and we used him. When I got sick he was my doctor. He was an obstetrician, but I got sick I went to see him. He says, I take women. I don't care. I ain't going to none of these other quacks. (Laughs.)

PIEHLER: Dr. Wahlberg...did he go to Meharry too?

DAVIDSON: No, he went to Howard.

PIEHLER: Howard.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, he didn't go to Meharry. But when I got out of college, you went to the first med school that accepted you because everybody...GI Bill and everybody and their brother's trying to get to some professional school. Meharry was the first one that said yes, so that's the first one I went to. I got Howard about a week later, but...

PIEHLER: But you had already... DAVIDSON: I'd already sent my \$50. I wasn't getting ready to lose fifty bucks. I came on to Meharry anyway.

PIEHLER: Jason, before we go on to the army...do you have any...

BOWEN: Um, your brother seemed to be a very prominent man in the community as far as having contacts or knowing people. What was his educational background?

DAVIDSON: He graduated from Livingston College, which was a small black college in North Carolina, Salisbury.

BOWEN: Okay.

PIEHLER: Your dad had been a Buffalo Soldier...

DAVIDSON: Yes.

PIEHLER: And you wanted to join the cavalry...

DAVIDSON: I wanted to join the cavalry because of that.

PIEHLER: ... Growing up did you ever see any war movies? That you remember.

DAVIDSON: I saw some, but I don't remember what they were...*All Quiet on the Western Front*...

PIEHLER: You did see that?

DAVIDSON: I saw that, yeah. That's the only one I really remember. Most I ...was into cowboy movies. Jones, Tom Mix...

PIEHLER: So you did see Tom Mix too?

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah, oh yeah.

PIEHLER: ...you enlisted in 1942, what month did you enlist? Do you remember? Cause you had worked at the War Department for about six months?

DAVIDSON: I think I worked...it had to be in September...instead of going back to school I went in the army. That's why I volunteered.

PIEHLER: ...you mention you'd volunteered in part...everyone in your neighborhood had been...

DAVIDSON: Everybody in my neighborhood had been drafted, so I decided, I'm not going to wait on this cause my number's going to come up next. So, I just said I'm going to go on and volunteer and get into where I want to go, in the cavalry. The only way you could get...they promised you if you volunteered they'd send you where you wanted to go. And which they did.

BOWEN: You mentioned you had to...you know, get your aunt to sign the papers since you were underage. What were your family's reactions to your enlistment?

DAVIDSON: Nobody agreed with me but her. My brother was against it. He got mad at her because she signed and I said well, that's what I want to do, I'm going to be an adult in a little while, so I can do what I want.

PIEHLER: Why didn't your brother want you to go? Did he...

DAVIDSON: I don't know. He just never did. He never said why. He just never wanted me...

PIEHLER: He really just...thought you should wait it out.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, he thought I should just wait until I get drafted. No, I don't want to wait on the draft.

PIEHLER: ...you signed up that you enlisted in September and when did they actually induct you? Did they induct you and ship you out right away?

DAVIDSON: Yeah. I got inducted within like two weeks and they sent me to Camp Upton in New York and from there, they sent me out to Fort Riley, Kansas where I did my basic training in the cavalry.

PIEHLER: I guess one of my memories...you had done some traveling before the war. You'd traveled to North Carolina...?

DAVIDSON: Yes.

PIEHLER: ...had you traveled anywhere else?

DAVIDSON: No.

PIEHLER: What was that journey like to Kansas? DAVIDSON: Like forever. (Laughs) I thought...that's going out west. I didn't realize how far it was. But it was like you rode forever on a train. Had a bunch of troop trains and we're gonna ride forever and ever and ever. And then got out there in Kansas and thought, god, this is out here in the middle of nowhere. I think...you had to change trains in Kansas City. And then you got on this local train to carry you out to Junction City, which was where Fort Riley Kansas was in Junction City, Kansas. That's out there in the plains and the desert. I thought.

PIEHLER: And very different from New York.

DAVIDSON: Very different. Very, very different. Just a tremendous amount of difference.

BOWEN: You mentioned in the Department of the Army form that I have here that later wartime draft policies were somewhat biased...

DAVIDSON: Yes.

BOWEN: I was going to ask in what ways did you think...

DAVIDSON: Um, it was segregated. When you went in the Army you either went...you had to go to an all black unit. There weren't any mixed units at that time. And when we went to Fort Riley, Kansas, we were the black...on our part of the camp and whites on the other part of the camp, so a totally segregated Army.

BOWEN: I guess especially after coming out of such a large diverse city as well as a high school such as Stuyvesant that this really must have been...

DAVIDSON: A sort of culture shock a little, but not unexpected, since I'd already been to, my one trip to the south. I found out hey, you know, that segregation is alive and well and...cause see at Camp Upton, we're all mixed.

PIEHLER: You were mixed?

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah, Camp Upton. Yes, you were just a number and....

PIEHLER: So you weren't segregated in...

DAVIDSON: No, not in Camp Upton. When we were first inducted, everybody from New York was all in just one big...got mixed out there at Camp Upton. And then from there they shipped you to what you wanted to go and then you knew you were going to...and I really didn't realize it was going to be an all black unit till I got out to Fort Riley. Hey, you know, everybody in here...it's all black unit, nothing else. And we were really segregated at that time.

PIEHLER: What about when you got off base? How much segregation was there at Fort Riley?

DAVIDSON: Totally.

PIEHLER: Totally, even off base, the community?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, the community was all totally segregated. In Kansas, cause a little town called Junction City and black side, white side. It was still really segregated. Kansas wasn't far enough east or north to not be. Now Kansas City wasn't. Kansas City was sort of a mixture here and there, not a whole lot.

PIEHLER: So you got into Kansas City?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, on pass, but not...you couldn't get a pass until you finished your basic training, which was like first six weeks. Then after that you could get a pass to go into town to Junction City. Then you'd get a weekend pass...took your time, you had to get the train and ride to Kansas City, which was like two hours or something like that.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, what are your memories of basic training for cavalry?

DAVIDSON: Basic training, basically when you first started out it was like anything else, a lot of exercise and becoming familiarized with your weapons and we were doing the obstacle courses and things like that. And then you didn't get into the cavalry until you finished your really basic training of how to be a soldier, then they took you into the horse cavalry, if that's what you wanted. And then you had your...a bunch of horses, sort of what we call herd bounding, just one following the other. You had to learn how to saddle a horse and how to get your cinch on there tight; cause if you didn't you'd get up and slide underneath the horse's belly. (Laughs) It was interesting; a bunch of city kids learning how to ride horses.

PIEHLER: ...had you even ever ridden a horse before?

DAVIDSON: I had. I had some, but not like...not an army horse with a old-time McClellan saddle. You ever been on a McClellan saddle?

PIEHLER: No.

DAVIDSON: It's a hard leather saddle with a gap of about six inches in the middle, open...big pommel in front and with stirrups on the side and skirts. And you had to learn how to put the blanket on a horse first. And then throw your saddle on and reach underneath there and get your cinch belt and tighten it. And most of the horses would blow their belly out so you wouldn't get it tight. (Laughs) And you had to wait until they relaxed and then you yank it real tight, make sure it's tight so it wouldn't slide off, cause a lot of...the first day three-fourths of the guys fell off. (Laughs) Saddles would slide off; you had to get up and do it again. But once you got to learn how to do that, get your saddle on, then you had to learn how to put a bridle, cause they only had a harness and you had to learn how to put the bit in their mouth and learn how to reach up there and grab his mouth down and force that bit in there and throw the reins over his head and fasten it under his chin. It took a while to learn how to get your horse ready to ride. Took you maybe fifteen minutes to get ready to ride and then you'd ride around the corral...and then they'd take you out on a field march. And you spent...you had a ten minute break every hour and you spent your first eight minutes taking care of the horse and then you had two minutes of

rest for yourself and then get back on there. (Laughs) But your horse was important, cause if you didn't take care of him, you didn't get to ride. You know, if something happened to him, then you're on foot out there on your own.

PIEHLER: So you would have to march along if your...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, walk along beside him if anything happened to the horse. So you had to make sure he didn't have any stones in his hooves, when you stopped for rest you check all four hooves and be sure they didn't have any pebbles or rocks in there or something. And be sure the shoes are on tight. You had a lot to do before...and you had to take care of him, give him a drink and eat before you could do it yourself. It was interesting.

PIEHLER: In some ways it's very interesting reflecting on it cause this is ancient history now. I mean, you were part of the last of the cavalry, except for some...

DAVIDSON: We were...

PIEHLER: Except for some ceremonial units now, there's just no more cavalry.

DAVIDSON: I know there wasn't. And then they switched us eventually.

PIEHLER: So you were there even in the transition.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, at the transition, when I left there. After I left Fort Riley and I went to school and then after that I went to the infantry. But Fort Riley was interesting because in the barracks that I assigned to I...Joe Louis had a room and Jackie Robinson and a couple of other famous blacks were in our barracks and they had rooms of their own and they all got to go to officer's candidate school.

PIEHLER: Did you ever meet or run into any...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, seen 'em all the time. I'd see Joe Louis everyday. Sergeant Louis. He'd had this room where nobody bothered him. He was sort of a celebrity on the post.

PIEHLER: So he really had a lot of privileges?

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah. He didn't have to get up with us. He didn't have to do what we did. He had a private room of his own...

PIEHLER: Which is not that kind...particularly for...

DAVIDSON: No. Well, he's the champion of the world, you know, a bigshot boxer and...now Jackie Robinson wasn't...we knew who he was, you know, he was a good athlete and come out of UCLA and how fast he was and he was in that OCS class.

BOWEN: He hadn't reached his prominence yet, though because he didn't join the Dodgers till '48...

DAVIDSON: No, no, this was in 1942.

BOWEN: So, was he on more like a level with the men?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, he's just...an ordinary guy like...

BOWEN: More of a soldier...

DAVIDSON: I just knew him. Alex Haley's brother was in my outfit, George Haley, who's now a lawyer. You know...it was a lot guys that's...some guys were bank presidents and we all in there mixed together, a bunch of eighteen year-old kids just some of us had gone to college and we were all in there together, learning how to be soldiers.

PIEHLER: So you had a high proportion...sounds like you had a high proportion of college...some college or was that...

DAVIDSON: In my outfit, yeah. When I went to Fort Riley there was a higher percentage of college students at Fort Riley than there was later on when I got in the 92nd.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DAVIDSON: But at Fort Riley they had a...I'd say half of the guys had been to college or going to college. And then we had a lot of guys in there who were illiterate, couldn't even read or write their own names so...and that's one of the things I did once I got to be a platoon leader, I had a class...the guy said, will you help me learn how to read? Yeah, I'll help you, so we sort of had a tutorial thing we started on our own, teaching guys how to read and write their own names. Which was interesting. I was amazed that there could be grown men who couldn't read or write. I just...it was a cultural shock, you know?

PIEHLER: Actually I'm delighted you brought it up, because one of the things I've documented on oral history, cause I just sort of assume that almost everyone knows how to read and write. And you're not the first interview, in fact a number of interviews have talked about having people in their unit that didn't know how to read and write.

DAVIDSON: To me it was shocking, because I didn't think that anybody who was adult, you know, I'd grown up in New York, everybody learned to read and write. You know, you had to. You didn't know how to get on a subway or ride the bus you couldn't read, but when I got there in the service, you know, the first time I learned, I guess I'd been there about three or four weeks this guy comes up to me, he says, can you help me read, I can't read this, my wife writes so bad. And I said, well let me that, see if I can make it out. And I read it...it was easy to read, you know, I thought...and he says, would you help me write a letter back to her? Yeah, what you want to say? And I wrote...then it dawned on me one night, he got another letter and I read it and wrote the answer to it. And I said, Carl, I said, hey, come here a minute, let me ask you something. He said, yeah, what do you want? I said, can you read? He looked at me real funny, no. I said, you can't read or write can you? He said, no. He said, would you help me. I said,

yeah. And that's how it started...to me I was just...I could not imagine, here's a man thirty-some years old who could not read or write. He could sign his name and that's all. And a couple of guys could just make an X and you couldn't read the rest of it. And so I...hey, I got a couple of guys and said listen, we got to teach these guys to how to read and write...this is ridiculous they can't read or write. Guy says, well you just, you ain't never been to the south. I said, yeah, I been down there, but I didn't know couldn't read. He says there's a whole lot of them that can't read and write. I said, that's fine, we're going to put an end to this. So that's when I...

PIEHLER: So it started in Ft. Riley where you...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, I started doing it at Fort Riley on my own, just teaching some of the guys in my outfit how to read and write.

PIEHLER: And then when you became a sergeant, later...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, I did it in the 92nd...guys in my outfit who couldn't read or write. I did the same thing again, because I felt that everybody is entitled to know how to read and write, ABCs.

BOWEN: So the group was largely from the south, that were illiterate or...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, mostly guys...every once in a while you get somebody from up north who was originally from the south who had never went to school or some guy said I only went as far as the second grade...you know...I learned my ABCs and that's it, but never learned how to put the words together, so it made a difference.

PIEHLER: What do you remember of your sergeant or sergeants at Fort Riley?

DAVIDSON: They were tough, they taught us...I don't remember any of their names, but I remember our barracks sergeant...he would get us out in the morning and he taught us how to make up the bed and make up your bed like the army, supposed to be able to bounce a quarter off it. Make your sheets and spread tight, they'd bounce a quarter, if it didn't bounce up a foot, then it wasn't tight enough and how to roll your socks and roll your underwear so that you could pack all your clothes in a little foot locker. Everything you own should be able to go in that footlocker, other than your heavy coats and stuff, which you wore and your shoes had to be shined and polished. In the cavalry, you had boots instead of shoes, so we had the cavalry pants and boots that come up to just below your knees.

PIEHLER: So there's even more to shine.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, more to shine...and they all had to shine. You should be able to see yourself in your shoes, that was his comment.

PIEHLER: So I take that you had old-time sergeants who had...

DAVIDSON: Had old-time...these guys that taught us at Fort Riley were old-time! They had been in the 9th and 10th cavalry and these guys had been in the army for like thirty years. You

know, and they were just...the one guy...what was his name...Sergeant Gross. Anyway he was an okay boy...wore his hat flipped up in the front and the back and he must have been...we all called ancient. He was so old and creaky and everything on him, his pants had a crease that'd cut your finger. I mean he was just tough, and he made soldiers out of us. We learned how to walk...do what they called forced march with a full field pack twenty-five miles. You'd walk, run, walk, run, walk, run for twenty-five miles, with a full field pack that's twenty-some pounds on your back, that's...interesting procedure, very interesting. But that was part of your training and then you did your calis-...in the morning you got up first thing you did was calisthenics. Got outside and did all the exercises, then you had to do the duck walk across the stage and which was another interesting...your knees would pop and crack. But he taught...we did a lot of calisthenics. And I got to be an acting corporal because I could do exercises better, most of them cause I was athletic, inclined, so you're going to be up here and instruct, okay. So I got to be an acting...one stripe after my first six weeks, then I got to be barracks sergeant. But that's how...you had to learn to curse real bad (laughs) and...

PIEHLER: So you had heard your share of cursing and had to do your share?

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah...I heard my share and you had to learn how to use it, like...we used to call 'em, kick, top kick...had to kick...what do you have to do? He says, son, if you say two words and they're all in English, then you're not a very good sergeant. (Laughs) He said, every other word ought to be something bad. But that was his attitude...but you had to be a soldier along with it and learned how to carry arms and how to shoot...

PIEHLER: It sounds like you got a fairly solid, basic training...

DAVIDSON: I got a real good, basic training, got a good infantry type basic training, plus then follow that by basic training with horses, learning how to handle the horse and to carry...you learned how to shoot a gun from a moving horse. You had to learn how to...

PIEHLER: So you did have that training?

DAVIDSON: Oh, you had that training, had to learn how to pull a .45 out of the automatic and shoot between the horses ears, and behind you and targets that come up behind you while you're still riding that horse and not holding your reins and doing it with your knees. It was interesting; you learned to be coordinated. That taught you a lot about coordination. And shooting a .45 pistol off the back of a horse is very interesting procedure. It'd probably knock your hands off if you're not prepared...just got a terrible kick to it.

PIEHLER: Yeah, which you don't, I mean, as I said...

DAVIDSON: Well, a Colt .45, you had to learn how to...cause it's the kind that you...you had to learn to give with the gun because if you don't, you'll find yourself getting smacked in the head. But I learned how you just...you had to learn to let the gun...

PIEHLER: Refract the gun...

DAVIDSON: ...your arm and the gun go at the same time, cause then you use the motion of the gun to keep you going and keep your directions in the same way. But it was interesting, treatment. Then you learned how to shoot a M-1 off the back of a horse, then you had to learn how to get off the horse and roll on the ground and fire at somebody and then pick up and get back on the horse they was at a sort of a trot. But it was interesting, getting on a horse that was about fifteen hands high, and you just 5 ft. 9...trying to get...(laughs)...

PIEHLER: Once you...would you have one horse assigned to you, did you...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, once you get in the cavalry and you have a certain group of horses that are assigned to you, and then that's your horse, that's your horse for the duration of the time that you're at Ft. Riley.

PIEHLER: Now you applied for...how did you learn about ASTP? DAVIDSON: They called us in one day and evidently...we took some kind of test.

PIEHLER: The Army Placement...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, Army Placement test. And then they called me one day and said you've been accepted to go to ASTP. We're sending you from...now I was still in the cavalry and said we're going to send you...I'd just got my second stripe and they said we're going to send you to the University of Nebraska. I said, for what. They said, you're going to college. I said, okay. You know, that's all right with me. So I packed up all my stuff and got my traveling orders and I was the only one from my outfit to go to the University of Nebraska. And I was on my own traveling. And they told you where you had to stay and the trains that you that you ride. They give you all these tickets and vouchers to buy food and stuff, so that's how I ended up at the University of Nebraska.

PIEHLER: And how long were you at...when did you enter Nebraska as part of the ASTP...

DAVIDSON: This is all '42.

PIEHLER: Still in '42?

DAVIDSON: Still in '42. And I stayed at the University of Nebraska like three months and then they sent me to Wilberforce and I stayed in Wilberforce, not too long, cause then that's when they were calling up...they were trying to make up this combat outfit, which I didn't know about, they told me, oh we're going to ship you out to Camp Polk, Louisiana. Why do I want to go down there for? Said, we're sending you out to the 370th Combat Team. We need some non-commissioned officers.

PIEHLER: In terms of Nebraska, did you actually finish a quarter or a semester?

DAVIDSON: Probably a quarter...

PIEHLER: Yeah, so you did go to class...I mean it did...

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah, we had classes everyday.

PIEHLER: And I'm curious how many black students and particularly how many black ASTP were they? Were you the only?

DAVIDSON: I was the only black. Only black and only man from the cavalry. I stood out on that campus like a sore thumb. (Laughs) Cause everybody else had on regular army and I had on my cavalry outfit, cause that's where I came from, the cavalry.

PIEHLER: Oh, that's right, you kept your old...

DAVIDSON: They all called me Wild Bill. They called me Wild Bill. (Laughs) And I was walking around the campus, and here I stood out, cause that's all I had was cavalry uniforms and boots and...so I stood out, very much so. And then when I left the University of Nebraska and went to Wilberforce, the quartermaster says, you got to take those, we got to give you some regular army uniforms. Okay. So, but I said I want to keep my boots and my breeches, so I packed 'em up and sent them home to my aunt. In fact, I still got a pair of boots, I think, at home, somewhere.

PIEHLER: Your old cavalry boots?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, somewhere in the basement. But anyway, I sent them home to her...and I said you're getting this...cause they're making me put on regular army uniforms now. I sent my stuff home.

PIEHLER: Did you have any say or...your movement from Nebraska and Wilberforce? You just did what the army...

DAVIDSON: They you said you had to go after the end of that first quarter, said okay. Then you're ready to go to Wilberforce, said why? Said, well, we're going to put you in advanced training, you're...going to go to school. So I went to Wilberforce, and I was there for about a month, maybe two. They said, well, need non-commissioned officers and we want college students to be in charge. So, they sent me down there to be platoon sergeant.

PIEHLER: In terms of Wilberforce...they didn't break the whole Wilberforce program up, did they when they sent you to Fort-Camp Polk?

DAVIDSON: No.

PIEHLER: So...a number of people in ASTP...

DAVIDSON: ...a lot of guys who were still there who were like seniors and they wouldn't take them cause they didn't have that much longer to go. A bunch of guys there who I'd met that I knew from school and guys I knew from New York who were...one guy, he...let's see...Duke went into anesthesiology. He was a senior and I left him there...a couple of other guys that I had

known from Lincoln, who were at Wilberforce in the ASTP. And they were seniors, so they got to stay. And I got to leave.

PIEHLER: ...cause I partly ask cause...I've interviewed a lot of people who they...everyone, no matter where you stood, they just...they needed the bodies...

DAVIDSON: They needed the bodies, so they took you out...then the guy who was our commander at Wilberforce, Captain Raines ended up eventually after the war in my class in med school. He was the company commander of the ASTP unit at Wilberforce. And after I came out the army, back to school and I got to MeHarry, I looked up and...Captain, what the hell you doing here? I'm a freshman like you. (Laughs) I said, yeah, I remember you, you mean so-and-so. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: ...when you're in the army, someone who's a captain really has power over...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, and he was our company commander at Wilberforce.

PIEHLER: So he must have been a rather intimidating...

DAVIDSON: He was, imposing, intimidating guy...he was rough on us at Wilberforce. And I said, well, I'll always remember you. (Laughs) And we came to med school, and he looked and says uhoh, I'm in trouble. I said, you damn right you are! (Laughs)

PIEHLER: What did you study in Nebraska, just going back to Nebraska?

DAVIDSON: Just basic...

PIEHLER: Basic, basic, engineering curriculum or...or was it...

DAVIDSON: As well as I can remember it was like, it was math and uh, biology. Think those two were the only...taking six hours I think. It was biology and math and psychology I think were the three courses.

PIEHLER: Now ASTP was...you still had calisthenics...yeah and you marched...

DAVIDSON: We marched. We did everything together. Uh, we were a regular unit.

PIEHLER: Now...this was because you were integrated with the rest of the unit.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, because my roommate was white.

PIEHLER: So you did have a white roommate...

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah, at the University of Nebraska he was white. Big ole, well in fact, it was three of us in a room. One guy was from Minnesota and one guy was from Wisconsin. And I was from New York. And we were all three roommates; we had a great time. We were just...

PIEHLER: So you didn't find any problem...

DAVIDSON: No, in Nebraska, no. Just a great...we had a good time. We enjoyed ourselves, other than being in the army. We had to get out and march and do our drills and had calisthenics, but you know, other than study in the evenings you sort of ...you'd go to the library and hang out with the other students...a little...they told us that we shouldn't fraternize too much with the rest of the students, but when you were at the library, you know...nobody to check on you.

BOWEN: Did you find your coursework at Nebraska as easy as you had your other opening college material?

DAVIDSON: Wasn't as hard. I think...to me I had had some of what they were teaching. But they were sort of like refresher courses...now psychology I had not had, which was interesting. But the biology and the math I was familiar with.

BOWEN: You mentioned that at Fort Riley, Kansas, the town itself was somewhat segregated and Nebraska wasn't...

DAVIDSON: Was not...

BOWEN: Of the camps that you attended from Fort Riley to well, Nebraska University to Wilberforce to Fort Polk, Louisiana, which would you say was the segregation was the strongest or...

DAVIDSON: The strongest?

BOWEN: Yeah.

DAVIDSON: Camp Polk.

BOWEN: Louisiana?

DAVIDSON: Yes, very much so.

BOWEN: In both the camp and the town?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, oh, we never did get to town...we stayed...we were down there on what they call maneuvers, preparatory...I didn't know what it was, I was coming out of college and I got down there to the unit and uh, the day I got there the man said that uh, the company commander was a Captain Gandy. He says, well, you're a sergeant? I said, yes, sir. He says, okay, you got the third platoon. I do? What's the third platoon? He says heavy weapons...what I do I know heavy...he says well, you're marksman with the rifle and the pistol. You could...there's nothing...you're supposed to be able to...so I said, yeah, I can take it apart, you know, if I take it apart I can put it back together. He says okay, I want you to field strip that rifle. I sat down there and took it apart and put it back together. He says, well, not bad. He says, now can

you do a BAR? I said, hell, I've never seen a damn BAR. He laughed, he says, well I'm going to show you and he showed me. He showed me how to take a little mortar, 30 millimeter mortars, take it apart and put it back together. There were basically two parts to it, three parts, and he says okay, you're the platoon sergeant. You got... A platoon sergeant? He says, yeah, you got three squads. I don't know none of these guys. He says, well...why don't you go down there and take charge? Oh, Jesus! So that's what...that was my introduction and the next morning I got up and 1st Sgt. says, alright, he says, this is your platoon sergeant. His name is E.V. Davidson, he's fresh here out of college and won't want no crap out of you guys. Guys looked at me and just started moaning...

BOWEN: Really set you up for success?

DAVIDSON: Yeah. So, that was my first introduction. I got out there, I said, 1st Squad...and they slouched...I said, all right, Goddammit! Straighten up!...said, oh, he's been in the army a long time. You damn right, I don't take no crap, I'll smack the shit out of you! (Laughs) That was my introduction. The guy said, man, he don't play. He ain't no college boy. I said, you'd better believe it.

PIEHLER: So you had learned this from Fort Riley...

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah, I learned Fort Riley...I had been a platoon sergeant at Fort Riley, barracks sergeant. So, I knew all the words. I knew...

PIEHLER: And some of what you needed...

DAVIDSON: ...I knew what I had to do. And I made these guys stand at attention for fifteen minutes, you know. And I walked up and down the line and I checked their guns and I said, when I come by I want every man to throw his rifle up at port arms and if you don't do it, I'll make you do it till you do it right. And so I keep standing there, he said...arms forward, and he watched me and I walked down each one and they'd slap it up and I'd snatch it out of his hand. I'd look at it and slam it back at him. Walked to the next man...got to the end. Walked up the next aisle...had three squads...told them all right, at ease. I said, now is there any question that I know what I'm doing. I won't take no crap off of nobody in here. I said, and despite how young I am, I'll hang my foot in your butt! (Laughs) But that was, you know, you had to get your point across and let them know that I'm in charge and the man put me in charge and it's going to be run my way. I'll be as good to you as you are to me. I said, when you...we're in this together. I said, there's no way we can duck it. I said, the only thing...I'll help you any way I can. I said, but you have got to understand. I said, I want all squad leaders around me. And three corporals and they all came up. And one of the corporals, he says, you are by far the meanest little son of a bitch I ever seen in my life. I said, hey I came out of cavalry and we don't take crap off of nobody. I said, I can handle a big two-ton horse. I can just hang your butt...I said, and don't ever forget that! The guy said, yeah, okay, Sarge. We're with you...that's how...my introduction to the infantry.

BOWEN: Do you think your...introduction to the platoon was maybe a test, the way he introduced you?

DAVIDSON: I think it was a test to see whether or not I could handle it. He thought that by telling them I was a college boy, I was going to kind of be wishy-washy. No. I learned the first thing you do...you establish who you are and what you're going to...put your perimeters on people. Hey, I'm in charge and this is the way it's going to be, whether you like it or not...nothing you can do about it. The man put me up here and you're going to do it my way or no way at all. You know...and after that, I got the respect of the guys. They believed...I said, hey, I'm this platoon leader. I will not send you any place that I won't go. No place I...the man said, go, we got to go. If I go, you go. You know, I'm right there with you the whole way. And that's what I learned, you know. If you want them to do it, you got to do it first. We were in training at that time, which I didn't realize...we were going to do when we got overseas, it's about going on line in active combat, and we had to wade the Sabine River which is on the border between Louisiana and Texas. And at that time, I didn't realize that the reason they're making us do this, was cause that's what we were going to do eventually in Italy. And that's what we did.

PIEHLER: Some people...people who have been to Louisiana maneuvers have said they really did not like them...I don't mean to prejudice the question, but I mean, I'm curious your reaction to being in Louisiana...

DAVIDSON: Terrible, hated it with a purple passion. Never so glad to leave a place in my life, as I was to leave Camp Polk, Louisiana, hated that place. Between the armadillos and the mosquitoes and the wet...it rained most of the time...mud up to your elbows, you know, just...it was just a horrible place. And then, it was very segregated, just very segregated. So, we just never went anywhere.

PIEHLER: Did you feel...I get the sense that it really was very...I mean, because you did leave Ft. Riley on passes, but you didn't have any desire to...

DAVIDSON: Camp Polk, you didn't go nowhere. And the fact that you didn't really get a pass. There wasn't nowhere to go. Little old town wasn't big as the camp was. Just a little dinky little place. And we were just down there for maneuvers and that's what we were there for and I was never so glad to...man says, okay, we're going back to Fort Huachuca. I said, thank god!...getting out of here, boy! Sheesh!

PIEHLER: and Fort Huachuca is in Arizona?

DAVIDSON: Douglas, Arizona.

PIEHLER: And I've read that was also a very isolated...

DAVIDSON: Very isolated camp. It's way out in the desert by itself. Huachuca's just a big fort.

PIEHLER: How long were you at Huachuca? Do you remember, 370th...? DAVIDSON: Not long.

PIEHLER: Just a few days, weeks...

DAVIDSON: Just a few weeks. We came back from Camp Polk long enough to go on maneuvers, again, up in the mountains. And then from there we just went on back, next thing I know we were on two trains, going to Newport News, getting ready to go overseas.

PIEHLER: Because, um, I've read...people who've written about the 92nd in Fort Huachuca, those who'd spent a lot of time, that really was tough on morale, because there was...there was nothing around.

DAVIDSON: Nothing around. Only place you could go would be to Douglas. And you go to Douglas you go across the border to Acroprieta, which was in Mexico. Um, that's about all...that's all you could do when you got a pass. But a one-day pass wouldn't get you nowhere, by the time you got into town; it was time to go back. Took you that long to get in and get out. So it really wasn't, nothing to do. And I didn't realize how isolated it was until we got out there. I thought, God, this is almost as bad as Camp Polk.

PIEHLER: It sounds like you...this had been your father's life in some ways, some of these...particularly Arizona...

DAVIDSON: Something in like probably was, I didn't...at the time I never really thought about it, because it was war time and later on in life, I thought, God, my dad, I don't see how in the hell he stood this, boy. I hated this...cause Arizona is the kind of place that...in Huachuca it was like in the daytime it may go up to a hundred, at night, drop down to thirty, just the drastic change in the weather, just from morning to night.

PIEHLER: ...people've written about Fort Huachuca that the army...and this was not unique to this base, but there was a real problem with venereal disease, because there was no recreational outlet. Did you have any problems with your men...in your unit?

DAVIDSON: No, because when they went to town (chuckles)...if you went across the border, when you came back you got what they called a shore-arm inspection. And whether you had sex or not, you got injected with this stuff right into the urethra and...no chance of you coming back in with venereal...that was something that they started...and our Commanding General Almond, whom I'll never forget, he uh, that was part of his standing rule. You went to Douglas and went across the border, that's what you got.

PIEHLER: So you had active propal...by the time you got there...

DAVIDSON: Everybody had a prophylactics you just, uh, and after you looked at some of them movies they showed you in the service, you thought, God, sex is the last thing on my mind.

PIEHLER: Well, I guess...we even talked about some of this at breakfast that you did see *Why We Fight*.

DAVIDSON: Yeah.

PIEHLER: And do you have any recollections of what you thought at the time about that...series?

DAVIDSON: Not really. Not a whole lot.

PIEHLER: But you did mention a very fondness for Kilroy and

DAVIDSON: And SNAFU...

PIEHLER: Those really...

DAVIDSON: That was really a thing...when you got overseas that's all you really had to look for was the *Yank* magazine and look at the cartoons and guys would write "Kilroy was here." Who the hell was Kilroy? We don't know, but he was here. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: And you mentioned a VD film left quite an impression...

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah, VD films, which they showed you everywhere you went...

PIEHLER: Then that was an ongoing...

DAVIDSON: ...was an ongoing thing and I think we showed it once a week, you know, just before you went out on pass, every Thursday night, you got to see the VD film. You know, why we looking at this for? So you will remember what you're not supposed to do and if you do this is what you have to do going over there. And I can truthfully say in my outfit, none of the guys...

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

PIEHLER: This continues an interview with Dr. E.V. Davidson on April 4, 2000, at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, TN, with Kurt Piehler and Jason Bowen.

PIEHLER: And just as the tape cut off, none of your unit, either the V.D. film worked or the prophylactic.

DAVIDSON: The V.D. worked, the film worked, uh, the prophylactic worked. Because every man, if you went across the border, and I was with you, you had to take the prophylactic, whether you wanted to or not. Even if you didn't do anything, the guys that went over there said "I went and just looked." Well, too bad. You're going to get treated anyway. (Laughs) It was one of the standard procedures and because they had said the problem was venereal diseases picking up with the women that hang around border towns like that. The venereal disease rate was high. So every, you were responsible for the guys in your outfit to come down with this. So, I was just really hard on them about that.

PIEHLER: The unit you took over, how did it differ from your cavalry unit? Cause you had some heavy hitters in your, at Fort Riley, Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, and others. What was the makeup of... and you also said you had some illiterate, people who couldn't read and write who were from the deep south. What was the makeup of the unit you took over?

DAVIDSON: The unit I took over in the 370th F Company was, we had more people who were sorta illiterate than they were in Fort Riley, more guys who couldn't read or write or who could just barely read enough to understand a letter. Had more of that than we did at Fort Riley. I got into helping some of them learn to read or to write better, to read better than what they did when they came in.

PIEHLER: What was the north, south mix in the, I guess Fort Riley...I guess I should ask Fort Riley and the mix now in the 370th?

DAVIDSON: The 370th was just sort of a general mix from all over the country.

PIEHLER: So it wasn't just dominant of the south?

DAVIDSON: It wasn't dominant south, but it was all black. PIEHLER: Yeah.

DAVIDSON: Except for the officers, there were some white. But in my outfit when I first, we didn't have any white officers. We all had, F Company was all black, from our company command all the way down. I think we had one white second lieutenant, other than that everyone else was all black officers.

PIEHLER: And this is at, uh?

DAVIDSON: The 370th.

BOWEN: What was the highest-ranking black officer in the 370th?

DAVIDSON: Captain. Company Commander. Captain Gandy, got killed in Italy. He was our highest-ranking officer.

PIEHLER: You, uh, I might as well bring it up now, cause you mentioned General Almond.

DAVIDSON: Yeah.

PIEHLER: With regard to Arizona. What was your sense, I guess, of General Almond? And when did you form impressions? I mean, you're a sergeant, but still, I get the sense he was talked about quite a bit.

DAVIDSON: He was talked about a whole lot. But he was a tough...we felt that he was a real tough general. What really made us begin to like him was we came through a little town and they were going to stop us in Louisiana. And we were all in half-tracks and tanks and this sheriff and his posse got in out in the middle of the road and were going to hold up the American Army.

And General Almond came up in his Jeep. And the guy said, “Well you can’t bring them damn black troops through here.”

PIEHLER: Well, he probably used harsher language than that.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, harsher language than that. Anyway, General said, “Tell me what I can’t do! If you don’t get the hell outta the way, we’ll tear this damn town down!” And uh, the sheriff kinda backed down and told we could only go down one street. And General said, “Just run that damn tank through that building over there.” From that day on the guys really began to like him, because he was not going to, that’s his troops and you didn’t tell him what he could do with his troops. We walked through Main Street, and half the buildings got knocked down by tanks, guys swinging the guns around on the half-tracks, you know. They’d knocked down a couple of buildings; the sheriff didn’t bother us anymore. You know the government had to pay for it, but that’s all right. They remembered us forever!

PIEHLER: Do you remember what town it was?

DAVIDSON: I don’t remember the name of the town...

PIEHLER: But it was in Louisiana...

DAVIDSON: Some little old, backwater town Louisiana with a little country sheriff. He and his deputies going to stop the United States Army with shotguns. General said, “Have you lost your damn mind?” Man said, “You don’t run this country.” He said, “The hell I don’t. We’ll level this damn town!” And the guy looked up and he looked back and saw all these half-tracks with 105’s on them. And he changed his mind, you know. We’d level a lot of the buildings. Guys were swinging the guns around, OOPS!

PIEHLER: You hadn’t met your unit, I mean, you sort of took over a unit. Someone else had really, they had gone through basic. They had actually, how trained had they been when you took them over?

DAVIDSON: They’d had basic training...

PIEHLER: Had they actually had heavy weapons?

DAVIDSON: ...and they’d had some weapon training. A lot of them came from all different outfits. They sort of just gathered guys who’d had a little experience and turn out they did pretty good, good gunmen and armorers. Most of the guys in the outfit had had good basic training. Different, some were Camp Linnet, some were California, all different places, so they were fairly well trained.

PIEHLER: ...their indoctrination and their...

DAVIDSON: ...indoctrinated. We got indoctrinated down there in Camp Polk. We learned a lot. We learned how to get along with each other, learned to live with each other.

PIEHLER: I guess, you had talked about a cavalryman, which I hadn't quite, you got very unique, I mean, what becomes very unique training. Because now no one trains that way in the Army.

DAVIDSON: No.

PIEHLER: And you remember your weapons pretty well. Could you talk about all your weapons? First your cavalry weapons and you talked about the Colt, but you also used the M-1 and I'm curious about that, I'm remiss by not asking people to reflect more on their weapons and then the heavy weapons.

DAVIDSON: In the cavalry we basically had, cavalrymen had two weapons. You had a 45-caliber automatic, which you carried on your side holster, plus you had a M-1 rifle. And you had a scabbard on your, on your horse you had a scabbard to put your gun in, put your rifle in first, and then you got up with your holster, 45 on your side. And you had to learn before you got the horse, you had to learn how to use both weapons. You learned how to use a 45 pistol on a straight range. And the major thing about you shooting a 45 was the recoil.

PIEHLER: Yeah, you had mentioned that...

DAVIDSON: You had to learn how to move your arm back as the gun kicked. You directed in the direction in which you wanted it to go. And you had to learn not only to shoot at a standstill, but you had to learn how to shoot the 45 off the back of a horse as you were moving. And you also learned how to get your M-1 out of the scabbard and up to the ready and fired from the back while you're riding on the horse. Kinda difficult to do, but it taught you how to aim your gun and pull the trigger all at the same time.

PIEHLER: Does the heavy weapons unit...

DAVIDSON: In the heavy weapons unit we had a platoon, each platoon was in heavy weapons. You had three squads. You had a squad that had the BAR's, which were Browning automatic rifles. And then you had a squad, that had the mortars, which were 30-millimeter mortars. And then you had a squad that had, had the snipers' group. You had a unit that carried the M1903's, which were sniper scopes that were fitted, that you could scope out and hit targets and then use fire tracer, then you use your mortar to fire where your tracer landed. Then you had the automatic weapons, the BAR's, then you had your ammunition carriers.

PIEHLER: What weapon, when you actually went into battle, what weapons did you carry?

DAVIDSON: Carried an automatic carbine. (Laughs) The other was too cumbersome if you were going to be a platoon leader to carry. And I had, myself, I made a 30 caliber carbine that had, I had a clip made on my own that you could load it and carry 75 rounds in it. And you shoot it like an automatic machine gun. You had to file down the firing pin so it would, if you would touch the trigger it would shoot like ten little "Thloop", at one time. And I also had a bayonet and a combat knife with the buckles on the end of it and also had a pistol that I carried, a 45, so I had ...

PIEHLER: You had a lot of...

DAVIDSON: I had a 45 pistol and an automatic carbine. You had to carry the bandoliers of 30 caliber machine guns for your, and we had a 30 caliber machine gun and the BARs and the uh, mortars.

PIEHLER: If you had been an infantryman, cause you probably would not have, the cavalry didn't survive. What did you think of the M-1 as a weapon? I mean, you couldn't as a platoon sergeant...

DAVIDSON: It was a good...I learned to shoot the M-1. It was a good weapon. Excellent.

PIEHLER: I've heard really good, it was an excellent weapon, I'm curious...

DAVIDSON: Excellent, excellent weapon. I thought it was really good. But being a heavy weapon platoon, we had guys who had M-1s. But we were so used to carrying machine guns and BARs and mortars and platoon leaders and sergeants carrying carbines because they were easier to carry. If you had a carbine that meant you could help, one of your men got hurt, you could drop back and help with his heavy weapons or whatever he was carrying. And you always carried bandoliers, which were belts of ammo for your machine guns because he couldn't carry it all. Uh, he, the guy who carried the 30-caliber machine gun and he had his assistant who carried one of those ammunition boxes which was loaded. And those two worked together, plus they had their own rifle. Everybody had the M-1. Plus, your other heavy weapon, and you had to carry all of that. Cause you were dependent upon uh, you know, every man was two man teams. You had a machine gunner, he had an assistant, he's the guy carried the ammo and he carried the machine gun. And the BAR guy had his one; he had somebody help carry ammunition for him. So each weapon had two men to go along with it.

PIEHLER: What did you think of the BAR? I mean, it wasn't your weapon, but...

DAVIDSON: It was a miniature machine gun, was basically what it was. Browning automatic rifle was just basically, a really, a machine gun in a sense. 'Cept it just had more distance than the machine gun did, it was more, it had a little more power to it, kick. Cause you had it on a tripod, had it on a bipod like, two in the front. It was a heavy weapon to carry, it really... A very good weapon. You learned to appreciate, it's according to what condition you are, where you are, how well you appreciate the weapons that you have.

PIEHLER: So in other words, in certain circumstances you appreciated it...

DAVIDSON: A whole lot more. You really didn't like heavy weaponry when you had to cross a river or stream. Because there was too much weight, and the water weighting you down, and carrying this, but you knew that you had to have it so you carried it. And every platoon had a jeep, which followed you, which had all this stuff in it. This guy was your jeep driver and he had a little trail and he carried all your extra equipment and gear and he followed us mostly in the rear. He was not too far away from us.

PIEHLER: (Laughing) But not that close to you either.

DAVIDSON: Well, we didn't want him to get hurt because he's our, say, he's the guy that's got our ammunition. We wanted him out of the way and protected. And we wanted him to stay as far away from us as he could, yet close enough to where we could get back and get what we needed off of his... He had extra weapons; he had all the ammunition and stuff that we needed. And we had to have somebody to uh, carry the shells for our mortar. And then we also, I, what I didn't remember, we also had bazooka, one of our weapons. Each heavy weapons platoon had a bazooka. That was our real firepower. We had somebody that was pinning us down, we tried to get the bazooka man in position where he could fire a...a rocket gun we called it. And it'd really blast us and then we could move ahead with that. But we had a bazooka. We had two bazookas.

PIEHLER: The bazooka was a very controversial weapon because it ...

DAVIDSON: You could not, could not stand behind it. You had to be clear before you could fire it because it had such a after explosive force coming out the back, as it shot forward shot something back. And if you were behind it, then you got burnt up. So it took two men to really fire the bazooka, because this guy had to load it while you were sitting there holding it on your shoulder and aiming it and then he had to be sure about it. When he got ready then he would tap you on the shoulder and then said, "Alright, all clear." And you would pull the trigger. Like when you fire the bazooka, it gives your position away, cause there is a lot of noise and a lot of light.

BOWEN: How effective was the bazooka in battle?

DAVIDSON: Highly effective.

BOWEN: Mainly against enemy tanks, or ...

DAVIDSON: Tanks, machine gun placements. First time we really used it we got pinned down by, um, a German in a church tower. We could see this guy, and he was just eating us alive. Every time somebody would peer up, he would just blast away, and uh, we finally got a bazooka in position where we could... The first one we fired too low, and kind of shook him up evidently. But the next one we just blew the top off of that thing. It was an explosive shell, and you could see him going one way and the gun going the other. But he had been pinning people down for days. We could never get close enough to get a shot at him. And we worked like early in the morning, about 3:00, we started getting into position and lining up. We knew where he was. And we got lined up, and as soon as we got just a little daylight to see, just enough, we had two bazookas, one on one end, one on the other. We fired at him with both of them. One hit him and the one got below him. Just blew the, hate to blow up a church, but you know, it was it or us. But that was just one of the instances where we had gotten pinned down and that bazooka really bailed us out. We tried mortars, but really the mortars didn't have enough trajectory, far enough where that we could really get a clear shot at him using the mortars.

BOWEN: You mentioned the jeeps that carried the ammo from behind, did the enemy tend to target those as well, I mean, since...

DAVIDSON: Germans, Germans were very methodical. They would... 88's...and they would fire what we call a checkerboard pattern. They hit every other square and if you watched where they went for two days, you know exactly where he's going to shoot. And that's what they did. They were just that methodical that they had a pattern that you could just, well, hey, you know, yesterday he did this, so today he's going do over here. So we'd just move over here.

BOWEN: So you'd start to predict where...

DAVIDSON: And we could predict where he was going to shoot, and that way we could... The hardest part was to locate placements of the guns, cause they had them in caves, in the mountains, and well camouflaged. And uh, we'd have to call in the Air Force to bomb them out.

BOWEN: It just seems like the one way they might cripple your unit would be, you know, obviously to target these...

DAVIDSON: They were the target, but they just, they had such a pattern of doing it, it was so methodical that you could just, after the first week, hey, I know what this guy is going to do. You know, you could stand right here in this shell hole, he's not going to hit you. Why? Cause he's not going to shoot there today. He's gonna, and you'd hear Shhhhooot! Bam! There, there he goes. You know we'd sit there, you'd count 'em and you could tell how many shells he's going to fire.

BOWEN: You often read about the fear of the German 88's, because it was such powerful weapon. What was your or your company's first reaction? When you were in battle?

DAVIDSON: Unbelievable. That anybody would take that 88 gun and shoot at a man. They would, in the early part of the war, they would take that 88 and follow you down the road, trying to shoot at you. And it was a powerful gun. And just, I mean, they just really, they were excellent soldiers except if they weren't methodical they probably could have beat us. They were just fantastic soldiers, the Germans were. Well-trained, early on, especially the SS elite troops, they were really fearless. They'd try you in a minute. That was an interesting experience, coming up against them. They were really fierce fighters.

PIEHLER: I guess we want to, we really should get you to formerly to North Africa and Italy. Uh, How well trained was your unit when you were actually deployed from Norfolk? How confident were you in your squads?

DAVIDSON: I was confident, I felt that they would do no matter what it was that we had to do. We had enough time together and we had enough experience on the things that we did. I felt that I wasn't afraid to go anywhere with them.

PIEHLER: So you were very confident...

DAVIDSON: Very confident in my group. I knew that they could do it and they knew that I was going to be there with them. So I had no fear.

PIEHLER: When you, um, when you had given a talk to one of my classes, you'd mentioned, you really felt that you had to prove something.

DAVIDSON: We did. Um, we were informed when we got ready to leave Huachuca by our battalion commander, who was Colonel Sherman, a West Pointer. He told us, he said, "Gentlemen, we are going to prove to the people that we're as good as anybody else." We thought, "Well, hell, we are already." He says, "No, not like that." He says, "We're going into combat." He said, "Now most of you don't know it. But we have been selected to be the first black combat troops, infantry, in the war." He said, "What you do, as to how well we're accepted." So we knew when we went overseas that we were going to be combat soldiers. And they had never had black combat soldiers before. They had all been truck drivers or service companies or whatever. But nobody ever had infantry in the war up until the time we went on the line. So it was interesting, we went across, and we separated ourselves from our division, cause we left Huachuca as a unit, 370th Combat Team. And left there, and went to Newport News and we boarded the Mari-, the USS *Mariposa*, which had been a luxury liner. And we were all excited, getting on a boat, getting ready to go overseas. First day we got ready to leave and the captain says we gonna leave in the middle of the night, you know. Why the hell we leaving at night? He says, "Well, we got a convoy to meet two days out." What do you mean a convoy? He says, "We're alone, there's nobody, we have no escort." We thought, "Oh crap! We're out here in this, and there's nowhere you can get off this boat. (Laughing) And uh, for two days, we just went full-steam ahead. We just really moved, one of the fastest crossings they said they ever did. And we sighted what we thought was a submarine once or twice, saw some wakes in the water. Evidently one of them was our own submarine, so we were fortunate enough that the Germans never got after us.

PIEHLER: But you were worried about submarines...

DAVIDSON: Oh. We were, yeah, because the Germans at that time were sinking all the British ships and they were hitting convoys. The ship captain says, "Well, our chance of getting across," he says, "is excellent because they look for convoys. They don't look for sole, single ships." He said, "A ship by itself, they don't pay any attention to. They're looking for convoys carrying men and equipment and stuff. He says, they don't realize that we are a unit of our own going over here. And here we have a small army on this uh-

PIEHLER: So how many men roughly were on the ship, how many were crammed in?

DAVIDSON: We had a whole regiment.

PIEHLER: The whole regiment was on this thing?

DAVIDSON: The whole 370th combat units.

PIEHLER: Any other units?

DAVIDSON: No, just our ancillary support people, motor pool and trucks and our jeeps and things like that. So it was a full ship. I'm trying to think; I don't remember how many we had. Each platoon had twelve men, so it was thirty-six men to a squad, to a company. I had thirty, each platoon had thirty-six men. So and uh, F Company had three platoons, so you multiply that up and each regiment there, A, B, C, D, E, and F, G, H. So the regiment's pretty big. It's...a small army. But, so, and we filled up that boat.

PIEHLER: How cramped were you?

DAVIDSON: We had, well, like six to a stateroom, bunks.

PIEHLER: So you weren't in a hull like, uh, many who did the crossing were really...

DAVIDSON: Well, we had all levels. According to the higher rank you were the higher up to the top deck you got.

PIEHLER: So, how, where did you place?

DAVIDSON: F Company as a heavy weapons, we were closer to the top because we had more stuff to carry than anybody else.

PIEHLER: Oh, so you didn't, you weren't way down.

DAVIDSON: We weren't way down. The guys that were way down were like, uh, first and second platoon. And we were third platoon and we were higher because we had all the heavy weapons to carry. So they wanted us up near the top so we couldn't-

PIEHLER: So you were actually in smaller staterooms, rather than...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, we had state-, they took the staterooms and put bunks in there.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DAVIDSON: They had a little shower and toilet in there. And they had four bunks on a wall, four or five bunks. And everybody had a bunk. And of course, Sergeant had the bottom bunk. (Laughing) I hated when the guys climbed to the top. But it was interesting. We ate in shifts. We had a big ole' mess hall.

PIEHLER: Did you get seasick at all?

DAVIDSON: No. Surprisingly, we didn't. I think we were all too scared to really. Nobody got really seasick. I can't remember anybody...and the crossing was not that rough. Now when we went to Japan it was. A lot of guys got seasick because we're on a Navy ship. But going across on the *Mariposa*, was a big luxury liner and uh, we made such fantastic time. Man, we made it across quicker than anybody had ever made it.

PIEHLER: How long were you aboard?

DAVIDSON: Um, four days? Four or five days. We were flying. Captain said he'd never...that ship had never gone that fast since he had been captain, in command there. He really put, he really put it to the metal, as the guys said, metal to the pedal. Oh, we were gone, boy! I mean, that ship, you could just see it cutting through the water. And we made a beeline. We passed through the Straits of Gibraltar. We realized, hey, you know, we're gonna make it, maybe. (Laughs)

BOWEN: Was this your first voyage on a ship?

DAVIDSON: First, yes. That was my absolute first...

PIEHLER: Except for possibly the Staten Island Ferry.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, well, I had been on the ferries, had been on the dayline, riding up and down the Hudson, but not no big oceangoing liner. That's the first I'd ever been on the ocean. We had been swimming in the Atlantic Ocean, cause we grew up there, but first time I had been on a big ship. But it was an interesting journey. We went across...they showed movies in the mess hall, showed VD movies and all. Then they showed a couple of westerns. You know, it was interesting going across. Always get the VD movies, you know. We had every other day...showing one of those...

BOWEN: You've got to ingrain that in...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, ingrain that in. You're going over here and you don't know what these women got over here and be careful.

PIEHLER: So it almost sounds like your voyage was...I wouldn't say...you were worried about submarines, but...

DAVIDSON: We were panicked about submarines. We saw a couple of wakes and boy, he really poured it on then, I mean, we just, he said that ship, he didn't know it could go that fast. He really poured it on.

PIEHLER: But, except for that fear, in many ways, particularly for your particular platoon, it was a pretty comfortable...

DAVIDSON: Very comfortable ride. We were just going so fast, which was amazing. We were just happy that we land. ...We were close to Africa. Why the hell are we going to Africa? I thought we were going to Italy. Well, we got to disembark there, then we'll go across the Mediterranean to Italy after you get down there.

PIEHLER: And where did you land in Africa?

DAVIDSON: Oran, Africa. Algiers.

PIEHLER: How long were you in Oran?

DAVIDSON: About a week...

PIEHLER: So not very long...

DAVIDSON: Not long. Just long enough to get around and look at the Kasbah and get back on the ship and go on over to Naples.

BOWEN: Um, what date did you arrive in Africa, an estimate around...? DAVIDSON: I don't remember. Ummm...

BOWEN: I guess it's hard...

DAVIDSON: It's hard to really tell. I don't really remember.

BOWEN: '43 or '44...

DAVIDSON: Some...yeah...sometime in...uh...'43.

BOWEN: What was Oran like?

DAVIDSON: Everything you see in a movie, dark narrow streets and little cubbyholes. It was everything...you know that *Casablanca* movie with Humphrey Bogart?

BOWEN: Yeah.

DAVIDSON: That was exactly what it looked like. Exactly. Everything that was in the movie, that's exactly what it looked like. Little narrow... and then we were warned don't go in these little dark dives and go in little shops unless you got five or six of you at a time. Never go nowhere by yourself. Always go in groups of five or six. And...uh...don't flash your money. It was interesting. Cause we stayed there just a week that I remember. Maybe it was longer. I think it was just about a week. Long enough to get there and say we'd been in Oran and to get redeployed, get redeployed, get all our stuff together and get ready to get on LST's to go across the Mediterranean to Italy.

PIEHLER: How long did the LST journey from Oran take?

DAVIDSON: Oh, it took forever, seemed like, I don't know, a day or two.

PIEHLER: It did seem like a very...

DAVIDSON: It seemed like we'd never get there. But that wasn't...that was...that wasn't a bad trip. But we got to Naples and then from there we just sort of deployed outside of Naples where they rearmed us and got all our trucks and ammunition and food and stuff together.

PIEHLER: When did you finally go on the line? How long after being in Naples?

DAVIDSON: We were there about three weeks, before we went on line.

PIEHLER: Before you went on line, what kind...besides the sort of getting things in order, getting equipment, getting supplies, what, uh, any special training or indoctrination?

DAVIDSON: Nothing, just usual routine...getting, as the guy said, getting rid of our sea legs, and get back to being on land, and get together with your troops, tell them what's expected of them, tell them what to do when they... I think he showed us some movies about what you do on line, and how to handle yourself in combat, about muffling your thing, be sure all your equipment is secure so you don't make a lot of rattling and noise at night, and how to carry your packs and stuff. And then what they did...all your equipment, we had duffle bags, and all our duffle bags were piled into our jeep carrier. Each platoon had its own jeep so, you know, all your stuff was piled on there. We had two trailers and you carried your duffle bag and stuff, just bare minimum. You had a blanket and field pack, but nothing, not a whole lot of anything, other than ammunitions and guns and make sure... and we did...went through taking guns apart, checking all our armor, making sure our gun's in working order, oiled and greased and cleaned. Um, guys who had the M-1's had bayonets and had a little bayonet practice and get you limbered up. Had a little hand-to-hand Jujitsu practice, lot of little things, a sort of refresher. Uh, infantry things that you learned to do all over again. We had to go through some drills with our weapons and unloading 'em and loading 'em, breaking them down and carrying 'em, reassembling them. Being prepared to move and moving quietly and going from place to place.

(Tape paused)

PIEHLER: I'm back to taping. You arrived in July of '44?

BOWEN: Since they came over as a unit as a whole, which they landed in Naples, Italy on July 30, 1944

PIEHLER: Um, ...one question, what was your first impressions of being on the line, uh...what did you anticipate and what couldn't you prepare for?

DAVIDSON: Well, you couldn't really prepare for anything. You can't compare it to anything, because we had never, the experience we had, we'd been on the obstacle courses and people shooting over your head and things like that, so we were kinda used to that part. Going on line was we had to relieve a unit in a little place where we went on line in Pontadaro. Um, on the Po River in the Po Valley. And we moved in at night. And this unit moved out as we moved in, took over their positions. And each squad, each platoon, each company was assigned a certain area. Each platoon in that company was assigned this is your area. And being heavy weapons, we sort of backed up everybody else. We were the third platoon and we backed up the first and second platoon. We were the ones behind them, so wherever they needed us was where we went. We were the firepower, if they wanted us, we could show up no matter what they had, we

could bring the firepower anything. In the meantime, while we were in Naples, we acquired some submachine guns from some of the outfits (laughing.)

PIEHLER: Well...some of the modifications you made to your carbine don't seem to be Army...

DAVIDSON: They're not Army, no, no,no...

PIEHLER: They're not Army...and picking up some machine guns which were not on your table...

DAVIDSON: Well, we picked them up from the black market in Naples. Thompson submachine guns. I think we acquired five of them. We traded some stuff off for it and picked those up and that's where I had my carbine made into an automatic. This guy was an armorer with an armored unit. And he says, "Do you want to make that carbine automatic?" I told him, "Yeah, how do you do it?" He says, "Bring me, get me three clips." Okay. So I got him three clips, and he welded them together and then readjusted the springs where I could load three clips worth, and like put forty where it used to take ten, you put in 45 shells in there. He says, "Now when you go out to practice tomorrow, see how that works." And I did, and boy, it was just phenomenal. He says, "Well, get me three more and I'll make another one." So I had two sets of three clips, which I carried with me all the time. And in the meantime we bargained some unit that had these 45 Thompson submachine guns. We bargained for four or five of those to carry with us. Company Commander says, "Where did you guys get those heavy?" "Sir, we acquired them from somebody." He says, "Don't tell me, I don't want to know!"

PIEHLER: So, the legends, I guess for me are legends, when you watch some of these old movies today. These apocryphal trading and you can get anything on the black market it is...much of that...

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah...anything you want on the black-market was available. You just had to know who, where, and when and how. You know, and it was always available. Some guy would come up and say, "You want a, you want to buy...German pistol?" No, not really. I wanted an Italian Berretta, one of them little pocket guns they carried. Okay, we'll get you one. Give me a couple cartons of cigarettes, you got it.

PIEHLER: (Laughing) Well, speaking, since you just mentioned cigarettes. Did you smoke at the time? DAVIDSON: I'd learned to smoke, yeah.

PIEHLER: In the service?

DAVIDSON: ...I learned...I learned to smoke because it was free. Wherever you went, like we first went to Camp Polk to the Salvation Army, the Red Cross was there with coffee, doughnuts, and cigarettes. And you know, the guys said, "Get all the cigarettes you can!" Yeah, okay...giving you my cigarettes, I'm saving them. Then I ended up, guy said, "You need to learn how to smoke, Sarge." I said, "What?" Everybody smokes in the army, so I learned how to smoke. So I just, my smoking then was just, you know, (blows imaginary smoke) blowing

smoke out, just...But everybody smoked. It was free. And you could buy a pack of cigarettes for like a nickel, you know. Wasn't no big deal. Weren't expensive. A carton for a \$1.00, \$2.00 at the most for a carton of cigarettes...cigarettes mostly free. Then every C-ration that you got had four cigarettes in it...as part of the pack. You got your rations and they had cigarettes in there along with the food. PIEHLER: What's your most memorable experience of combat? Does any one particular memory stick out of all the rest or memorable experiences?

DAVIDSON: I guess, our first, what we call first power patrol. We had been on line for maybe like two weeks and the orders come down that we needed to move. But the Germans had us...they had this encampment. We could see it. But we could never get 'em, the airplanes couldn't get in there and drop bombs because of where it was and too close to our proximity, so we were to go across as a power patrol and hit this German outfit in the middle of the night and destroy as much of it as we can and set bombs and delayed explosives, and things like that...Bangalore torpedoes and see if we could get all of this done and make them move out so we could move up. And that's my most memorable occasion. We had to...going across you had to...we had these long bamboo sticks that you probed the ground to be sure that you didn't step on one of these foot mines. The Germans had these little quarter pound cakes of dynamite with a firing pin sitting at an angle. And if you stepped on that it would be just enough to blow your foot off. And we had a couple of guys lose feet like that. On a power patrol you had to belly down and probe the ground in front of you as you went along. And as you go back, just leave a marker in that area so that you know the path that you came. We had little markers that sort of glowed in the dark. Of like phosphorous things and you just made a little dot where you'd come. And you probed all the way down until you got to the waterfront, and you had to probe. And then we had to wade, uh, at that time the river was real low. And I guess the water was, like, up to your knees. And we had to go across without them hearing us, without making noise. And the power patrol consists of ten people, with fully automatic weapons. You had to...everyman had either automatic carbine or submachine gun...um...anything automatic. And we all had, we had enough Thompson submachine guns and 45 pistols and automatic carbines and the BARs. And then we had to carry a satchel charges that we could set with timers to go off as we left. And we got over there and we hid them and we raised a whole lot of havoc and threw hand grenades and scared them to death. Then after we set the charges, then we backed off and came back across the river, then the Germans fired all these phosphorus things...

PIEHLER: ...the night light...

DAVIDSON: ...the night light to light up the night to see where we were, but by the time they did that we were back across the river.

PIEHLER: Did you lose anybody in this...?

DAVIDSON: Not a soul, didn't lose a man. ...nobody got hurt. We uncovered four or five of those foot mines...but nobody stepped on any. We found a couple and you just sort of dig 'em up and take the charge off.

PIEHLER: It sounds like a very, I mean...

DAVIDSON: At the time it was fascinating. We were interested in doing it and scared to death. One guy said, "Sergeant, I'm so scared." I said, "If you weren't scared, I'd be scared." You have to be. A guy that's not scared, I'm afraid of you. I want you to be afraid.

PIEHLER: Well, I think one of the things that...one of the things, I think, it's at night, too.

DAVIDSON: It's at nighttime. So it's a case of, you know, I know where you are because you are an arm's length away. I can touch your hand and you can touch my hand. And every ten feet you reach out and touch my hand and I touch yours so I know where you are, cause it was dark that night. You just barely...we could make each other out cause we could just... we knew where we were going and had ten men. There was one lieutenant and myself; we were the commanders of the power patrol. We went over and did what we was supposed to do and and got back and when they fired that light night, uh, the British was our artillery backup. And when they did that, they lowered a barrage on those guys. And the next morning we got up and moved up about five miles.

PIEHLER: They had just left?

DAVIDSON: They had just left during the middle of the night. ...during the daytime they began to pull back.

PIEHLER: So this really worked, this...

DAVIDSON: It worked, that power patrol. It think we kinda scared them, cause they thought that this ...they know these Americans been over...they'd been sitting there for a month when we came. Just right there, that same place. And they thought well, we just got 'em, they're not going to move. And we hit them that night with a power patrol. In fact I found out later that every company sent a power patrol, ten men across, and we each had our own sector. We were supposed to go in and create as much havoc as we could and set satchel charges and blow up cars. My platoon's job was to, they had an 88 sitting there at that time in a garage. And our job was to get as close to it as we could and set a satchel charge on it so it would blow the gun up. And they had a sentry, my corporal, his job was to silence the sentry. And he came back and he says, "I got that son ...! He didn't even hear me coming." I said, "Where is he?" He said, "He's over there, don't worry about 'em." So we went in and set our charges and then we came on back and the Germans had a barrack area, and we loaded up charges on them. They were just sleeping, having a good time. They didn't even think the Americans were going to do anything.

PIEHLER: So they weren't in trenches...they were literally in a barracks.

DAVIDSON: It was sort of a big building they were staying in it. They just kinda got to the point that...we'd just sorta see each other, you know, every once in a while you'd shoot at each other. One of those things. And we just kinda shocked them. And they moved out after that. We destroyed a lot, blew up some of the ammunition dumps. And the rest of them got to start moving up.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, because in a patrol like this, you really get close to the, I mean...

DAVIDSON: You're right...

PIEHLER: Yeah, it's not like being on the line where...

DAVIDSON: You're head to head, really head to head.

PIEHLER: Was that the closest you ever got to the Germans in combat? DAVIDSON: No, that's the second closest I've ever...

PIEHLER: What was the closest?

DAVIDSON: The closest...was in Northern Italy. ...just south of the Swiss border. We had taken a little town. And we were marching up, and the town had a fork in the road and there was a building sitting there in that fork and our job was to check each building as you go in. And, uh, I had my carbine cocked and ready and when I pulled up on the building, I threw the door open, this German guy was just standing there. He looked at me and I looked at him. (Laughing) I rolled back and he rolled back and he went his way and I went my way.

PIEHLER: So neither one of you ever...

DAVIDSON: Neither one of us fired a shot. I think I scared him and he scared the hell out of me. Cause he was just standing there...he had his gun down. I can't shoot this armed man ain't ready. He looked at me and I looked at him and I backed out cause I thought he was going to raise his gun and he did the same thing. He went out that way and as he's going up the guys started shooting at him and he was taking off through the field. So evidently he had been...come down to see where we...to see where the Americans were coming. And he was going his way and he got back and then the next day that's when we got the counterattack with the SS troops.

PIEHLER: So this was very late in the war that you...

DAVIDSON: Later in the war when we hit that area.

PIEHLER: Cause by that time German was resistance had really...

DAVIDSON: It had really gotten down. This was about the time that they made that big final push, trying to push the Americans back and they really tried to dislodge us, but, uh...

PIEHLER: How did you know they were SS troops? I guess...

DAVIDSON: Totally different than the average German. They were in black.

PIEHLER: So their uniform...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, uniform difference and they were very well disciplined. Average German...like average GI. You know, he's just sort of casual and not too... But these guys

were really for business. Man, you could tell they cover each other, you know... We could see them coming with glasses. And we'd fire at them, drop mortars and they'd stand there for a little while and see if anything coming and they just kept coming.

PIEHLER: Whereas the average German might have just said...

DAVIDSON: The average German said, hey, you know, this is it, like that guy did me. He just took off, but they didn't. They started coming and they kept coming. And we were just hitting them with mortar fire and artillery fire and they just kept on coming, and they just kept on coming...we got there and we dug in and the British came to reinforce us that's when the Ghurkhas came. And they were really something else. Scary guys.

PIEHLER: One of the questions...you ran into...a number of different...I mean, you were supported by British artillery. And in fact you'd told us, when we had lunch, you told quite a few stories about the Ghurkhas, and so...

DAVIDSON: The Ghurkhas...were the troops from India and they were fierce fighters, never had guns. They all carried knives, these curved blades. And they got paid by the number of ears, left ears they cut off. They killed somebody...and their job was... This British officer came up there dressed in, you know, no helmet on, just regular uniform... He swaggered with a stick...he says, "My men are coming through." I thought this guy...you lost your mind, man. Get down. He says, "Nothing to be afraid of, old chaps. My men are coming through. And make sure all your men have dog tags on." I said, "What for?" He said, "We tell by your dog tags..." I said, "What do you mean you tell?" He says, "They are on you before you know it and they feel for your dog tags." I checked every man, "You got your dog tags on?" I went down, passed...everybody if you got em in your pocket, put em around your neck. Put your dog tags on. Why? You're gonna get killed if you don't. So everybody had on dog tags. And that night, I guess in the middle of the night, I felt this hand, then I thought, oh crap! ...gonna kill me! Then this guy, he found my dog tags and he turned around and looked at me and grinned. And I thought, "Jesus, God!" Died twice standing here.

PIEHLER: So you thought this was it?

DAVIDSON: I thought it was it. I thought this German's had gotten me. You know, well, they sneaked up on me in the middle of the night.

PIEHLER: And there's nothing you can do.

DAVIDSON: Nothing you could do. I had my gun laying right there, and I couldn't get to it. This guy had me by the throat. And his hand just went on down and felt my dog tags. He just looked at me and grinned. (Laughing)

PIEHLER: So, what you thought this crazy British officer...

DAVIDSON: I thought he was crazy. I thought... this man had lost his mind. But, he came, he stayed, and the Ghurkhas came through that night. And then about ten minutes later he comes, he

says, "My men are all through now." I said, "Did you send those guys?" He said, "Yeah, those are the Ghurkhas. Those are the wonderful warriors. They'll take care, you guys will be able to move up tomorrow," he says, "they'll all be gone." "All who?" "The Germans." And he stayed there and smoked his cigarette. I said, "Man, don't light that cigarette...you'll draw attention." He said, "Don't worry, old man. Perfectly safe." I thought this guy is crazy!

PIEHLER: Because he almost sounds like something out of central casting.

DAVIDSON: ...Nuts!! He just light a cigarette. He standing there smoking...and about an hour later they come back, just grinning. This guys got this wire thing with all these ears on it. I thought oh, Jesus, what in the world. And he looked at them and they said something to him and says alright. Looked down the road, there's about 25 or 30 of them. I said, "Where the hell did they come from?" Guy says, "Sergeant, I don't know. They came through here...I was scared to death...I still think I need to change my clothes." (Laughs) But, and the next day, there were Germans dead everywhere. They just...

PIEHLER: And this was the SS?

DAVIDSON: I don't know who they were, at that time. This was part of the SS and somebody else. The Ghurkhas just went through there...

PIEHLER: This was in [19]45?

DAVIDSON: Decimated them. And the next day we just moved up...

PIEHLER: So some of the image the Ghurkhas have is a deserved one....

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

PIEHLER: One question about combat. You lost a lot of officers?

DAVIDSON: Yes. ...One of the things interesting in combat is from the time we went on line until the end of the war...my platoon, each platoon has a 2nd Lt. in charge. And all three lieutenants got killed, every last one of them. And company commander offered me a battlefield commission. I told him I didn't want it. He wanted to know why. I told him, "Cause every time you put on a bar, you get killed."

PIEHLER: You quickly learned that that...

DAVIDSON: I told him, "No, no, I don't need a bar...I said that's fine, I got stripes and that's all I need. He said, "But you're in charge and these guys will follow you. I said, "Fine, and they will continue to follow me, but I'm not putting on no bar...every 2nd Lieutenant. we had's been dead, just got...the last guy we had lasted a month...three weeks, I guess. Got out there doing something...said, "Lieutenant don't do that!" And the next thing you know, Wham!

PIEHLER: How many lieutenants did you have, do you...? DAVIDSON: Three or four.

PIEHLER: Three or four...and they all got killed or?

DAVIDSON: All of them got killed.

PIEHLER: None of them just got wounded, they...

DAVIDSON: All got killed. All of them.

PIEHLER: How green were...cause the first...

DAVIDSON: The first lieutenant...he got killed when we had a firefight. I mean, we were really in the middle of battle and he was just...got blown up out of the foxhole. He'd been with us from the time we left Camp Polk, Louisiana. He was really good. And his death really upset everybody in the outfit. Then they sent us some young 90-day wonder and he lasted about a month. And this third guy was about two weeks, and he was gone. So, every time we got a new 2nd Lt. they either got killed...and one guy just wanted to shock...he never did know what happened...he lasted a couple of days and got pinned down got fired at. He just went bananas so...

PIEHLER: And they just...pulled him out...?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, they pulled him out of there.

PIEHLER: How many...besides him, any other cases of battle fatigue when you were...in your...?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, a couple of guys had battle fatigue...we had one guy in my outfit who shot himself in the foot, cause he just couldn't...handle it...

PIEHLER: There was no way you could...you knew he...it was clear...

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah, we knew he did it. But you know, we ended up saying, yeah, he got shot. Somebody must have shot him. Hell, we knew he shot himself in the foot.

PIEHLER: So you didn't try to court-martial him.

DAVIDSON: No, no, no, the guy had been with us for a long time and he had just...he'd just gone off the deep end, so...we came back to the battalion and they said well, looks kinda suspicious. I said, "Well, we were running across open field and he got shot." "Oh, okay, you saw him?" "Yeah," you know. I knew he was lying, but...why get the guy court-martialed. He'd been with us for a long time. He'd been a pretty good soldier. He just got...uh...you know a couple of guys...I remember some other guys who just...we'd go back on pass and they'd just disappear.

PIEHLER: Just never...never...

DAVIDSON: Just never showed up again. We heard that they got taken up by the M.P.'s or they got sent back or put in some other company or asked for a transfer out... Most of the guys, all of the guys we went overseas with other than maybe one or two all lasted till the war was over. 'Cept those that got killed...lost quite a few.

PIEHLER: Well, I guess in terms...all your officers turned over several times, what about...your squad leaders? How well did they fare?

DAVIDSON: They fared well...

PIEHLER: What about the rest of your unit? How...

DAVIDSON: We lost...I think out of my outfit...originally we went over with 36 men, and I think we lost half of them...half of my platoon.

PIEHLER: And how...the replacements you got...

DAVIDSON: ...were from other outfits, some were newly draftees, and we had to protect them...and get them started.

PIEHLER: ...how did replacements fare in your unit? Cause in some units they've said much like the replacement officers they just...

DAVIDSON: Some of the replacements...a lot of the people we lost were replacements. You know, get a guy-

PIEHLER: So the fifteen were some of those...

DAVIDSON: The fifteen were rotated...some of the guys that rotated in and just rotated out. They got shot or blowed up or did something silly or stepped on a mine. We had two guys stepped on mines...little foot mines and their foot blowed off...one guy got shot, just...I don't know what he was doing. We thought he was in a foxhole and looked up there he had a hole right through him...everything...he raised up when somebody was shooting and he got... But other than that, most everybody...either they got from shells or we got pinned down and a shell blew 'em up. I lost a couple of guys like that. And I guess I came as close to it as they did, but the shells just landed on a foxhole and just wiped out two guys. But, I think those are the ones I remember, tragically.

BOWEN: As you gained more of these green recruits, did they hinder your units, obviously, cohesion or success at all? Or were you able to really kind of fold them in and keep going?

DAVIDSON: Some of them we kind of folded them in. You had 'em assigned with a guy who had been there for a long time. We tried to...every time we got a replacement, we tried to put them with two guys who were veterans, who'd been there for a while and to protect them and teach them what he had to do and teach him how to keep his head down. Average recruit that

you get...replacement...always wants to look around and see what's going on and you can't do that in combat. You know, you don't roll up and look around. If you want to look around, you roll over on your back and you know, see what's going on around you, but you don't raise your head up, peek out a foxhole, see where somebody is when you're dug in. You don't get up during the daytime and try to run from one place to the other. Had a couple of guys get shot like that. But, once you learn how to get around without exposing yourself, then you're pretty safe.

PIEHLER: Is that one of the most important lessons of combat?

DAVIDSON: Learn not to expose yourself. First thing is self-preservation. Don't expose yourself, don't put yourself in danger, where you can get into a problem, because when you do, then you got problems for real...something you can't handle...and you could end up getting hurt or killed or...something like that, step on mine cause you didn't listen or didn't try to do what you were told to do.

PIEHLER: It also sounds like the light at night, you were very...when that British officer was smoking a cigarette, that really...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, something...you know light...you don't smoke cigarettes at night, you know, lot of guys got in trouble smoking a cigarette at night and ...don't light no damn cigarette at night, hell, you ain't that addicted. You light one, you might not light another one. Guys in my outfit knew that, you don't light a cigarette at night, you don't smoke at night. If you're going to do it in daytime, you're not going to do it at night. You know, be careful in the daytime cause smoke gives away your signal, where you are. So there's a lot of things you had to learn how not to do in order to preserve you...keep yourself safe.

PIEHLER: What about digging in? How quickly...

DAVIDSON: Learned to dig in a hurry.

PIEHLER: So your men, that was one lesson you didn't have to...

DAVIDSON: One lesson you didn't have to teach anybody. Okay, men, this is it. Dig a foxhole...talking about getting those shovels out and start digging a hole. You can dig a hole in nothing flat when you're trying to hide. Kind of tough in the mountains, but on the level ground...when you know you had to get in there and dig in and you could dig a hole...and you're digging one deep, you can dig a hole. Once you get down there, then you keep digging and digging (laughs) and mound that dirt up in front of you to protect you.

PIEHLER: What...um...particularly from Bill Mauldin cartoons, but also...I mean...almost anyone I've ever talked to from Italy...and the impression I get from watching documentaries, Italy could be really miserable, in terms of conditions for some...

DAVIDSON: It's according to where you were, you know, coming into Po Valley, it was hot and oppressive in July, sweat run off you like bullets. You're scared to death. Your mouth stayed dry half the time. Between being scared and thirsty, your mouth stayed dry. As you got

up into the mountains, it was really tough. I remember being up in the Swiss, in the Italian Alps, we went up...the Partisans took us up using mule trains to get up to the top. By the time we got there started getting cold, so they'd brought parkas and you had these white parkas on and trying to hide. We got caught up there in a storm and I remember laying in a foxhole with the rifle out in front of you and your hands are so cold you can't turn the gun loose...and watched lightning striking all around. I think that's the only time when...close enough...I don't know whether I got really struck by it, but I know I tasted...and something jumped out of my mouth like a spark. I said, "Uhoh, I've been hit by lightning. ...Guy said, "What's wrong, Sergeant?" I said, "I think I got struck by lightning." He said, "Yeah, that damn thing was running up and down your barrel." I said, "Holy cow!" I said, "I can't turn it loose!" And about that time I said, finally, and just sort of relaxed. Evidently I was well grounded enough not to get killed. Wasn't enough to...

PIEHLER: But in some ways an electrical storm, you're...

DAVIDSON: ...and you can just taste it. It just tastes like sulfur in your mouth. Made little black spot on my tongue for years afterwards...

PIEHLER: From that lightning?

DAVIDSON: From that lightning strike. So, that was the scary part, but just laying up there in a foxhole. Then when the...and then we had to retreat from that area. That's the first time I got on skis. The man said that the only way down off this mountain is skis. I thought, Hell, I ain't never been on a pair of skis in my life. He says, "Well, give you a short lesson. Step in these things and you pull them tight. You hold your gun and your poles and try not to hit a tree. I said, "You sure?" He said, "That's it!" All the guys said, "Sarge, I've never been on skis!" I said, "Help, put 'em on your feet and slide. When you're going to fast, just turn sideways like you're on roller-skates." And that's how we came down the mountain, on skis, till the snowline stopped. Coming down there forty miles an hour on skis, Jesus, scared to death!

PIEHLER: What about mud? Did you ever have any...

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah. Mud up to your knees! Only worse experience in mud was that we were on the...we had been relieved...we came back to Pisa, and we were in rest camp. It had been raining for about a week. And we had these pup tents, and the only dry spot was where the tent had been pitched. These tents had already been pitched before we got there, so we knew it was dry in the tent. And everybody had a two-man tent. I got in there and got my clothes off and was drying off and just beginning to get warm and some guy started shooting. ...Who the hell was that shooting out there? I heard the company commander, "Sergeant Davidson, get your ass out here!" ...Damn! What's going on? I got my boots on and got out in the rain. "Yes, sir!" He said, "I got one of your men out here trying to shoot up the damn camp!" Oh, Jesus!

PIEHLER: What had he been doing?

DAVIDSON: Drunk! He had been full of Italian Grappa. And just went bananas. He was gonna kill everybody. He was going to kill that company commander, that white so-and-so! Just

made him mad. He was just firing the gun...just...he said, "That's your man! Do something with him!" I looked at him, I said, "Simeon, put that damn gun down." "Go away, Sarge, don't come over here, cause I'm gonna kill that son of a bitch, I gonna just..." I said, "If you don't put that gun down, I'm going to get a two-by-four and beat the living crap out of you!" "I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna do it!" I walked over...and not thinking, you know how you're mad, I'm wet, I'm cold. I walked down there and I snatched the gun out of his hand and slapped him upside the head with the barrel. Said, "If you don't get your ass in that tent, I'll beat the living crap out of you with this gun!" "Don't hit me no more, Sarge, I'm going, I'm going!" ...the company commander looked at me, he said, "You have lost your damn mind!" I said, "No, you called me, you said it was one of my men and I was to stop him. I did. I took a gun away from him and I knocked the shit out of him. Now what else do you want me to do?" He looked at me, "Oh, that's alright, Sarge, no, no, no, that's okay, that's alright." I stomped away, I said, "Goodnight, sir!" And then when I got back in the tent...my corporal said, "Do you know what you just did?" I said, "What do you mean, what I just did?" He said, "You walked up to a guy with a gun with live ammunition, shooting the gun, took it away from him and slapped the shit out of him and walked back here with...the gun in your hand. You didn't even salute the company commander." I said, "@#\$\$% the company commander! I started to turn around and shoot him myself!" He said, "Do you realize you could've got killed?" I thought, oh crap, I probably could have.

PIEHLER: I mean, you did something that was very dangerous...people with loaded...

DAVIDSON: I didn't think about it!

PIEHLER: ...with loaded weapons, and drunk are not and angry are not, it's not a good combination...

DAVIDSON: I didn't think about it. The time was...he was one of my...in fact, he was one of the best BAR gunmen in the outfit. I mean, he was just...do anything you tell him, wasn't afraid of nothing. There was nothing he wasn't afraid of. He'd do anything you asked him. He was a good guy, but he just got drunk and just got it in his mind that the company commander was on his case and he was gonna shoot that so-and-so.

PIEHLER: Was the company commander really on his case, or was it just something he thought?

DAVIDSON: Just something he thought. He'd just...that grappa just twisted his mind up and he was just mad at the world that day. The next day he didn't remember nothing about it.

PIEHLER: Was he court-martialed at all?

DAVIDSON: Hmm,mmm [no]. Company Commander says, "I-." I said, "No, sir, you're not."

PIEHLER: You told him you weren't going to...

DAVIDSON: I said, "No, you ain't going to court-martial him." I said, "He's the only man you got in BAR that will do anything you ask him at anytime. He just got drunk. He does not even remember what he did." And he called him up in front... "do you remember what you did last night?" He said, "No, last I remember I was in town getting drunk. So, I don't remember nothing after that." I told him what I did and he said, "Oh, Sarge, I'm so sorry!" I said, "It's okay, I'm gonna get you off this time. You do that again and I'm killing you myself!" But after...we never had another problem out of that guy. In fact, I don't think he ever got drunk again. He just, he said, "I won't never do that no more." He was sick...I said...he was sick all that day and the next day...he was...all over the place so that cured him. But he never...he didn't court-martial him. I told the company commander, no don't court...he's one of the best guys we got in this outfit. He's the most dependable, and anything happens to him, I said, "We're in trouble."

BOWEN: Um, besides distinguishing themselves, the 370th regiment came into contact or fought alongside a lot of notables. I was just going to throw a few names out and let you kind of comment on each...

DAVIDSON: Okay.

BOWEN: ...the 99th, the Tuskegee Airmen.

DAVIDSON: The suit squad from Tuskegee?

BOWEN: Yes.

DAVIDSON: We called on them a lot of times to give us air support when we were pinned down and we looked up and see those P-38's coming and we knew that was the 99th. And they'd come over and we'd call and they'd say, "You guys in trouble?" "Yeah, hell, we need ya, bad." So, you know...whaddya got? And we'd tell them and they'd say okay. And they'd come in there and they'd dive bomb and strafe and come back and say I think we took care of that problem for ya! You can go ahead now! I said, alright! We'll call you guys back later. Alright. But they were really dependable. And there wasn't anything that they wouldn't do. They were kind of...we didn't have a lot of personal contact with them, but if we needed help and we were in trouble, you could call the 99th and they would call some of the other Air Force and they would show up. The 99th would go out of their way to...so who's this guy that said 370...yeah, that's us. Give us some firepower. Okay, we got ya. And that would be it. Those guys would do it, they'd dip their wings and take off, go on back. But we could depend upon them. They were very dependable.

BOWEN: Um, another is the 442nd, the Nisei unit.

DAVIDSON: The 442nd was a Nisei...they were our brother unit. We went on line with them on our right flank and uh, we were very comfortable with them. We complimented each other very well. They were fearless fighters...they would...nothing...go any way you said. And going in concert with them, watching them work was just remarkable. They were excellent and well trained combat troops. And they did a good job. We never had to worry about our flank.

They were on our right flank and we never even thought about them. We knew that they were there and if we got into trouble, we could call them. And they'd say, okay, we gotcha. But they were always present, always willing to do something.

BOWEN: I noticed in your scrapbook you have a letter from yourself and some other troops and talking about how the Japanese Americans had been treated in the U.S.

DAVIDSON: Yeah...

BOWEN: ...you know, that they'd so well represented...

DAVIDSON: ...well represented. Yeah, we felt there was a tremendous disgrace the way the country treated them because...they were fighting alongside to protect our country, and yet we had them interned in some kind of stupid camp here in town, in the country. And we felt this was just disgraceful. These guys had demonstrated heroic activities and there wasn't anything they wouldn't do. They fought just as hard or harder than anybody in combat. They really were excellent troops. And we felt that was sort of disgraceful that they were treated way.

BOWEN: The Italian partisans, you mentioned fighting with them...

DAVIDSON: The Italian partisans were very, very helpful because they would come back and tell us where Germans were and they put up a lot of disconcerting sidelines to the Germans. They'd draw a lot of attention off and they gave us a tremendous amount of support. They were willing to go places that we couldn't get to. And they'd do a lot of intelligence. They had their women go behind the lines and find out what the Germans were doing and they'd come back and tell us. We'd pretty well know where they were and what we needed to do.

BOWEN: We've already talked about the aforementioned Ghurkas. Also you worked with a British artillery unit, I was going to get your take on them...

DAVIDSON: I don't remember the number of the British artillery unit, but you know, the British are kind of conservative. They said we fired our rations for the day. We can't give you any more support. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: They would literally say, we've used our...?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, we used our quota for the day, but they would do it...they would hold off and do it when you asked. But if ever we were in a tight spot, they'd come through.

BOWEN: What was your general opinion or...through your company of the British soldiers?

DAVIDSON: We thought they were good soldiers. They were good...we had a lot of...we had come in contact with what, the Australians, who were excellent soldiers. We came in contact with some Portuguese from Brazil. They were good soldiers...we sort of fraternized with the Portuguese more than we did anybody else.

PIEHLER: Really?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, we'd go on pass...because you know first we didn't realize these guys couldn't speak no English. We thought, damn, what black troop is this? And turn out they were the Brazilian army. Some of them could speak English and we had a good time with those guys. They were really nice.

PIEHLER: How many passes, how many leaves could you get off the line? Do you remember?

DAVIDSON: None off the line.

PIEHLER: None off the line.

DAVIDSON: Nuh,uh. Only time you got leave was when you'd pull off of line.

PIEHLER: Then you could get...

DAVIDSON: Your company would be pulled back for a rest, then another company would take your place. While you were there, you'd be out for like a week, and during that week's time you could get clean clothes, go take a bath, go in town, write letters, get your mail. Then your mail would catch up to ya. You'd get a chance to sit down and read letters that maybe a month old that you hadn't gotten or they couldn't get the mail up to you on the front line and all would come in at one time so you got...the only pass you had was when you were on break. Once you got off relief, you couldn't do anything while you were on line. But once you got off the line, you got to the rear, a week or two weeks whatever it was they give you. Then you could do a lot of things for yourself. That was the only...pass you had. And we got to see a lot...you know, got to go back to Pisa. Got to go back to Monte Cassino, places like that, after we fought through, go back and look at it. Wow, that's a whole lot different than what it looked when I was here before.

PIEHLER: You'd mentioned you did get a pass to Rome...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, got a pass to Rome, um, a two day pass, long enough to get there and look around and get to the Vatican and just sort of get a good glimpse of it and then get back up there. Didn't get a chance to do sightsee like I wanted to, but to say, yeah, I've been to Rome, know what it looks like, been there to see it. It was fascinating, excellent place to look at, I just wish I had had time to go in and do all the things that I wanted to do. And we got to see the Pope. He was on his balcony.

PIEHLER: So you did...see a papal...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, saw him up there waving. We guessed that was him. ...he was out there blessing the crowd and all...genuflecting, thought, well, we got to see the Pope. But at a distance, so many people, so many soldiers around. That was our one day...we had that one day...took almost that long to get back.

PIEHLER: How much...while the war was going on, how much fraternization was there between men in your unit and Italians?

DAVIDSON: Uh, to the point...as long as it didn't interfere with your combat, now we stayed in some people's houses and they were...you know, as we were moving along. We moved in a village, and the people just so glad to see Americanos, you know. They just do all sorts of things, festivals...cause we gave them food...candy and whatever we had we give 'em candy, blankets, and stuff. Cause they were really...lot of people were just destitute, didn't have anything and we'd share what we had. And they said that the black soldiers were kinder than the white, because they said we were willing to share what we had with them. The white soldiers wouldn't do nothing. But, so we got along with them very well, very well.

PIEHLER: So you...felt that, I also get the impression that the different um, for example the British soldier-officer and ...do you feel the Allies respected you...your service?

DAVIDSON: I think they did once they realized that what we were doing...I think everybody sort of had their eyes on us. Everybody was kind of watching to see what we were going to do, see whether or not we're going to be able to stand up under the pressure of combat. And I think that we proved to them that hey, you can do it, we can do it. We could probably do a better job than you're doing, you know. We did things that...the outfit that was there before said they'd been sitting in that place for a month, doing nothing. And we came in there and in two weeks time we were moving, which was the difference...our company commander said, "Men, I'm proud of you guys are really doing a good job. Just keep it up. We're over here to prove a point." And he said, "I think we are." And we did. We lost some people, but that's to be expected in a war. You're going to lose somebody. Most tragic was to lose our first company commander, that was really very devastating.

PIEHLER: How did you lose your...

DAVIDSON: Oh, we got caught in a firefight and the Germans had us. Just they won a hill, then they were just eating us up. And the man insisted that we take this hill. We took it finally, but the cost was unbelievable.

PIEHLER: Including, including...

DAVIDSON: Including the company commander, the executive officer, and some of the headquarters staff, and I lost maybe four or five guys on that day. But it just it was one of those things, that just...something you had to do. And I think that really set our company back. We just really...everybody kind of...I think they relieved us after that for about a week. Cause losing him was just like you know, losing your father. He was just that good. Captain Gandy, fantastic man.

PIEHLER: ...the next company commander, was he white or black?

DAVIDSON: White.

PIEHLER: What was that dynamic like? Because you're in a segregated army and while you have some black officers, you have black NCOs, you have white officers. ...what did you perceive their attitudes and ...

DAVIDSON: Superiority.

PIEHLER: And that was the general...

DAVIDSON: That was the general attitude. And that was another reason...I can't hang out with these guys like this...you ain't no better than I am, cause hell, you ain't no better than me. You know, you're out here doing the same thing I did and you know I don't have to take that crap off of you, so I'll just stay away from you, the best way for me to get along was just to stay away from you, not to be involved as much as I could. So that's why I did...they had that superiority air too. We had a battalion commander...the regimental commander, our battalion commander was Colonel Sherbet. And he was a stickler, but he was fair. He didn't care, as long as you were one of his soldiers, he'd go to bat for you just all the way. And we...guys were really crazy about him. And he carried us all the way through the whole thing.

PIEHLER: So he made it through the war?

DAVIDSON: He made it through the war. He...was the kind of guy that come up there where we were to the front. You know, he's the battalion...he didn't have to come up there where we were. He could stay in the back and tell you what to do. He came right up there and says, "How you guys going?" "Just fine, Colonel." He said, "You need anything?" We said, "We're doing alright." He says, "Okay, you know, if you're in trouble, holler at me." And I said, "Okay."

PIEHLER: In terms of the white officers you had, how many were southerners and how many were northerners? Do you remember roughly?

DAVIDSON: I don't really remember.

PIEHLER: Do you remember any southerners at all?

DAVIDSON: I don't remember whether they were north or south. Never got to know them.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DAVIDSON: Never got that involved with any of them.

PIEHLER: On a more mundane level, how often, if you were on the line, how often would you get a hot meal?

DAVIDSON: Ugh, rarely. (Laughs.) Mostly C-rations and K-rations. Sometime in the daytime you could heat up your canned C-rations. Just make you a little fire and heat it up and eat it while it was hot. Or sometimes the mess sergeant would be not too far back and he would run up a bunch of hot meals. And you'd get a chance to eat it. Okay, five men go back and eat and five

take their place. We'd alternate like that, go back and eat something hot. Um, we had good hot meals every once in a while.

PIEHLER: But, it was mainly K and C rations...

DAVIDSON: Mostly K and C rations. Every once in a while we got some good hot meals. They'd bring them up in these big canisters and we'd ease back there and eat real quick and the guy'd take your place. They would still be warm. They had one of those things to keep them hot. But, man, our mess sergeant was a good man. He took care of our company...mess sergeant...he'd get us a hot meal up there. He'd get as close as he could. He says, "It's hell on wheels trying to get a damn kitchen, y'all on the side of a hill. How do you expect me to cook your meal?" We don't care, just get it! But he was good though. He'd get us...we got at least two hot meals a week, two maybe three.

PIEHLER: And you consider yourself fortunate to get that?

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah. We got that...we got a hot meal we were happy, didn't make a difference what it was. We'd eat anything. And every once in a while you'd come to a town. Somebody had have some chickens and you'd go out and scavenge a chicken and cook it over an open fire. It was interesting.

PIEHLER: What about...you mentioned being pulled back and then going to a rest camp. What about when you were on the line, what about a hot shower?

DAVIDSON: None.

PIEHLER: So the only time you ever got a shower...

DAVIDSON: Was when you went to the back.

PIEHLER: So how long might you go for a stretch without a...

DAVIDSON: Month.

PIEHLER: Yeah, with a month on line.

DAVIDSON: You got you some water and heated it in a bucket...what we did was you know, where there was hot water we'd put you helmet and then boil water in it and then bath, you know. You'd wash up as best you could. It just solved the question...and maybe you shaved once a week, if your beard didn't bother you. I think I didn't...cause I wasn't shaving that much then, cause I didn't have much of a beard. And I maybe shaved like once every three months, you know, it didn't bother...a little fuzz on my face, forget it! (Laughs.) But, uh, it was just something you never worried...when you got back to the hot shower though, oh God, you'd get in that water and never..."Alright! It's time for another crew to come in there!" "Already? We just got in here!" But it was interesting; they had hot showers for you and clean clothes. Clean clothes, from the skin out, underwear, socks, everything, shoes, and you get a whole new outfit.

And throw the other ones in the pile. They'd take them and clean them up, wash 'em and iron 'em, sort 'em into sizes and give 'em to somebody else the next time. So you never knew what you were getting. All you knew were they were clean and dry. And the only thing the Army really insisted on was that you have dry socks. We got those.

PIEHLER: So you got those very regularly?

DAVIDSON: We got dry socks regularly. The mess sergeant, he didn't have you a hot meal, but he had you a pair of dry socks. And you got a pair of dry socks at least every other day. That's one thing we'd get. Cause they didn't want you to get trench foot. But those...were really the things we had.

PIEHLER: What about your medics and medical care?

DAVIDSON: We had a medic all the time. Every platoon had its own medic.

PIEHLER: And how well...

DAVIDSON: Well trained. In fact one of the guys was...medic'ed my mouth was into Dent. School when I went to med school. And he was our medic.

PIEHLER: So he was in dental school at MeHarry?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, same time I did. We both got out the Army and all went to med school together. He went to dent school and I went to medical school. But he was our medic and he was right there with us. Wherever we went, he went. You know, he was right there. We'd get hurt; he was right there with the bandages and the first aid and took care of you. And then we always had our battalion sergeant; surgeon with every outfit had their own sort of semi-medical staff. But the medic was with your...every platoon had its own medic. That was his job. Wherever you guys went, he was right there. He just didn't carry a gun. He had a big ole red cross on his helmet and on his arm and he had the...his bag on his shoulder and anybody got hurt, "Medic!"

PIEHLER: Did you ever have a medical cease-fire to retrieve the wounded? DAVIDSON: No.

PIEHLER: You never had a formal...with the Germans?

DAVIDSON: No. Never did.

PIEHLER: Was the medic ever...you think ever deliberately fired upon?

DAVIDSON: Not that I know of.

PIEHLER: You never had a case where he was...you had to send...

DAVIDSON: No, Bassett was...the guy's name was Bassett Brown, and Bassett said he never got shot at and he's been out there in the open taking care of some guy and he said nobody ever fired at him.

PIEHLER: So he would in fact go out in the middle of the firefight and...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, he'd go out there and some guy'd be down...I know one guy got his leg blown up...Bassett went out there and put a tourniquet on his leg and dragged him back and they...and we knew Germans could see him. But they never fired at him or did nothing. Nobody...went to help him, but he did it all himself put the guy on a stretcher...and dragged him back. But he never got fired at.

PIEHLER: What about chaplains? Did you ever encounter...?

DAVIDSON: Umhuh, chaplains, yeah, all the time...he was there.

PIEHLER: Which faith was...?

DAVIDSON: Uh, we had a Catholic chaplain for a while and then we had a Protestant, but I think...as far as I remember, I think this guy...I know we had a priest and he was with us part of the time. But most of the time it was the Protestant uh, and he said this is just an all faith ceremony. We're just all praying together. He said, "I know some of you are Catholic and some of you are something else." He says, "But it doesn't matter we only have one God so let's all pray." So he was there if you needed him.

PIEHLER: So you did see a chaplain a lot, cause...

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah, we had services on Sunday when we could get back to them. They had...religious services on Sundays.

PIEHLER: Did you ever go to...particularly when you were not on the line, did you ever go to services at any of the Catholic...any of the churches in Italy.

DAVIDSON: Yeah. The mass...the Italian...the Latin mass at that time was all the same, no matter what church.

PIEHLER: So yeah, I was...was...

DAVIDSON: So I went to a couple of masses, yeah, when I got a chance...which wasn't often, but every time I got a chance to go I'd go on to church and pray and uh, one lady was surprised that I was Catholic. "Cath-leek?" (Laughs.)

PIEHLER: I guess it's my commentary...but this was probably the beauty of the Latin mass that in fact you could go anywhere in the world.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, you could go anywhere in the world and the mass was the same. In Latin you know, I knew what he was saying, I knew exactly where he was and it was refreshing in that hey, I can understand this guy, you know...good! I know what he's saying, same things they do when you're home. So that made it interesting. It was a lot easier to do that.

BOWEN: Um, were you ever wounded? In combat?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, I got a scratch, somewhere. Yeah, I caught a piece of shrapnel in the arm.

BOWEN: Um, how did you...since yours is a lesser wound, how did they treat your wound, I mean, was it good, I mean your medical care?

DAVIDSON: He put a band-aid on it...I got hit with a piece of shrapnel and Bassett said...looks like you got something in there. Said, well what is it? He says, "I don't know." He picked it out and put some iodine in there and I screamed and he put a bandage on it and that was it.

BOWEN: Okay, I guess I didn't...the better angle to the question then may be, for the more serious cases in your unit, how was the medical care?

DAVIDSON: The medical care was adequate. Uh, we got 'em in and out as quick as we could and Bassett was right there if you got hurt or wounded or shot he was there to do the preliminary and call and we got guys carried out, got 'em taken back to the rear right away, so...if you had a minor wound like this, you know, you just put a bandage on it, wrap it up and keep going, cause if you left your outfit, you may not get back to it. They'd send you to some other outfit. And he said, "You want to go?" "No! Just put me a band..." I ain't leaving my outfit. I don't want to go someplace I don't know nobody. So, you know, unless you really got hurt bad...a lot of guys wouldn't want to go to the rear. You know, "I ain't going back there, I don't get to come back to my group." No you may not, well I ain't going. Well, you have to...no I'm going to Battalion Sergeant. He say I'm alright, I'm coming back. And we sent some guys back and they'd be back there maybe like a day, you know, if it wasn't real bad and fill them up full of sulfur and bandages and clean and tell them what to do and they'd be back. I said, "What are you doing back up here." "Aw...they was going...talking about sending me to so and so and so and so. I didn't want to go there."

BOWEN: So the fear of losing your regiment was the best cure?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, losing your regiment, yeah...and you'd be surprised that that's all the family you got when you're that far away from home and the guys don't really want to leave. If you leave you want to go home. You don't want to leave the outfit just to go in the back and recuperate for a week and the next thing you know, you're going to some other outfit.

BOWEN: In the company of strangers...

DAVIDSON: We had a guy we lost like that. He went to the rear, kinda wounded and they treated him and he'd got shot and they took the bullet out and they kept him in the rear for like

ten days and when it got time for him to go they were going to send him to another outfit. And he never showed up to the outfit, showed up back up at our outfit and they had him listed as AWOL and our company commander called them back and said, "No, he's not AWOL, he's here." And they said, "Well, he was sent to so..." He says, "I'm sorry, he didn't know nothing about those folks so, he's back here with us and he's not AWOL." And they said, "Okay, we'll take him off the list."

PIEHLER: So...from some of your stories...a lot of stuff is not done according to regulation.

DAVIDSON: No.

PIEHLER: There's a lot of...gray area...

DAVIDSON: A lot of gray areas that...it's according to who your company commander is and who your platoon leaders are and how far you can go. You know how far you can push it. And there's several times...a couple of guys really should've got court-martialed, but uh, you know, they were, they'd done a good job and you'd plead their case to the company commander and put them on some kind of punishment and ...confine them to quarters...

BOWEN: Sort of carries back to that family aspect you were discussing...

DAVIDSON: Yes, the family aspect that you build up a camaraderie with these guys that you don't have with ordinary people. It's like a group...uh, we have interfamily relationships. I know you, you know me. You've been with me for a year...I know what you like to do; I know what you don't like to do. I know what you like to eat; I know what you like to drink. I know what kind of woman you like. You know, these are the things that you know about each other and you trust each other. You know, hey man...I...so and so and so and so. I go with you Sarge; I'll take you back. You don't have to worry about it. I'm with you. You know, just, those are the kind of things that you miss when you get new guys in there. I mean, who's that new guy. I don't know. Well, we gotta work him in our outfit. I don't trust him, he looks kind of odd. You know, take a guy a while to build up trust with the guys who'd been there for a while. So that was another problem. And then once you learned how to trust somebody else, then you're willing to go on with whatever procedures were...so it was a big family thing, the war. I think war teaches you to be close to the guy that's next to you. This guy on your right and left is all you got. You know, if you lose one of them you know who's gonna come take his place. So you want to surround yourself with people that you can say okay, my life is in your hands and I trust you with it. You know, I'm gonna take care of your life like I take care of my own. You know, I'm not gonna waste it so that trust is there. You hold on to it, treasure it.

BOWEN: Well, family is far more accepting of anyone's faults than...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, I can take your faults if you're related to me than if you're just a stranger. You know if you do something out of the ordinary and you're a member of my family, ah well, that's just Charlie messing around, he's alright, you know, he's a good boy. He won't do it again.

PIEHLER: You did mention this incident where you had to disarm someone, did anyone really, particularly...cross the line that they got in trouble. I mean, you couldn't just say to the company commander...

DAVIDSON: I don't think anybody in my outfit, my own-

PIEHLER: Your own outfit...

DAVIDSON: My platoon-

PIEHLER: Your platoon was okay.

DAVIDSON: Like I said, my platoon, other than that one guy shooting off his gun and getting drunk, really got that far out of line that he needed to be court-martialed or reprimanded or something.

PIEHLER: What about in the regiment?

DAVIDSON: Regimental, not that much.

PIEHLER: So overall your order and discipline was pretty good.

DAVIDSON: Overall, discipline in our regiment was a whole lot better than...I tell you what, our regiment had better discipline than the other two regiments in the 92nd Division...they came over later. And we, as our regiment, we were...we thought we were elite. We were a better outfit, we had better discipline. We carried ourselves a lot better. We were more respected and people...said what are you from? 92nd. Oh, God. No we're the 370th combat team. Oh, yeah, I remember you guys. It made a difference when you said that. People recognized you for what you were, because they knew, when the 92nd finally came over, near the end of the war, we'd already built up a reputation. You know, we were a dynamic fighting force and we were trustworthy and they knew we could handle our end. Whatever they could put on us, we could do. So we built up the reputation...guys coming behind us weren't quite that good. Cause they didn't have the experience and they didn't have the pressure on them that we had.

PIEHLER: You felt that you had pressure?

DAVIDSON: We had a tremendous amount of pressure on us. And we felt...we had to succeed. It wasn't a question that you will, you know, you must. It was a "you will succeed." You are going to do it. And that was the impression that we went over with. That's the attitude we carried, we said hey, there's nothing out there you do that we can't do.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, historians focus a lot on this. How aware were you of the NAACP Double V campaign?

DAVIDSON: Didn't know a lot about it.

PIEHLER: Yeah, uh...

DAVIDSON: Cause it happened, I guess, back home and we didn't ...

PIEHLER: How much...did you know...you said that you read the *Yank* magazine and *Stars and Stripes* and that...?

DAVIDSON: Wasn't a big play about it. They didn't put a lot about it in the paper.

PIEHLER: Did anyone in your unit get any of this...I don't know if the *Amsterdam News* was around, but the *Pittsburgh Courier*...

DAVIDSON: *Amsterdam News* was around, cause I sold them as a kid.

PIEHLER: But you didn't...

DAVIDSON: We didn't get any overseas. No, they never sent them to us overseas. There was a little something my aunt might write me in a letter tell me about it, but you know, really wasn't that interested. We never really got into that. There was a lot going on back home, but you know we were too busy trying to stay alive. We weren't interested in what somebody else was doing back here in the Double V program or whatever they were into. We just never really got into it.

PIEHLER: How many prisoners did you take? Particularly in the earlier parts of the war.

DAVIDSON: Early part of the war we...one or two. And we couldn't understand what the hell he was saying cause he was speaking German and uh...we had to question them and he kept talking German and finally the guys says if you don't take...I'm gonna cut your damn throat, cause you understand English. The guy says, "What do you want to know?" (Laughs.) That kind of got to me. We found out that a lot of Germans understand a lot of English. They spoke...quite a few of them spoke very good English. In fact, one guy, he used to...say, that sounds just like a guy...Hey you guys, what are the Dodgers doing? I said, don't answer that. That's the Germans...listen his "r's" are not like we pronounce them.

PIEHLER: So this was out on the lines?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, they would come over the loudspeaker. Hey, you guys, what's the score? What are the Yankees doing over there at home? Damn propaganda. They did that a lot. But we weren't fooled. See, it's hard to fool a black person, when you're not black. (Laughs) He's talking and we were yeah, yeah...uhuh, you're not one of us. I know better than that. But that made a big difference. It was obvious, a lot of it, some of it...but it was interesting. Interesting portion of life.

PIEHLER: Anymore questions that you have on Italy, just uh...I guess, is there anything we forgot to ask you about Italy, cause I want to ask you a little bit about Japan, cause...

DAVIDSON: Not a whole lot. I think I've told you most of all I remember.

BOWEN: Did you mention something about Mussolini?

PIEHLER: Oh, yes, oh that's right. You really had a dramatic...

DAVIDSON: I forgot about that...at the end of the war we got...we were just sort of mopping up and we got to Genoa and we got to go to the square, the piazza where Mussolini and his mistress were hanging in the square. We got to see that. I had a picture of it, but I've lost it over the years time. But we got to see the partisans' hung them in the piazza in Genoa. But that was interesting. And I just got there and the glimpse and the next thing I knew I was on my way to Japan.

PIEHLER: V-E Day, how soon after V-E Day did you leave for Japan?

DAVIDSON: I don't remember now.

PIEHLER: Cause you were...you sent your...the letter to...that you wrote in July, 1945 in Pisa.

DAVIDSON: Yeah.

PIEHLER: So you were in Italy in July and the war ended in May.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, to May 12, 1945 we were transferred.

PIEHLER: Oh, so it was that soon that you got transferred to the quartermaster company.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, then we got sent to...and right after that we got sent down in it. I forgot about this letter.

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

PIEHLER: This continues an interview with Dr. E.V. Davidson on April 4, 2000 at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, TN with Kurt Piehler and...

BOWEN: Jason Bowen.

PIEHLER: So we had sort of left off with...we were trying to figure out how long you were in Italy after the war...the war had ended. And you got transferred pretty quickly to quartermaster company in May and that was because you didn't have enough points...

DAVIDSON: Didn't have enough points to be redeployed to the United States, so all the guys who had under a certain number of points was transferred to the quartermaster so we could be sent to Japan to be part of occupation troops. (Murmuring and shuffling of papers.) This is the passenger list, but it doesn't give a date. That's the list of the guys that were transferred with me to the quartermaster outfit.

PIEHLER: Well, you did...you were part of the quartermaster...the time while you were in Italy, what were you doing?

DAVIDSON: I was all in the infantry...while I was in the quartermaster?

PIEHLER: Yeah...

DAVIDSON: Just being redeployed and...

PIEHLER: Just basically waiting...

DAVIDSON: Basically waiting to go to uh, Japan. We didn't know where we were going. We knew we were going to the South Pacific, but we had no idea where at the time. And they were forming this new company, it was just being made up of combat soldiers, being put into a quartermaster outfit to go to South Pacific to be part of the invasion troops. That's all we knew.

PIEHLER: As part of the quartermaster, you were...had been an infantry company, what were your duties going to be?

DAVIDSON: I was still a platoon sergeant. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: Platoon sergeant. But what tasks would you...

DAVIDSON: Basically none, that I really...we didn't do a whole lot of anything.

PIEHLER: You didn't really...you didn't even get to that...you didn't have stores, you didn't have...

DAVIDSON: We didn't have any stores, we didn't have anything. We just were a group getting ready to go overseas. We didn't know they had everything down there that we were going to acquire once we got to the South Pacific. That's what they told us.

PIEHLER: Because some black quartermaster, a lot of black quartermaster companies were basically labor companies...

DAVIDSON: That's all. Well, we weren't...we didn't do anything.

PIEHLER: You didn't even know what...

DAVIDSON: Nuh, uh. We still had our guns and we were still combat troops that were being redeployed to a non-combat unit to go down and reform...they told us we're going down there to reform to be part of occupation...be invasion force for Japan. That's what they told us. We had no idea what we were going to do. We knew that the Marines and Navy were raising havoc down there. They were just fighting like crazy. We were going over there to help 'em out. That's what we thought.

PIEHLER: The war...having fought in Italy, the war in the Pacific must have been a very, just as distant as the homefront...

DAVIDSON: ...it was like something...another world...something we were not totally unaware of, but we had no idea what it was about and where it was going and how they were going to get there and...we had no concept of war in the Phil...we knew it was all in sea and air and you know, in island hopping. We just had no concept about what it was about.

PIEHLER: How did you get to the South Pacific?

DAVIDSON: On a Navy ship.

PIEHLER: And what was your route?

DAVIDSON: We left the Mediterranean, we left Naples, and we went, came back across the Atlantic, came through the Panama Canal. We stopped in New Guinea to refuel or refurbish or something. And left there and went to the Philippines. And we disembarked in the Philippines and...to be redeployed and into these liberty freighters, that carried trucks and all sort of stuff on there. And while we were in Japan, I mean, while we were in the Philippines was when they dropped the atomic bomb on Japan and they announced that the war is over. And we were just going to go and be occupation troops. So we said, that's fine, let's go, what do we do? Said, well, we don't know till we get there. So they loaded up us on these liberty freighters and we were sitting in a harbor at San Fernando North, while MacArthur and the Japanese signed the treaty on the Missouri. And after they signed the treaty, then we took off for Japan, got caught in a typhoon. Then we finally got to Japan and unloaded in Kyoto. And we took over what used to be an airplane factory, where they made our airplanes. And that's where we set up our headquarters and they unloaded all this equipment. They brought it into us, and then we were supposed to inventory all the things coming in off the ship and then dole it out to the different units as they arrived.

PIEHLER: ...you had a much longer voyage...on a very different ship than a Navy vessel. What was that...how did that compare to the...?

DAVIDSON: Horrible! (Laughs) Worst trip in the world. Everything was strictly Navy, and you had to get up at a certain time. Had to get up and clean the decks and all sorts of things that we had to do going across. It was an entirely different trip. Being on a Navy ship everything is crowded and crammed together.

PIEHLER: So you were much more cramped?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, much more cramped on the Navy ship.

PIEHLER: and you also rode out a typhoon at one point, going to Japan.

DAVIDSON: Going to Japan, we went on liberty freighters, which carried the equipment that we were carrying with us. And that was just fascinating experience. Got caught in a typhoon, liberty freighters which can only tilt 45 degrees in any direction. We tilted 43 and 44 degrees and we were all praying that we don't capsize in the sea, cause there's nowhere to hide. But we were fortunate enough...when we got there, without losing anything.

BOWEN: So would you say the typhoon was probably one of the scarier things you faced?

DAVIDSON: Or scariest. It was worse than combat, because you're helpless. You're riding on a ship over which you have no control and the sea, which the waves are like as tall as this building. You could look down and see ships down below you and the next thing you know, you're washed down in this big valley, just like on a roller coaster, falling off of it. Scary...that's really scary. I was more afraid of that than I was being shot at. It was really frightening. Cause there's nothing you can do. You're just there. All you can do is just ride and pray.

BOWEN: Nowhere to hide...

DAVIDSON: Nowhere to hide. There ain't nothing you can do. And the captain's talking about well, we got 43 degrees. Oh, Jesus, don't tell me that. 44. We got as far as I think 44 1/2, and the ship just hung there for like looked like an eternity and finally it began to right itself. And then evidently the propeller came out of the water. He says, oh, we can't stand more than one or two more of those. I thought, oh, Jesus, man, don't tell me this, you know. And finally we rode it out. And we were on the outskirts of the typhoon. That's what was so bad. Thought, God, if we'd been in the middle, just think of what it was. They lost a lot of ships that day. LST's split in half. But we rode it out, and got to Japan all in one piece.

PIEHLER: What did you know of Japan before...before the war or during the war?

DAVIDSON: Nothing. Not a thing, other than we knew that the Japanese-American troops were great people and we didn't know anything about the Japanese. We hated them because they bombed Pearl Harbor, but that's all we...we got to Japan, the people were just ordinary folks. They had no idea that their country had done all the things that they did do, so. They were just, no, we didn't that. Yes, you did. But they...

PIEHLER: What would they deny that they hadn't done?

DAVIDSON: Denied that we had Pearl Harbor, that it was our fault. It was nothing that they did. Course, that's what they told 'em. And that's all they had to go by, on what they were informed. They didn't have no way of knowing one way or the other.

PIEHLER: What was your typical duties like at occupation duty?

DAVIDSON: Nothing. We really didn't do anything. We...honestly other than going down to the waterfront and having them load up...and all I did was stand around with a big clipboard on my hand and check things off.

PIEHLER: That the Japanese were...

DAVIDSON: No, that they were unloading, that the seabees or the Navy were unloading and every once in a while somebody would drop a box full of cigarettes, and you know...(laughs) and you'd pay somebody off to make sure we didn't count that box. But it was interesting. Everything was sort of...

PIEHLER: Well, your men, did they do any of the unloading or were they...

DAVIDSON: No, we never done any...our job was once we got it in our little quartermaster compound, we issued it to...you came with a requisition, my guys loaded you up with what your requisition, you signed for it and that's it.

PIEHLER: So in many ways you were a supply...

DAVIDSON: Just a supply...that's what we were, quartermaster supply company. We supplied everybody.

PIEHLER: So you didn't do any patrolling or any...

DAVIDSON: No, we just...we were there. We got to do a lot of sightseeing and visiting and traveling around, but we didn't do any patrolling.

PIEHLER: Well...Jason...we were discussing preparing for your interview, he said, well there's a lot more pictures of Japan, a lot more material on Japan...

DAVIDSON: It's because I had more time. And then, coming from Italy a lot of the stuff that I had, I just kind of, you know, lost and misplaced and it's hard to pack up all the stuff you got and get ready to go on another journey to another world, really, was what it was. And a lot of stuff I just lost. Some of it I sent home and a lot of stuff was in my aunt's house and I don't know what happened to it.

BOWEN: Um, we were talking about your scrapbook has lots of interesting pictures of Japan, lots of aspects. I was going to see maybe if you could describe some of the social and cultural interactions that you had, while, you know, while on occupation duty there.

DAVIDSON: The people we met were very nice, you know. We learned how to say, Ohio and Wacadmasin, thank you very much, and mamason and papason, those are the things that you learn and we found out that as a rule the average Japanese person was very courteous, very nice, and welcomed you and one thing...culture shock was you took your shoes off...you had to leave your shoes outside. You know, is it safe? Uh-huh, only...very nice...wherever you went you had to take your shoes off and sit on the floor. And we just weren't used to doing this. It was fascinating about that. And then the other thing was the devastating to see Nagasaki where they destroyed it with the atomic bomb. It's just devastation that you cannot imagine. You'd have to

see it to really appreciate it. Just, just...you could tell where the bomb stopped. The aftershocks just totally, completely obliterated a city. Just wiped it out.

BOWEN: On seeing this devastation, did this change your attitude's toward the bomb or, I mean...

DAVIDSON: We knew it was powerful. I said that I never realized that any one bomb could do that much damage...had really no idea what an atomic bomb was till we saw that. Then we realized what an atomic bomb was and what it could do. I mean, I'd heard of it, you know, smashing atoms and stuff like that. And a lot of guys didn't understand and I could explain it to them what happened. And they looked at it and said, Sarge, there is nothing that we know of could create this much havoc. We've seen bombs and we've seen explosions, they said, but nothing like this. This is devastating, totally unbelievable and if you couldn't see it, you wouldn't believe it. I mean, steel girders were melted like candles. Just melted. And you could see where the streets were just totally wiped out, just...just as far as you could see, nothing left.

BOWEN: Most of the things I've read, it discusses, you know, especially vets facing an invasion of the Japan home islands...the lives that it saved, especially on our side, you know, that it was worth it or whatever else. I didn't know that if maybe seeing like I said, such destruction...

DAVIDSON: You felt empathy...with the people...I felt really...I could empathize with the Japanese. I felt sorry for them, I felt guilty that uh...but then again I felt mad at the military that they would subject their people to this kind treatment. It's their fault and the people didn't really...the people that we talked to...the average Joe on the street had no idea what all this was going on. They knew about it and were fighting for their country, because the imperialistic Americans...but they, once they got to know us, they...you know, we never realized that Americans were like this. You know, we're not that bad. We didn't do nothing. Why did y'all bomb us? We didn't bomb you, you did it. Their attitude was that we did it, but we didn't. That's what they thought. They were taught that everything they did was self-preservation. That the Americans caused it. And until they were really informed, they didn't have any idea what was going on. The difference was...you know, their eyes...no, we couldn't do nothing like that. Oh, yes, you did.

BOWEN: With these...feelings expressed, did you incur any resentment, I mean, obviously...besides just kind of a general...was there any anger or you know, shown...toward American troops...

DAVIDSON: Once in a while you'd get somebody, some...if you got any military people, they were mad, but other than...just the average Japanese person was not upset or angry. They were just shocked that...they were shocked number one that we could do this to them, and then they were shocked when they found out that they just had no idea that their people did that to us. They didn't realize that...and we told them and showed them pictures and they thought, no, we're just retaliating what you did to...we didn't do anything. We were just minding our own business when your country decided to just bomb us. And uh, they really...it was eye-opening to a lot of those folks.

BOWEN: Did you happen to get a chance to see some of the other cities that had been bombed by firebombing or regular bombing? DAVIDSON: Yeah, it's a totally different...just, you know...what we'd seen in Italy where buildings were blowed up and craters in the ground where bombs had fallen, nothing like the atomic bomb. We saw some places where they had been bombing, but the devastation was nothing like where they dropped the atomic bomb.

BOWEN: I didn't know if some of the firebombings, if there might...

DAVIDSON: Firebombings weren't that bad, from what we could see. You could tell, you could tell the difference...

PIEHLER: Did you ever make it to Tokyo?

DAVIDSON: Yeah.

PIEHLER: And so Tokyo, you didn't get the sense that it was...

DAVIDSON: Didn't get the sense that it was really that devastating, you know. Some firebomb...nothing any worse than what the Germans did to London, you know, with the V2 bombs, just sort of like that. But it wasn't any really...we were that...those kind of bombs never would have turned the war. It took that atomic bomb to really...when they realized how much devastation...we would have...if they'd dropped two more, they'd have blown up all the islands in Japan, totally destroyed them.

BOWEN: So you saw Nagasaki...did you get a chance to see Hiroshima as well?

DAVIDSON: Hiroshima, both of them. Got a chance to see both of them.

BOWEN: Which in your opinion would you say was the most, I mean, obviously both were wiped from the map, but...

DAVIDSON: Both equally...both of them were equally as bad. I think Nagasaki was worse. If you can kind of equate that in your mind, it's hard to really equate them. I just never thought that much...both were just terrible, just really bad.

PIEHLER: Where else in Japan did you get to go?

DAVIDSON: I was on old Kyoto and went to a lot of the little outlying towns. And went somewhere in the north towards the mountains, which was nice. And then went up to that area where they had the springs, I don't remember the name of it now, but they had those natural hot springs and you could go in there and get in the hot water. We were really excited because there was no segregation, you know, man, women, child, everybody goes in together. We thought, wow, man, all these women in there. And when you get in that hot water, you think oh, god, I'm going to get out of here is all I want to do. I don't care if she is naked, it doesn't make any difference. But the water's just...coming out of there...it takes you half an hour to get into the

water and once you get into it...you don't stay too long. And when you come out it's like somebody took you through a ringer. And people there...they'd walk up and down your back. You'd lay down on the...and this lady walks up and down your back on this thing. And you just lay there, you're helpless. You couldn't even turn over by yourself. And they give you a massage and they rub you with these herbs and you go put your clothes on...and you thought...oh, god, all I want to do is go back to the barracks and go to bed. (Laughs.) But other than that we had a chance to see...and got a chance to ride some of their trains.

PIEHLER: You have a lot of pictures of Geisha girls in your...

DAVIDSON: That's what we...(laughs) you know, when your in the (laughs) Japan, that's about all you can do. We didn't know the language and of course they were the only ones that'd entertain you, so...and then the pictures were there, we were in a place that the guy took a lot of photographs. We just helped ourselves to some of the pictures. Some of the girls I knew. But most of those are some that were already posed...

PIEHLER: Yeah, a lot of them look like posed pictures.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, a lot of them were just posed pictures. But a couple of them, regular photographs were people that I had met. Couple of them...it was interesting. It was just fascinating to be in that country.

BOWEN: Can you elaborate on the treatment of the population or the various refugees by the U.S. Army and how were they...? DAVIDSON: Average American unfortunately treats occupied people like they're beneath us, you know. And most places that we went in all the various countries that I got the chance to go into, black troops fared a lot better with the population than the average white troops. The white troops sort of treated them like this thing was...story about the ugly American, which is quite true. And people were fearful of the average white American, but a black American, you could just about go anywhere you want to, and people treated you a lot different than they did...cause a lot of...we had some white sailors that said how come you guys can go to these places and they treat you so nice. Cause we treat them like they're people, like they're human beings. Y'all treat them they're dirt...we know how to treat people because we've been treated bad. Oh, we don't treat you... Yes, you do. We got into an argument over that, but they just accepted us a lot better and we got along with the population 100% better than they did. People accepted the average black troop wherever you went they sort of accepted you because they realized you were sort of looked at as second class citizen at home, so you know, you're in the same boat we're in. What do you want? Oh, fine, hey, we want to come in and sit down and eat and talk to you. Okay, come on.

BOWEN: So it took going to the enemy's homeland to be treated with the respect that you deserve?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, we could get the respect from anybody in Japan. You know, they'd see you coming, oh...invite you in, you know, have a meal...I guess the average Black American was free. He had something he's going to give you. If you had candy...hey, I don't have anything, have some candy or some cigarettes or something, you know, have some. We'd give away... in

Italy we gave away all we had to the kids, just...boy, when they'd see us coming...they had hands out. We'd give them candy, give 'em C-rations, K-rations, whatever we had. We shared with the populace, which made a difference.

PIEHLER: It's intriguing...you never made it to Germany, but Italy...you fought against...in two Axis countries...fought in one and occupied another. And these are now very different, I mean, Japan is among the most expensive places in the world to travel, and Italy...has done quite well for itself...I guess your images of Italy are of a lot of hungry children and of...

DAVIDSON: Well, when I was there, they were...

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DAVIDSON: Because it was...what the Germans didn't destroy, we did, you know, trying to take the land back for the people and folks just didn't have a lot. We shared what we had and we...I guess, really basic average American, black, white or indifferent, if it was a child, you do more for kids than you do adults. You know, children come and they hungry, aw here, take this, go ahead. You know, but uh, it was just that much difference and children, you didn't care. Whatever kid, anywhere you seen 'em, you're going to give them something. But we were just, I guess, we just felt that hey, these people are down, let's give them a helping hand. And we gave away a lot of stuff that the government didn't really know about. People coming in, looked hungry...and destitute, we'd give 'em blankets and whatever else. We shared our food with them, and they appreciated it.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, you mentioned at some point, some tension between white soldiers...from other branches. Any incidents that you recall, either large or small, cause on some army bases, I mean, there'd actually be riots that would break out between black and white...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, we never had a lot...at Fort Riley we had no fights, cause we were totally opposite and out at Fort Huachuca there wasn't any problem, cause it was mostly all black anyway. Overseas we had a couple of run-ins with some white soldiers...back in our rest areas. You know, they'd say, oh, what the hell you guys...no damn combat soldiers. You know, then you'd get into a fight over that, but other than that just minor skirmishes, nothing really bad.

PIEHLER: So never to the point where...

DAVIDSON: Never really to the point that you'd want to shoot somebody or kill anybody, but you know...

PIEHLER: Or you never had intervened where a whole squad or two were going at...

DAVIDSON: Uh, no. We had a couple of guys get in some fights...

PIEHLER: Yeah, but more...

DAVIDSON: But there was enough of us that...nobody's going to jump on them...and two got into it, we let them fight it out. And we'd protect them, you know. Don't you jump in there, cause if you do, we're going to get in, so...and then the M.P.'s would come or shore patrol would come.

PIEHLER: Well, that was my next question. What was...Bill Mauldin makes a lot about the M.P. What was your mens' relationship with M.P.'s, particularly when you were on leave and shore patrols?

DAVIDSON: We stayed away from them. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: Do you think they harassed your men or you?

DAVIDSON: Not any more than anybody else. M.P.'s were relatively fair as long as you didn't get in trouble or act belligerent or get drunk and shoot up the place. It was not too bad. ...when I was in Fort Riley, I was on the M.P. myself. All platoon sergeants got to be the M.P. on the weekend and you had to go on and keep order. And that's where I found out that you had to pay seven cents for every bullet. If you shot somebody, you had to pay for the bullet. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: How did you find this out?

DAVIDSON: Some guy...we fired a gun just for the heck of it one night, couldn't get to quiet and they were arguing and guns started...pulled my gun out and fired into the ceiling. And it got quiet in there. Says, all right, everybody in this outfit, get out of here. It's time to go. And they all filed out. And I sat there with that pistol in my hand. Guy said, he's serious. You damn right, get out of here. (Laughs) And then next day, we got back to camp and Lieutenant or the guard says anybody fire a gun. I said, yeah, I did. He said, for what? And I told him what happened. He says, well, you owe seven cents. What the hell for! He said, for the bullet you shot. Oh, dang. Okay. That's when I found out you had to pay seven cents for a bullet if you shot it. They tried to do that so you wouldn't fire your gun unnecessarily. He said, did you have to? Yeah, cause they wouldn't listen, couldn't get 'em quiet. I said...you pull that .45, makes enough noise inside a building, boy. I got everybody's attention. People diving under the tables. (Laughs) Oh, gosh.

PIEHLER: Did you think of staying on in Japan...did you think of reenlisting?

DAVIDSON: No. Never. My idea was to get out as soon as I could.

PIEHLER: When did you learn of the GI Bill? DAVIDSON: After discharge.

PIEHLER: Not until...you didn't hear word of it...

DAVIDSON: Didn't know anything about it beforehand, till I got ready to get out the army. And they told us about the GI Bill and going to school, all that. Told what you were entitled to.

PIEHLER: Do you think if it hadn't been for the GI Bill, you would have been able to go back to college?

DAVIDSON: I doubt it. I probably wouldn't have. I probably would...I would've stayed in New York and went to City College and NYU.

PIEHLER: But you hadn't really thought...

DAVIDSON: I hadn't really thought about how I was going to get there. I was thinking about how I could afford it. I couldn't afford it, then I realized, you can go to school. My aunt says, you got the GI Bill, why don't you use it. I don't want to go to school. So I laid out from, I got out the army January '46 and I worked in the paper factory and drew my 52/20 and every week, then unemployment insurance and then I finally decided one day, this is stupid. Punching a clock, let me go to school. And so that's when I went back and applied to Lincoln. And they said, well, you going to pay this debt? I said, yeah, I'll pay you all. So they told me what I owed and I paid them. And they said, yeah, you can come back. When you want to start? September. So I started back to school.

PIEHLER: One question, back up, because you told a really wonderful story...well, it's a sad story in some ways, but also, you got back, you entered San Francisco...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, we got back. We landed Christmas Day 1945 in San Francisco on Angel Island. And when we got off the boat, we'll have Christmas dinner on Angel Island. They had it set up like a cafeteria and German prisoners were serving the meal and I was going through the line, this guy says, hey, sergeant, sergeant, sergeant! I thought, what the hell? You know, the guy says, hey, he's calling you. I said, who's calling me? I don't know no Germans. And he says, that guy knows you. So I...he kept calling...I stopped and yes? He said, you remember me? Remember me? No. He says, you captured me. And I thought, when did the hell did I capture you? I don't remember you. And then he told me, now, oh, I remember. He says, remember I'm the guy with the...and the gun across my arm? I said, yeah, I remember. He came out and surrendered, the whole outfit and he came across...we popped over the hill and these Germans were all lined up, I thought, oh crap, thinking there's a million damn Germans down there. And he was the guy that was in charge, and he standing there with his arms folded and handed me his gun. He says, we surrender to you. And I thought, you? What about all them? He says, we'll all surrender to you. I thought, Jesus Christ, here I am, I got twelve people in this...in two jeeps. This all the American...and they got all their guns stacked in rows and we said that the commander wants to surrender to you. I said, okay. We went down there and he surrendered his whole German outfit to us.

PIEHLER: What stage of the war was this? DAVIDSON: This was at the end of the war...

PIEHLER: Yep.

DAVIDSON: ... and we radioed to the rear and told them, and they said what's wrong? I said, we got a whole German regiment up here. He says, are they shooting at you? I says, no, they have surrendered to us twelve...we have...my squad, I said, one squad of my platoon, we have

captured over a thousand Germans. (Laughs) Will you please come in here and take 'em off our hands. Guy says, I don't believe it. I said, okay, come on up...we're standing and we told him where we were. And about that time one of the guys from headquarters came up and he said, Jesus Christ, you captured all these? I said, yep. They're yours, Captain, cause we're going home. We gotta keep on down the road. That's where the guy...he remembered me...after all those years.

BOWEN: Were these German regulars? DAVIDSON: Yeah, German regular army...regular army soldiers. They had their cars parked and they were just sitting there. They didn't have no food, had no...everything was gone. And no ammunition and they just...decided to park there and wait for anyone...they didn't want to surrender to the Italians because of...partisans would probably kill the half of them. So they waited until the Americans came to surrender to us.

PIEHLER: You also said, your journey back from San Francisco to New York, you had an experience...

DAVIDSON: ...terrible experience because we left...we got...after we disembarked they picked the ranking non-com to be in charge. There were ten of us going back to, uh, Fort Dix, New Jersey. And being the ranking non-com, I had the money and the tickets and we were assigned to fly and we left Sacramento and flew to Dallas. And we got to Dallas the plane was grounded because of bad weather and we said, well, we need to find some place to eat. Went out to eat and got to the restaurant to go in to eat and everybody went in and I was at the end. The guy said, you can't come in here. I said, why not? He said, we don't serve colored. I said, well, if you don't serve me, they don't eat. He says, yes, they can eat. I said, no they can't. He said, yes, they can. I said, no they can't. He says, what do you mean they can't. I said, I got the money. I'm in charge of this outfit. I don't eat, they don't eat. And the guys said, what's the matter, Sarge? I said, he said, I can't eat in here. They said, hell, we'll tear this damn place up. The guy said, well, I'll put you in...so he took me and put us in the back, put this great big screen in front. And he served us, so we could eat. And so nobody could realize that I was in there eating...a bunch of guys from New York, so, we'll tear this damn place up if you don't feed him. So they fed me and that was our problem...we ran into that segregation all over, in Texas, and uh...we finally couldn't get on a commercial airline, so we went on out to the Air Force and got on one of those Army planes. Guy said, well, you couldn't get...I said, no, I couldn't find a civilian plane that was not loaded, and so they said, well, come on, we'll take you. So they flew us from Dallas to where, St. Louis, and then we changed planes in St. Louis and we flew from there to Fort...New Jersey on out to Fort Dix...asked me if I wanted to reenlist, I told him hell, no. I want my money and discharge; I want to go home. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: You mentioned, you talked a little bit about working in the factory. It sounds like you...there were things you had to work out...would that be fair to...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, I had to work out in my mind. I had to decide whether I really wanted to go back to school, cause I had been disillusioned so much about it...going to ASTP and I just kind of felt that going to school, I was too old. Here I was...over 21 and still hadn't finished college and all these folks are ahead of me. And I'd go back to school with kids younger than I am. I just couldn't make up my mind, until I started working I realized hell, punching a clock?

You know, every day, this is for the birds. So I came home one day and told my aunt, said, I'm going to school. She says well, I wondered how long you'd last down there at that damn job. She says, before you realized that you had to work for somebody. I said, I ain't working for nobody. I'm going to school. She says, well, it's about time. So I went on down there and paid off my bill and registered and I went on back to school.

PIEHLER: What was...you'd been to Lincoln for a semester before...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, I'd been a semester...

PIEHLER: How did the war...how did the GI Bill change Lincoln from what you could tell? What was the same and what was different? DAVIDSON: The difference was that they'd added what they call veteran's barracks. They had some barracks for married veterans, guys coming out of the war who were married and had families and wanted to go back to school. And uh, there were more veterans there than I...was surprised, I thought it would be a lot of young guys, but there were more veterans coming back. My class at Lincoln was probably half veterans.

PIEHLER: So a lot of your fears about...

DAVIDSON: A lot of my fears about being too old were unfounded. (Laughs) Cause half the guys in the class were older than I am or as old as I was and you know, wasn't that many young guys, so a few young guys who were already there, but as far as catching up, I had to catch up a half a year that I missed. So I went to summer school for two summers to catch up. But I enjoyed going back to school, I said man, this beats getting up every morning and punching a clock.

PIEHLER: ...you mentioned to me at one point that you had, besides your...the government covering tuition and books and the allowance, you also had some, you and several other veterans also had some things on the side.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, we worked...we had a little business going on the side. We washed and ironed shirts for guys that wanted to go up on weekends. And we sold pies and things that...in the dormitory, if you wanted a homecooked meal, we'd cook you a meal for a price. (Laughs) And we all lived together in the vets village like it was a...Boots, me, Calvin...there were four of us lived together...

PIEHLER: The four vets, what were their experiences...

DAVIDSON: They were about the same...they'd been some in the infantry, some in the quartermaster. And they had similar experiences. All had been overseas, so we all had similar experience and we were determined, hell, we weren't going to go through this crap no more. And we lived together and just did our own thing. But we all went to school, all studied and stuff together.

PIEHLER: I guess...you'd been well prepared by Stuyvesant, did that hold up?

DAVIDSON: Yes, held up very well. Between what I learned in ASTP and what I'd gotten at Stuyvesant and my earlier experiences, plus in the summertime I went to...I did one year at Lincoln in one summer. And then one summer I did a summer at CCNY making up embryology, which I didn't have to get enough courses. I had enough hours, but I didn't have that qualifying course to get my degree in biology. So I did that. But that's...I caught up pretty fast, wasn't too hard. Had to do a lot of studying and a lot of work and all on the sideline.

PIEHLER: Well, I guess, how much of a social life did you have at Lincoln? Given, I mean, pre-med is not an easy major, but how...

DAVIDSON: No, but we had plenty social life...I was the, going to Lincoln I was a reporter for the school newspaper, I was the editor of the yearbook the year I graduated. I was a member of the varsity club. I was manager and trainer of the football team. I came back; I didn't play, I decided to be the manager. So I was the manager of the football team and the trainer for the track team. So I...

PIEHLER: You were something of a man about campus...

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah, I was BMOC on the campus. I was a big wheel. Yeah, I got to do a lot of things. And I like to write, so and I like to talk so I wrote a letter called "Doc Rapper," had all the gossip on the campus. I put it in the *Lincolnian*, which was the daily newspaper and then I was the associate editor my junior year. Then senior year I was the editor of the yearbook, getting the pictures and the ads and stuff, so...

PIEHLER: I guess...you said that the four vets you lived with...they sound like they were your close friends at Lincoln.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, very good.

PIEHLER: You sort of said you wanted things to change. That you...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, we sort of interchange...we all wanted to...and I think each one of us four, we all went into a different field.

PIEHLER: So which fields did they...

DAVIDSON: One guy went into social work, one went to minister, one's a cardiac surgeon, and I went into general surgery. We all sort of different fields and guys in the building next to us were ministers. I think everybody at Lincoln went into some sort of professional field, teachers or whatever.

PIEHLER: How did you think at the time when you were at Lincoln and considering med school, how did you think race would limit you? Did you...

DAVIDSON: I didn't even think about it.

PIEHLER: ...cause I know for Jewish students, there are real Jewish quotas, so you just can't get into certain schools. Were there certain medical schools you just crossed off the list?

DAVIDSON: I just never...I crossed 'em all off. The only schools I applied to, four schools, and I knew...I applied to Meharry, Howard, Boston, and New York Uni-not New York...med school in the Bronx, what's that...

PIEHLER: Oh, Montefurer?

DAVIDSON: CUNY or something? PIEHLER and BOWEN: Oh, okay.

DAVIDSON: CUNY? Anyway, City University and the local, New York State. Those are the only four I applied to. I heard from Meharry and Howard, Boston, those were the three I heard from. Boston said I was accepted for the...I had to wait a year, because the class was already full. Meharry first said I was an alternate, and then Howard says I was an alternate and a week later I heard from Meharry and said, you've been accepted. So I sent my money and two weeks later I got accepted to Howard, but I'd already accepted to Meharry then. So I just went on to Meharry. And I told Boston that I...I wrote them a letter and thanked them for accepting me for the following year, but I'd already been accepted to Meharry, so I give that place to somebody else. And the guy wrote me a nice letter. He said, you're awfully nice to let us know that you're not coming. He said, we wish you a lot of luck. So...but New York, I don't think I ever heard from them. So I didn't even worry about it. They ask you to send your picture, I said, well, that's the end of that so...and they all asked you to send a picture, Meharry, Howard, Boston, and New York. And I sent them a picture and the guy from Boston said, you know, you're second member of our class the next year, said, but you have to wait a year to get in. I thought god, I stay out of school for a year, hell, I'd forget all I knew.

BOWEN: If the Meharry and Howard acceptances had arrived at the same time, would your choice have remained the same? DAVIDSON: I probably would have gone to Howard. I would have gone...because Howard's closer in Washington, rather than come all the way south. I would have gone to Washington D.C., cause I had relatives living in Washington. My cousin was an orthopedic surgeon in Washington. I probably would've stayed there with him, if I'd gotten...if they'd accepted me first. But at the time, I didn't think about it. I would have probably have waited, had I known, had I remembered. And my aunt reminded after I accepted Meharry. She says, why didn't you wait to see if Howard. She said, you could've stayed with your cousin. I went "what cousin". She told me. I said, hell, I didn't know he lived there. I didn't know he was a doctor. She says, well, we don't either, but he is. He is my grandmother's sister's son.

PIEHLER: So you had a quite...there was a network, you had a family network...

DAVIDSON: Had a family network...he also, and the funny part about it, he also finished Meharry, which I didn't know till I got there. And they ask you, do you have any relatives here. I said, well, I ask...she said yeah, Bob Gladen. I put his name down, she said, oh yeah, he was in the class of '45. Damn, I didn't know that. So you know, it's a cousin you don't even...I didn't know that much about him. I knew that we were related. I knew they'd lived out in St. Louis.

And you know, not that close when it's on the grandmother's sister's children, you know, way off the other end.

PIEHLER: You were moving to the South, I mean going to Meharry.

DAVIDSON: Yeah.

PIEHLER: ...and segregation...

DAVIDSON: When I got accepted, I didn't think about the segregation part. I was just so excited about getting into med school. And once I got down there, then I realized, oh, crap, I'm right here in the South again. Goddog, this is not what I wanted to do. But I'm in med school; I don't have to come in contact with anybody. We're over here at Meharry, all black school. You know, just...I ain't got to go over there for nothing. And turned out to be that some of my professors were from Vanderbilt who were white and they came over and taught our classes so, you know, I got to go over there and see some classes. Once you get here, you learn well, it's not that bad. And Tennessee really wasn't as bad as North Carolina.

PIEHLER: You thought there was a real distinction between...

DAVIDSON: There was a distinction between the two states. Yeah, Tennessee's more of a semi-northern; well they were Union sympathizers anyway. Yeah, sort of semi-northern as far as southern states are concerned. More south-, they were more northern than Kentucky and all the other, Virginia and the rest of them.

PIEHLER: Really? There is a real...

DAVIDSON: East Tennessee was more Union than anything else. That's the difference, and it's part of the world...it's just more northern.

PIEHLER: But you noticed that was even in Nashville, which is more...

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah, you noticed the difference. It was a big difference. And then I went to Memphis to do some extern and...oh, man, Wow! That's really south.

PIEHLER: So you noticed in Tennessee the...

DAVIDSON: Oh, man, the difference between Nashville and Memphis is like Tennessee and Alabama. (Laughs) And it's just that bad!

BOWEN: It's almost like three separate states.

DAVIDSON: It is. Absolutely different. And you could tell the difference. It's the further south you go, the worse it gets. I mean, you can tell the gradations and the differences along there. So, it made a big difference.

PIEHLER: What was...the best part of medical school and what was the hardest part?

DAVIDSON: Hardest part was anatomy, I think. We had a professor who taught anatomy who insisted that you write down everything he told you on index cards, 3 x 5 index cards, read it so he could read-write it so he could read it. And he collected them every week, reviewed them, and marked you on them. And then gave you a test on them every Monday morning. You got a five minute quiz every morning on what you had the day before. And he was the only person that did that. I mean he just, he was death on us, I mean, he's just, Dr. Lambert, he's just unbelievably hard. And his idea was that the only man that could get a hundred was Mr. Gray who wrote *Gray's Anatomy* and himself. And the highest mark that you could possibly get was 97. Cause Gray made a hundred, he made 99, and Dr. Watson made 98, and the best you could do was 97, cause you weren't smart enough to make any better than that, even if you gave it to him verbatim, you weren't that smart. And that was the highest mark you could get in the class was 97...I don't care how much you did. You could have it verbatim out of the book; you got 97 if you got it all right. And his grades were...third was on your notes, a third was on your class presentation, and a third was on the exams. And that's the way he marked you. And that's...

PIEHLER: It's a memory that you've really...

DAVIDSON: I will never forget that man. I remember him, just vividly, forever. And I...my anatomy is based on what he taught. Had nothing to do with the book. He taught anatomy his way, and that's the way I learned in there. It's good, it stuck, I mean, it made sense. But it was his way, and the book was a reference. You referred to the book, just to get the correct spelling of the name. Other than that, you didn't need the book.

PIEHLER: So in many ways he was also something of a character? DAVIDSON: Very much of a character, very much of a character. He was really something, I remember him. That was...he was probably the toughest. Next toughest was physiology, Dr. Roth and his wife, Birdie. They were very tough, and your exams were oral. And if you'd make a mistake, he'd reach behind his head and scratch his ear. And you'd know, oh, god, I'd given the wrong answer. (Laughs) And he would say, Mr.-, tell me about the blood. Well, I'm waiting. And you had to describe to him everything about blood from the time it was made and the molecules, the chemical equation and how it moved through all the processes. And if you added anything, he'd...(coughs) according to my book, I don't think, what page is that on? (Laughs) But I guess the easiest course was probably biochemistry. Um, Dr. West was the president of the University, taught biochemistry. If you did good on your bio, you didn't have to take the final in biochemistry. Whatever you made is what, if you were satisfied with your day by day grade, and the grade that he gave you, you didn't have to take. You could be, everybody who made a B+ or better were exempt from the finals. And I never took a test in biochemistry in my life. I made up my mind I was going to get an A in this man's class; I don't care what he said. And I...he'd look at me, he says, okay Davidson, you can leave. I said, why? He said, you know why. Just get out of here. I went, yes, sir. I was gone, cause I always managed to make 95 on his exam or a 96 or something like that. He says, oh, you're going to pass, just leave.

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

PIEHLER: ...you were talking as we left off, about your biochemistry was your easier...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, easier subject.

PIEHLER: ...in medical school what area of medicine did you think you would go into, specialize in?

DAVIDSON: At the time I was in med school I...my mind...and because of Dr. Wahlberg, again, I had anticipated going into obstetrics and gynecology, which is my interest. After I got into Meharry, I got a chance while I was a senior student to do my externship in surgery in Mount Bayou, Mississippi, in a little place called Devorin Hospital, which is a small black hospital in a rural town, all black town in Mississippi. And I got to do a month there, general surgery and general everything. They sent a resident and two senior students to this hospital to work and during the course of time down there I got a chance to do my first appendectomy, which I had never done in my life. I had seen several. And uh...in the middle of the night when he came in with right lower quadrant pain. I called the resident and I said, Dr. Ice, we got a man over here who's got acute appendicitis. You need to come over. He says, well, have you worked him up? Said, yeah, we did his urine, blood count, he's...high count. He's definitely got acute appendicitis. And he says, well, get him ready for surgery. I said, okay. And we got him prepped up and I said, well, how soon are you going to come? He says, you don't need me. I said, yes, we do! We don't know...he says, you've seen me do it? I, yeah. You've helped me. I go, yeah. He said, well, that's all you do. Make that right lower quadrant incision, just don't cut the intestine, and pick the appendix up and take it out and tie it off. You know what to do. I said, yeah, I know, but we need you here. He says, well, just go ahead and I'll peek in on you in a little bit. So we got the anesthetist and she was giving open drop ether. I don't know if you've ever seen that or not...

PIEHLER: I've seen it in movies...

DAVIDSON: A pin and a can of ether and a mask and dripping open drop ether. And she put the man to sleep and my roommate, I said, get the book. There were two of us. Two New York boys in Mississippi. I told him, get the book and come in and you read. And I'll do the surgery. He said, okay. So he's reading and said, prep the lower abdomen and I prepped all...we did all that, I said, we know how to do that part. I said, now what do you do? He says, well, you take four fingers' breadth above the iliac crest, half way between that and the elbolicus and make a...incision down through the skin in a fashion...I did that...clamp all the bleeders...I clamped all the bleeders, tied them off. He says, now you pick up the fashion and said...I did everything he's telling me. I said, now I'm down to the perineum, what do you do? He says, pick it up with a clamp. I said, oh, hell, I see the gut underneath there. He says, don't cut the gut, cut the perineum. So I picked it up and made a little incision, it opened up. He said, now extend it, and I did. He says, do you see the appendix? I said, yeah, and it just popped up into the incision. I thought, oh, god, thank you. (Laughs) I put a clamp around the end of it and clamped it. Tied it off, took my...cut the appendix off and cauterized the tip of it. And put a purse string suture in there and tied it and pushed it back and...made sure there's nothing else in there. And then sewed him back up. And about the time I was getting ready to close him up, Dr. Ice came and he looked and he said, I don't know what the hell I come over here for, you didn't need me. He

walked right on out the door. I thought, oh, Jesus. I was sweating. I was dripping wet, head to toe. That was my first surgical experience, and I enjoyed it. After I got over being scared and shaking, I really thought it was a wonderful thing. And that was my first surgical experience. That was my...I did being by myself, doing it on our own. And we were real proud of ourselves. We'd done something, nobody else had done.

BOWEN: So your first surgery was truly by the book?

DAVIDSON: Truly by the book. Absolutely by the book. Word for word.

PIEHLER: You weren't even a resident. You were...

DAVIDSON: No, I was a senior student at Meharry. And the interesting part about it, the year that we were seniors they didn't have any interns at Meharry. So being all...the senior students did all the internship work at the school, which we got a good experience. We got to do a lot of things we ordinarily would not have done, had they had interns.

PIEHLER: Well, one of the things I've noticed, I've interviewed several doctors from the '40's, the '30's and '40's, who went to medical school in that period, um, that you learned a lot more, much wider range of things, both in your residency...in your case, even earlier, because of unique circumstances, but even in residencies and earlier in your career, things that doctors today...

DAVIDSON: Don't do.

PIEHLER: They just don't do.

DAVIDSON: We got to do...we did all the externship. I did that surgical externship in Mount Bayou. I did thoracic externship in Memphis under Dr. White. Uh, I did a psychiatric externship in St. Louis at Homegy, Philips. You know, as senior students, we got to do a tremendous amount of work. And we got to do obstetrics. And the first baby that I ever delivered was a patient of the head of the department, Obstetrics and Gynecology at Meharry, Dr. James. And we called him and I said, this patient is waiting for you. He said, just tell her that I'm in the next room washing my hands. He was at a party. He says, I will be there shortly. Just prep her and give a little trilene and keep her knocked out. And I'll be there in a moment, you know. And this lady...I said, Dr. James, she's an active...we're going to have this baby. He says, well, you know what to do. Yes, sir. Do it. So we went in there and give this lady a little knock out, she didn't know what was going on. And did the episiotomy and delivered this baby. And uh, clamped the cord and about the time we got the cord clamped and tied and the baby to the nurse, he showed up. He'd just put a gown around, whipped in. Lady looked up and says, oh, Dr. James, I'm so glad you're here. He says, honey, I've been here the whole time. You're just in good hands. I thought, you lying dog. (Laughs) We'd done all the sweat and work, but it was a wonderful experience because I got to do a lot of things that ordinary senior students don't have the opportunity to do. And that's the training we got. We got a tremendous training at Meharry because of our unique circumstances in our senior year.

PIEHLER: You also met your wife in...

DAVIDSON: I met, yes, I met her the first day I got to Meharry. She was a freshman nursing student; I was a freshman med student. We had...a bunch of us had gotten down, we'd gotten our place to live, with nothing else to do. Guy said, man, I wonder where the girls are. I said, well, school hasn't started yet, but my aunt told me if you go to a nursing home, you could always find girls over there. So we went parading over to the nursing home and walked up to the desk and Mrs. Dismucks was the housemother and we told her. She says, yes, gentlemen, could I help you? Said, we're freshmen students and we don't know anybody and we just thought we'd come over here and fraternize with the some of the young ladies. She says, well, there're some young ladies downstairs. Let me go see if they're decent. So she went downstairs and stayed about ten minutes and she says, okay, come on down. We went downstairs and my wife and three other girls from Knoxville were playing cards. And it was four of us and four of them, so they said, well, let's split up. Two boys against two girls, we played. And we started playing pinochle. And my wife and her friend sitting across from each other, they were kicking under the table. You know how you stretch your legs out under the table, and I felt this kick. I looked down, I said, you're cheating! I'm not cheating; I was just stretching my legs. I said, you're lying. You're cheating. I said, you're the biggest...I said, I thought southern girls were honest and nice. I said, you're nothing but a crook. (Laughs) She says, I'm not a crook...don't call me...I said, yeah, you are. So we got to talking and playing and I told her, I said, well, I may come back over and see you. I said, you're so crooked, you remind me of some of the people I know in New York. (Laughs) And that's how we met and we ended up going together, ended up four years later getting married.

PIEHLER: After you graduated...

DAVIDSON: After we graduated...she graduated a year before I did and she came back to Knoxville and worked a year. And then I graduated the next year. We got married the day after I graduated and went to New York.

PIEHLER: And you did your residency in...

DAVIDSON: I did my internship and residency at Harlem Hospital in New York. I did part of my residency at Bellevue. When I was doing my internship, the chief resident on surgery, I was helping him one day doing a hernia or something and he said, you're pretty good with your hands. Said, you ever done any surgery? I told him, yeah, I did an appendectomy when I a senior and I'd done some other little...he said, ah, we'll see what you can do. So he...every time he had a surgery he'd call me and I'd go help him. And he says, you're pretty good with your hands. He said, you ever thought about being a surgical resident? I said, naw, I'm going into ob/gyn...and he said, why do you want to do that? I said, well, my foster-uncle, Dr. Wahlberg's...Dr. Wahlberg was an attending ob/gyn and head of the department at Hospital down the street. And I told him-

PIEHLER: Lenox Hill?

DAVIDSON: No, it was a small place. I can't think of the name of it. Ummm, name was on my tongue, can't think of it now. Anyway, he was doing that, and I helped him a lot. During the summer, I'd come home and he said, you want to come help me? Yeah. He said, come on, I'll teach you how to do a DNC. Okay. So I'd go over there with him, and he'd show me how to do a DNC and he'd tell the nurses, well, this is my nephew. He's at Meharry. He knows how to do this. And he'd show me how to do it, do a DNC...and I helped him during a hysterectomy and helped deliver babies...I was really intending to go into ob/gyn. But, when Dr. Gragiola, who was a senior resident, he said, talked to me, and he said, why don't you try surgery. He says, you'll like it. You're good with your hands. I said, yeah, I like to dabble around. He said, oh, you ought to do it. So he said, we're going to have an opening in general surgery. He said, if you'd like it, he says, I told the chief that you're pretty good and we got a lot...had thirty-five guys apply for the position. He says, and I told him I think that...there were three openings. He said, and I think that you need to get one of them. I said, you got all those guys ahead of me there. He says, no, he says, I think we'll take you. Just like that. I said, okay, I'll apply. So I filled out the application...went told my aunt I said, I think I'm going to do surgery. Why the hell would you do surgery? I said, ah, I just like it. The chief thinks that I'd be good at it. She says, okay. I said, what do you think? She says, well, if that's what you want to do, all right. Whatever you want to do, I'm with you. So that's how I got started in surgery, and I just enjoyed doing it. And I stayed...

PIEHLER: So obviously you got the...

DAVIDSON: I got the...yeah...I was one of the three guys that...

PIEHLER: and this was at Harlem?

DAVIDSON: At Harlem Hospital accepted. And then in that course they send you to Bellevue to do what they call your post-graduate. It's like doing a whole year of med school in a year. You do everything from anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, pathic physiology, everything in a whole year's time, you...and you do...instead of five people working on a body, there's two of you on a body. And one does the right and one does the left and you do the abdomen and the head together. You do a whole course in anatomy in that year's time and you do surgical anatomy and pathophysiology. It was under Dr. Hinton at Bellevue. And that was an interesting experience. So, I learned quite a bit.

PIEHLER: And you did like surgery?

DAVIDSON: I did, I really did. After I got started I really liked surgery and I found out that...our chief used to always tell us, he says, uh, you can make a surgeon out of anybody. He says, but to be a good physician who is a surgeon you have to know what to do. He says, I could take a butcher and make him a surgeon. He says, but he can't make him a doctor.

PIEHLER: What's the difference...you've obviously thought about this, what is the difference? What do you need to do?

DAVIDSON: To be what? To be...

PIEHLER: To be both a surgeon and a doctor...

DAVIDSON: You have to learn...you have to be a good doctor, learn to empathetic, have good bedside manner, be able to make a...chief said, he always makes...you have to be able to make a diagnosis, now. When you see a patient, make a diagnosis, and be open-minded enough to say, oops, that's not what it is. I think because of so and so and so and so I need to change, and this is what you need to do. Be willing to admit to your mistakes, admit to making a misdiagnosis, but to correct it before you do any harm.

PIEHLER: Are there some doctors that get stubborn about that?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, some doctors refuse to acknowledge the fact that they could be wrong. You know, yes, you can be wrong and still be right. I had a lot of patients...and he taught us that you can be wrong but be right. You can be right and be wrong. It's no crime to say, I don't know. That was his main thought to say, if you don't know, admit it, and go to where you can find it. And when you got to be a senior resident, before you could finish or to be chief resident, you had to be able to do three surgical procedures without knowing what it was when you walked into...when you walk in the patient would be on the table and they'd give you history and give you the laboratory findings and the x-ray findings and ask you what you're going to do. You know, you'd have to tell them, well, what's your diagnosis, Dr. so and so and so and so? What's your differential diagnosis? Well, I think that it could be either this, this, this, one, two, three, four, down the line. What is the most likely? The most likely diagnosis is...and why. You'd have to tell them...and you're standing there scrubbed up, with your hands scrubbed, the gown and cap, and you'd tell them all this. And there's this patient laying there asleep. He says, okay, now what are you going to do? And then you'd tell him. He says, all right, do it. And you'd operate on the patient. My first one was a lady who had a thyroid goiter. And the clue was this lady had proptosis, eyes, hyperthyroid people have eyes that bulge out and she had this difficulty in swallowing. Never did tell me she had a lump on there. She had difficulty swallowing and had compression on x-rays and you...I said, well, sounds like the lady's got a goiter, could be substernal. And need to do a thyroidectomy. He says, you lucked out on that one. You know, it's like that...oh, then he'd ask you what you'd do, make an incision. And the next one I did was a man who had an anal hernia. He had an anal hernia, which went down into the scrotum, which you could...he...difficult diagnosis, probably a hydroseal hernia and we had to differentiate between the two and why you thought... And then the next one was I had to do a...an ulcer, lady who had a peptic, ruptured peptic ulcer. And then you got to do a...pin a hip in orthopedics. And then you got to do a hysterectomy for the gynecological surgery. And a prostatectomy for a prostate for the urology. We had to do all those. And you'd do something in each one of them before you could finish, before he'd sign your paper saying you're a graduate surgeon and ready to take the boards. But that's, those are the operations that I had to do before I got finished.

PIEHLER: And you obviously didn't make mistakes on those big ones.

DAVIDSON: No, didn't make, didn't make many mistakes.

PIEHLER: At least until the final, the final...

DAVIDSON: Not in the finals, and then when you know you got it made is when he calls you, what are you doing? Nothing. Uh, meet me down at the Beekman, the downtown hospital in the morning at 7:00. Yes, sir. And you'd meet him down there at Beekman Hospital; I was standing outside, quarter to seven when he drove up. He says, see you're on time. Yeah, you said 7:00, chief. Okay. We'd go in there and that was his private hospital he used to operate on his patients. And we went in there and did two cases that morning. And he'd make the incision and do most of the surgery and says, all right, close her up. Yes, sir. When he tells you that, then he trusts you. And that means that you've arrived. When he takes you to his private hospital and lets you close his patient, uh, without him being in the room, then you've made it. Then you know that you're capable of going out on your own and doing your own surgery. I did that. He just died here the last year. Dr. Abrey Maynard, he was my mentor.

PIEHLER: And after you finished your residency, what was next?

DAVIDSON: Oh, when I finished my residency, we left New York and came to Knoxville, because my wife's father was sick. And we came to visit, because we were going...we had an offer to come to New Bern, North Carolina, where they had an office and a house and all the privileges. All we had to do was just show up. Didn't have to show up over there until September.

PIEHLER: So you had some time...

DAVIDSON: So I had time, so we...I told...my father-in-law was sick and we went to come here to see what we could do to help my mother-in-law out. So we came here, while I was I here, you know, I told my wife, I said, I can't just sit around and do nothing. So she said, well...brother-in-law says why don't you go over to Oak Ridge. They're looking for somebody to work in the emergency room. I said, okay. So I went over there and talked to the administrator of the Oak Ridge Hospital. He said, yeah, we want somebody to work in the emergency room, you know, can't ever find doctors at night and on weekends here. Do you want to work? I said, yeah, how much are you going to pay me? And he told me and I said, aw, that's pretty good, I can handle that. So he says, well, we'll call you and let you know when we want you to start. Well, going over to Oak Ridge, I went Oak Ridge Highway, and coming back out of Oak Ridge, I took the wrong turn and ended up on Clinton Highway, got lost. But I knew which direction; I ended up on Clinton Highway. And I came back to town on Clinton Highway. It took me forever to get home. My father-in-law, when I came home, he says, hell, we thought we were going to have to send the damn police out to look for you. ...I said, I got lost. And I said, I told him what happened. He said, oh, hell, everybody could do that. But you're supposed to turn there at Edgemore and come across the bridge. I said, I missed it, I didn't know what street it was and I just...trying to get home. And he says, well, that man from Oak Ridge called and wants you to come back to work. I said, when? He said, tomorrow night, he said you'd know what he was talking about. I said, okay. My wife said, I thought he...I said, he'd told me he'd let me know when in a week's time. She said, he called before you got out the office. (Laughs) So, that's why I started. I started working over there...

PIEHLER: Which year was that?

DAVIDSON: Uh, 1958.

PIEHLER: So you finished your residency in...

DAVIDSON: The lower end of '58. Yeah. And then I came...I started working over there. And I was making good money; I wasn't working that hard. And we stayed, and I told my wife, said I ought to just go from, take the boards and take, get a license and practice here in Tennessee. So I went and took the state board in Memphis. And I got my license in September of '59. Yeah, I started in...yeah, late '58-59. And that's when I did it. Just started practicing.

PIEHLER: You had mentioned...we had talked earlier that Knoxville might be East Tennessee, but it was segregated, particularly the hospitals that were...

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah, hospitals were definitely segregated...only hospital that blacks could go to was UT Hospital, before that it was Old General. And at UT Hospital, they could only use the third floor. That's where all the black patients were on the third floor at UT Hospital.

PIEHLER: And Baptist didn't take black patients?

DAVIDSON: Baptist didn't, St. Mary's didn't. Ft. Sanders didn't. None of them did. The only one was UT. And uh...

PIEHLER: What about Oak Ridge? Where you were actually...

DAVIDSON: Oak Ridge you could. They had a floor at Oak Ridge.

PIEHLER: They had a floor?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, they took black people there, Oak Ridge black patients. And most of the people at Oak Ridge never had seen a black doctor before. That was the interesting part. I was the first black physician that they ever seen. And to be a surgeon. They just never heard of anybody who could operate on somebody.

PIEHLER: You were also, I mean, you were, your clientele was mainly white, I would assume given the...

DAVIDSON: At Oak Ridge?

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, Oak Ridge was mostly white. 90% white, cause there wasn't that many black people over there. In the emergency room, 90% of the patients that come in were all white. They'd come from all around, Petras and Wartburg...

PIEHLER: How stunned were some of them? I would imagine...

DAVIDSON: Very stunned. Uh...when they come into the emergency room, the nurse says well, uh, say you got a doctor here? She'd say, yes, we have a doctor. He's colored. You want him to work on you? (Pause) Colored doctor? Said, yes. And uh...I don't know. She says, well, if you don't want him, you have to go to Knoxville. He's the only doctor we got available. And a lot of people said, well, I ain't going that far just to be treated and I treated a lot of people. And they found out that you know, damn, he does know what he's doing. Take the guy that was the most segregated person that I know. He had this restaurant in Clinton. He just did not like black people. He came in one night, his daughter had her leg just laid wide open, bleeding badly. Wanted to know if they had a doctor. He said, well, call the doctor. He says, he's not available, he's out of town. I want Dr... he's not here either. Said, we got a doctor. I don't want no colored doctor working on my daughter. She says, well, take your daughter to St. Mary's then in Knoxville, cause that's the only doctor you got if you want it sewed up or you can take her there and let her bleed to death. And his wife said, well, let him sew her up. He's a doctor. And he didn't want...finally she says take the child in and let that doctor fix it. So he took her in there and I cleaned up and talked to the child. Child was fine, she didn't care. She was crying, and I numbed it so she wouldn't feel anything. And I sewed her up. He stood right there and watched everything I did. And when I got through he looked at her. I put the bandage on her and told him, I said, this has...bandage has to stay intact like it is for a week. At the end of the week, you change the bandage. Take it to Dr. Louis's office and he'll change it. And then you have to wait another week to take the stitches out, because on her leg, you wouldn't want it to pull apart. And a week later he brought her back to the emergency room. Nurse said, you're supposed to...he said, he put them in there, let him look at it. So she brought her in there, I looked at it. I dressed...I changed the bandage and cleaned it up real good and dressed it, put a bandage, told him, you need to take the stitches out in about another week. So, he took her on home and a week later here he's back. I said, you have to go to your own doctor. He said, you did it, you take them out. I said, okay. So I took the stitches out and the wound healed over well, just beautifully. And told him she didn't need a whole lot of running and jumping on it for a while, it was healing very nicely and probably be fine. And after that I had a lot of white patients come. And he got hurt once and he came back to me and I sewed him up. And he never called me that...and he never said doctor, says, I'm back again for you to fix me up. I said, now what the hell...

PIEHLER: He wouldn't call you doctor?

DAVIDSON: No, no, never did, never did. He'd tell the nurse, well, is that doctor in there? And he never called me doctor, but he'd...is that doctor in there? She says, yes, he's here. Well, I need to see him. She says, why do you need to see him. Well, I'm hurt. Where? Got cut or something. She says, well, I'll see if he'll see you. Well, he took care of everybody else in my family, hell, he'll fix it. He's all right; he knows what he's doing. You know, he would always accept that, but he never called me doctor to my face. He'd always tell the nurse, that doctor in there. She says, yeah, that doctor's here. You want to see him? And he'd come in and says I'm back again. I said, now what's wrong with you? I got hurt my leg here. I said, okay, get up there, let me see what it looks like. But...he's fine. Most of the patients, every once in while,

you run across somebody had a real negative attitude and just sort of segregated and prejudiced that they just didn't want you to touch them.

PIEHLER: ...some in fact go back to...

DAVIDSON: Oh, yes. A lot of them would go to Knoxville. Come all the way to Knoxville from Oak Ridge, rather than be treated by a black doctor.

PIEHLER: And that was...there was no Pellissippi Parkway, so that was really...

DAVIDSON: Long way around, yeah. They'd take their...you know, to me, I didn't care. The nurse said, you have thick skin. I said, no I just learned to ignore it, you know. Names not going to hurt you. They can call me whatever you want to, I know what I can do. And I don't do anything other than what I know how to do. I don't try to do anything else.

PIEHLER: How long did you remain with Oak Ridge Hospital?

DAVIDSON: I opened my office over here in '59. I worked out there until um, I guess '61, cause they couldn't get anybody to work in the emergency rooms, so I was doing double duty, working over here in the office and then run over there at night.

PIEHLER: So you were trying to build your own practice?

DAVIDSON: Trying to build my own practice here at the time. And as the practice got busier, I just told them I couldn't...I couldn't do it anymore. And they didn't want me to leave. Said, why don't you stay over here? We'll give you an office and blah blah...no, no. I'll just go to Knoxville.

PIEHLER: You weren't tempted at all? Because it seemed like they were...

DAVIDSON: No, they were real nice and uh, but my wife didn't like Oak Ridge. I think that had a lot to do with it. She didn't want to move to Oak Ridge.

PIEHLER: Really?

DAVIDSON: And I really would have had to live over there if I was going to be a doctor. You can't practice one place and live somewhere else, just didn't work. And I enjoyed working over at UT. I became one of the assistant professors of surgery over there on service. Once you get started doing that, working with the residents, I enjoyed that.

PIEHLER: When did you start working with the residents?

DAVIDSON: '59, when I opened my pr-, once I started practicing, Dr. Zurkel was chief of surgery at UT at the time. He says, well, do you want to work October, November, December? I said, yeah, if that's all you got. He said, well, that's your three months on call. I went, okay. And those were my three months. I worked that three months on call for years.

PIEHLER: But you told me a story earlier...I think the first time we met that you were tested out the first time you did surgery.

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah. First surgery I did he...any new surgeon coming to town as a chief of surgery, it was his responsibility not only to check your credentials, but to see what you could do. He would sort of stand in there and watch and...

PIEHLER: So, that was not unusual because of your race?

DAVIDSON: No, wasn't...no, no, had nothing to do with race.

PIEHLER: He was going to check you out...

DAVIDSON: He was going to check you out whether you green, black, yellow, or purple or whatever, no matter who you were. And every young surgeon that came to town, Charlie Zurkel checked you out, if you were going to be on his service. And first case I had was a gall bladder, I think. And he asked me when I was going to do it, and I told him. He says, well, I'll just kind of look in on you. I said, all right. So you know, I didn't think anything of it at the time. And got the lady in and prepped her, made my incision, and did everything you're supposed to do. Got in and got to taking her gall bladder out and got down in there and did my surgery. He stood there and watched me for I guess, maybe fifteen, twenty minutes, turned around and walked out the room. And the nurse says, he never does that. I said, never does what? She says, walk out. I said, well, he said he was just going to look in, he looked in and then he left. She says, no, you don't understand. I said, understand what? So she told me, and that's the first time that I realized that he did this to all young surgeons. He came...she said, most of the time he stayed right here till you closed the skin. I said, why? She says, to be sure you know what you're doing. He says, he looked at you and says, hell, I'm gone...and he walked out the door. She said, he didn't even look back. I said, did he come back to see if we're through? She said, no. He left and went up to his office. I said, what? She said, you must've really impressed him. You did real good. I said, oh, thank you. And I really never thought a lot about it at the time.

PIEHLER: Your practice in Knoxville, what was your ratio of black and white patients? Did you mainly have black patients or did you...

DAVIDSON: Initially, I had an office down on the corner of Vine and Central, which is Summit and Central. And initially I had white patients and black patients come in. A lot of the merchants and farmers would come in, they'd come to town and I was open on Saturday mornings, and a lot of doctors weren't in the office, so they just...do you take white patients? I said, you sick? Yeah, yeah. Come on in, you know. Didn't make any difference to me. He says, you're the first colored doctor that sees white patients. I said, if you're sick, I see sick people. I don't see white or black patients. And that guy told somebody, his other friends, and on Saturdays, my practice was mostly white, for the farmers that come in out from the country...be seen, somebody'd check 'em. They'd come to the office, and I'd take care of them. And they'd go on back. So they gradually...my practice was sort of maybe, 25% white, mostly otherwise black. But I had a sort of mixed practice because of the way I was and people are

going to find out that you treat...didn't make any difference as long as you treat them. They didn't care.

PIEHLER: How did you find...you were teaching residents...

DAVIDSON: Yes.

PIEHLER: Were you generally accepted by the medical community here, did you ever encounter any problems in the late '50's...

DAVIDSON: As the doctors...

PIEHLER: Yeah, the doctors in the early '60's...

DAVIDSON: the other doctors?

PIEHLER: Yeah, was...

DAVIDSON: Not really, no. Not really, they were pretty...most of the doctors were...they'd say you're a doctor and you belong to the...when I first came in, they gradually began to accept us. I belonged to the AMA; I come out of New York. And they had to take you, if you're in AMA, they had to take you into local society. And then the Knoxville Academy of Medicine let me apply and they accepted me. Then I applied to Tennessee State Medical, but at first, they were a little hesitant until things kind of opened up. But they were all very nice, you know. I went to all the conferences and you...especially surgeon, I was the only black one in there. So you know, it didn't bother me. I'd been in Oak Ridge long enough to...that I wasn't phased by color or whatever. So, I just sort of accepted it.

PIEHLER: So you didn't get a sense in Knoxville that you were being shunned by certain doctors or...

DAVIDSON: I knew some didn't like me, and I didn't really care. Didn't make no big difference. I got along with the people that I needed to. Um, you know, Charlie Zurkel told me, he said, hell, some of these guys ain't going to like you. Said some of them are horse's asses, but you know, that's just the way things are. I said, yeah, I understand. He says, well, you'll get along with them. He says, I don't worry about you. I said, hey, you know...I treat them nice, if they don't treat me nice, that's their problem. They're the ones that are losing, not me. So I, in fact...in residents I never had any problems with any of the residents. Always had good rapport with all those guys.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, you...earlier you told me as story about Oak Ridge Hotel and when you desegregated the hotel...

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: ...which is a great story. Just because in some ways it shows you how routines can have a...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, they had a Christmas party, I guess, the first Christmas we had staff, Oak Ridge Hospital where the doctors had a staff party. And they invited my wife and I, cause she was doing some nursing out there. And I asked her, do you want to go? She said, yeah, let's go. I said, okay. So we got dressed and went on to the party, and we got to the hotel, parked the car, getting ready to go in the front door. And...black guy says, you have to go around to the back, Doc. I told him, what the hell for? He says, we not allowed to go in the front door. I said, I was invited, I'll go in the front door wherever I want to. So we went on in the door, and everybody greeted us, chief of staff, hey, Doc, come on in. You know, and we sat at the table with the chief of staff and his wife and he danced with my wife and I danced with his wife, and we had a great time that night. And all the local black folks were standing outside looking in the window. They could not believe that here is this black doctor in here with all these white doctors, went in the front door and he's just having himself a good time. And he's dancing with their wives. They thought, this is just totally unheard of.

PIEHLER: So you were fairly...this is still the late '50's, I mean there's a lot...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, this is...yeah well, this was '59, 60.

PIEHLER: Could you have seen this happening in other parts of...I mean we talked earlier about Tennessee being different than a lot of southern...could you have seen this scene say in North Carolina or Kentucky or...

DAVIDSON: No. I couldn't see it happening any other places in Tennessee, other than right there in Oak Ridge at that time. It was just at the right time and the right place and I had enough rapport with the doctors over there in Oak Ridge and accepted by them to the point that you know, hey, he's a good doctor, he does his job. You know, and his wife is a good nurse, and you know, we invited them, hell, let's just make them welcome. And they did. And the people in the town were more worried, the black folks were worried that, God, I'm going to start a riot, you know. You're going into this hotel in the front door. And you know we walked right into the front door, went into the ballroom and made ourselves at home like everybody else. Everybody knew me. The guy that owned the hotel, hello, Dr. Davidson, come on in, you know, you and Mrs. Davidson, yeah fine, how are you? You know, we went on in. To me, I didn't...I wasn't hesitant or timid like I was afraid to go in, I thought well, let's go on in. She says, yeah, let's go on like we own this damn place. I said, we do as far as.... And we did.

PIEHLER: By the way, so we have it on the record, what was your wife's name?

DAVIDSON: Esther Johnson Davidson.

PIEHLER: And how long did she remain as a nurse, practicing as a nurse, did...after you got married, did she...?

DAVIDSON: Ummm, she worked during the time I was a resident. She worked at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. She was an evening supervisor. And then we came south and she worked at Oak Ridge part time as a fill-in, substitute nurse for those that didn't show up. Then she worked in my office, once she got the office open. She was our office nurse, until she got pregnant with the second one and she finally quit. Then after that, she stopped working.

PIEHLER: But she worked for a number of years after you....

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah, she worked until, let's see, my daughter that's the doctor, she worked until she was born, and that was in '61. So she worked and then after that she did work in the office a day or two, helped us out.

PIEHLER: Um.

BOWEN: Maybe some more specifics about your family itself, your children?

DAVIDSON: I have three children. Oldest one is um, medical record librarian and billing clerk for the eye doctor, Eye Institute at Baptist. My middle daughter, the youngest daughter, she's a M.D. internist, practices here in Knoxville. And my third child, the youngest, my son is Elvin II, and he's a technical engineer for Regal Cinemas. He does all there computer work for all the theaters in the country. He's in charge of all the funscapes that they have. And he had installed all their computer work in all their theaters that they own, which is several thousand something. But that's what he does.

BOWEN: I'm sure you're proud of all your children, but is it especially nice to have a next generation doctor in the family?

DAVIDSON: I think it is. It's nice and it's surprising, because I really didn't expect her to be a doctor. She was a very bright student. She was a valedictorian at Catholic High School when she graduated. And she got a scholarship to Vanderbilt to be a biomedical engineer. I guess in her sophomore year, she called me one day, she says, Daddy, I'm going to change my major. I said, oh, God, now what? She says, I'm going into pre-med. I said, don't do that. She says, yes, I am. I want to be a doctor. I said, that's the worst thing in the world you could do. She says, I'm going to be a doctor. I said, okay, whatever you want to do is all right with me. And so she went on into pre-med and she got accepted to...ten different med schools. And she finally decided she wanted to go to East Tennessee State, cause that was, she's close to home, yet far enough away from home that she could be independent without us looking over her shoulder every other day.

BOWEN: Was it the first one sent?

DAVIDSON: No, she got accepted to Howard, Meharry, to George Washington, oh, God, she got accepted to a number of...in fact, when she graduated from high school, she had 150 scholarship offers from colleges, then she decided to accept the one at Vanderbilt. But she's a very bright, very bright student. She was an excellent student. She was always an A student from the time she went to school and then...at Vanderbilt she was a member of the honor...Engineering of Modern Society. She's real bright. And she decided she wanted to be a

doctor. So, we went to Howard to interview and look at the school. She didn't like that. We went to St. Louis to George Washington to look at that, she didn't like that. We went to UT at Memphis, she didn't like that. We went to Meharry, she didn't want to go to the school that I went to, so we ended up she didn't want to go (laughs) she wanted to strike out on her own and East Tennessee was the newest medical school and she wanted to go up there. And I told her that's fine, so we went up there and found her a place to live and that's where she went to school. And then she did that and then she did her residency in internal medicine at Hanover General Hospital in Wilmington, North Carolina. And then she came back home and said that, well, I decided I want to come here and practice. I said, why? She said, well, it's the only place that I can go that doesn't cost me money, have a patient base to start with and all the equipment is in place. And it's free. (Laughs) Okay, you got it. So that's what she did.

PIEHLER: So in a sense, your daughter took over much of your practice?

DAVIDSON: She took over the practice as a whole, cause being a general surgeon, being black in this town, you do a little bit of everything. And being one of the only few at that time, when I came, I guess there were maybe eight black physicians that had gradually died off, till there's only three of us left and we did surgery and medicine and everything. So, when she came I had a lot of family practice going. She just stepped in and took over and I stepped out and gave it to her. I was through; I'd had enough of that.

PIEHLER: When did you start gradually phasing...

DAVIDSON: Started phasing out in 1990 when she came and over the next two years, I just backed out. I gave her my office and I moved into the little office, and then when we moved I said I don't need an office.

PIEHLER: A clear sign that you're...

DAVIDSON: Clear sign that I was quitting. I took my desk home and took it apart. She says, you're not...nope. This is your office and I'm just here to look at some of these old ladies that refuse to let me go. And when she moved to the office, she said, now, I used to go in there like in the morning for an hour, see one or two little old ladies that I cut their toenails or checked their blood pressure or just sit down and talked to them. I'd been treating them like for thirty years, and they just couldn't let go. So, I gradually backed off. One day I told her, I ain't coming back no more. She says, why? I said, I'm tired. I've had enough. You don't need me around; I'm in the way. She says, no, you're not. I said, yes, I am. Bye! She says, okay. So, that was it. So, I haven't been back. I just sort of part time did that to keep my hand in it.

PIEHLER: I'm curious in terms of medicine, in some ways it sounds like your practice, while a lot of doctors I interviewed started off doing everything from delivering babies to doing hernias, they gradually became...either moved in the direction of real general practitioners who specialized and stopped delivering babies because the malpractice insurance would shoot through the roof, it sounds like because your practice remained much more of a...you did surgery, but a lot of the sort of general...

DAVIDSON: Well, in this area, I found out that just because you're a surgeon does not mean that's all you do. If you operate on grandma, then you should be able to treat Aunt Susie's pneumonia and high blood pressure. People would you know, well, he...took out my appendix, well, yeah, he ought to be able to take care of this. You know...said, well, I'm a general p-. Well, that's all right, you took care of so and so and she's my grandmother. She said I need to come see you. Okay. So I ended up doing a lot...my practice was general practice, with surgical specialty. And then as I got older, I kind of wound down and discovered that you know, your hands get a little shaky. I started backing off on some of the real hard surgical procedures. I did minor stuff, hernias, hemorrhoids, stuff like that, little non-serious operations.

PIEHLER: What's the most involved surgery that you would do in your career?

DAVIDSON: Anything in the abdomen.

PIEHLER: That's really the tough...

DAVIDSON: Intra-abdominal. And I was an abdominal surgeon, that's what my specialty was, and that's what I had my fellowship at...most anything in the abdomen, gall bladders, intestine, um, stomachs, small and large bowels, anything like that, hernias, and the rest of the surgery you do sort of cystic things, any kind of operation, but mostly abdominal. When I was at Oak Ridge, I used to help Dr. Spray, who was an orthopedic surgeon, because I...during our training at Harlem, you learn how to do pin-hips and put in bars and all sorts of things, nails and pins and I actually helped him and he says, you ought to be an orthopedic surgeon. You do this real well. Oh, no. Orthopedics' too hard. You had to work too hard to do that. But I used to help him a lot, during the daytime when I first started, when I wasn't busy, I'd help him and do some of his tough cases over there in Oak Ridge.

PIEHLER: What about the economics of being a doctor? Because one of the fascinating things I learned about doctors, particularly, I think this was probably more so in the late '40's early '50's, it was and before that, it was tough to be a doctor. It wasn't...

DAVIDSON: Hard. Money was scarce. When I first started practice, office calls were two dollars, you know. House calls were three or four dollars. Um, people sometimes paid you with food, you know, especially here in Knoxville, you go out in the, I'd go out off of Middle...

PIEHLER: Middlebrook?

DAVIDSON: No, not Middlebrook. Millertown Pike, out in that area, was a black community, making house calls. I'd come back home with bushel baskets of corn and greens and a chicken or two or ham or something. My wife says, well, one thing, we ain't got no money, but we sure eat well. You know, you get all sorts of things. We got a lot of gifts, people bring you food, they'd make a cake and make one for you, uh, you know. Economically you didn't make a whole lot of money. You made enough to just get by on. And people were poor and you didn't try to charge them exorbitant rates. And if you did surgery, in most of the cases, I did, whatever your insurance paid, that's what we charged, you know. Your insurance didn't pay a lot; we didn't charge a lot. We'd make it up on the next guy, guy worked at Oak Ridge or Alcoa, their

insurance paid good money, so we charged them top dollar. And if you worked as a janitor somewhere and your insurance didn't pay, we'd take whatever your insurance paid. And you know, we tried to accommodate the patient.

PIEHLER: It sounds like you've done quite a bit of charity, particularly early in your career...

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

PIEHLER: This continues an interview with Dr. E.V. Davidson on April 4, 2000, at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, TN, with Kurt Piehler and ...

BOWEN: Jason Bowen.

PIEHLER: And you were saying about, I had asked you about charity care and you mentioned you've done a lot of charity care...

DAVIDSON: I've done a lot of charity

PIEHLER: And your daughter has in fact said...

DAVIDSON: My daughter said in fact when I retired, she said if all the people that owed you money, she said you could just take a trip around the world and never worry about having to pay for it. I said well, what they owed, they just owe. I'm not gonna try to [collect] for it. You're not gonna get it. Probably half of them don't have it anyway, so...a lot of work was charity. We did a whole lot of work.

PIEHLER: Did Medicare or Medicaid help at all or change the economics at all for you? Did it make it easier for your...

DAVIDSON: Not really. At first Medicare...the people would...at first we didn't take assignments on Medicare. People'd get the check and spend it. So we decided, well, we have to take assignments and that's...accept whatever they paid. And of course Medicaid did not pay nothing, you know. They paid like a dollar out of every five is what you got. So really Medicaid, as far as economically didn't help. Medicare did, for the senior citizens who didn't have any money, didn't own insurance, Medicare was a Godsend, because that really paid their bills and they got good treatment and ended up not paying. If you accepted assignment then they didn't have to pay anything other than the first deductible, which made a lot of sense.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, um, what's your memories of the civil rights movement in Knoxville and when did things change in Knoxville?

DAVIDSON: In the 60's.

PIEHLER: Yeah, in the 60's.

DAVIDSON: First time we had was I guess, the Knoxville College students did all the work. The people livin' here didn't do anything, to really be honest with you. Students of Knoxville College did all the sit-ins uptown at the Five and Ten and the restaurants and the really...the civil rights here in Knoxville really wasn't really that bad. Um...there was a little and the people said okay, let 'em move...and so what. Really didn't take a whole lot. Just a very short period of time and the next thing you know the stores were saying okay, let 'em eat, you know. Downtown, not that many of them gonna eat anyway. So it ended up that it really wasn't that severe as far as the demonstrations...they demonstrated and they marched, mostly just the students of Knoxville College did all the work...and the people in town didn't do a whole lot of nothing. And that the hospitals, they finally agreed to take 'em...in fact Baptist Hospital probably became integrated before they really started because my daughter had gone to Dr. Crompton, she'd fallen and knocked out her front tooth or something and he wanted to repair it. And they had to put her to sleep and he says we'll just take her over to Baptist. I said, to Baptist? He said, yeah. Okay. We went over to Baptist and he told them who I was and they took her in and put her on the floor in the pediatric ward and we went on in there and did it. And after that just sort of gradual...next thing I knew the man asked me, Would you like to be on the staff over there? Yeah. And so why don't you apply? Okay. And I did and they accepted me. The next thing I know my first patient over there was white. And I operated on him and then after that we begin...average black patient didn't really want to go. Said, they're segregated over there. I said, no, they're not. I'm on staff over there now. You are? Yeah, you can go to Baptist. So people began to...

PIEHLER: What year was that that you were put on staff?

DAVIDSON: In '65, I guess, '64, '65.

PIEHLER: So Knoxville...the impression...as an outsider I get the impression that it is not like the...

DAVIDSON: It wasn't like "South"...

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DAVIDSON: Here the demonstrations were mild. I think some UT students and Knoxville College students went up there and some white and black students got together and they decided ah, we're going...and they did. And people said okay, that's it. And they didn't resist very hard. There really wasn't a lot to it. That's why I don't have a real heavy recollection about what all they did cause really wasn't that much to it. Just sort of, they did some sit-ins and they did some demonstration and they did some marches, but nothing like what they did other places. Knoxville gave in real quick.

PIEHLER: I guess one of my final questions is did you ever join any veteran's organizations? Or have you ever been a member?

DAVIDSON: Yeah, well I joined one time to the American Legion, but I never stayed in there long enough. And I joined the VFW once and got out. That's about the only thing...I never really was fired up about belonging to them.

PIEHLER: What about the 370th? Ever go to a reunion...has there been a reunion of the 370th?

DAVIDSON: Not that I know of, I've never been notified or called or realized that...they may have had one, but I never really got into the going back as a veteran.

PIEHLER: I think you've mentioned you have been back to reunions for Lincoln.

DAVIDSON: Oh, yeah. I went back for my 50th last year. And had gone back a couple of times...of course I go to Meharry ever five years for reunions. Got my 50th coming up in '03. So I just...we just had our 45th two years ago.

PIEHLER: ...it's been interesting, cause I told my wife that your daughter...was surprised at how much...I had learned. What have you told your children about the war? Or what have they asked about the war?

DAVIDSON: Nothing. They have one or two things, and I've shown them the scrapbook. They've looked at that and oh, you did that? Yeah.

PIEHLER: But your children really don't know...

DAVIDSON: I never really got in...not like I've been here.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DAVIDSON: They have no idea that I did all these things. I tell them one or two things every once in a while they'd ask. But they never really, you know, were that curious. At least they never asked me. They may have asked their momma, you know, and she'd tell them.

PIEHLER: And have you stayed in touch with anyone from the service? DAVIDSON: Nobody. No. Yes, well...the guys that were in my class...

PIEHLER: The class at...

DAVIDSON: At med school. Um, Captain Raines, he was a member of my class. I spent four years with him. And Bassett Brown, who was the medic with my unit, was in dent school while I was in med school. We both graduated the same time, so I stayed in contact with Bassett and Captain, stayed in contact with him quite a bit.

PIEHLER: I'm curious how...in your med school class...how many...do you have any sense...how many were GI's, former GI's? Did you have a high percentage?

DAVIDSON: Umhm. I guess about 50% of them were GI veterans.

PIEHLER: And they're GI Bill, many of them were...

DAVIDSON: Yeah, GI Bill. And see one of the things the guys who lived in the south, especially in the state of Tennessee, if you wanted to go to med school and you were accepted the state would pay for you to go to Meharry to keep you out of UT.

PIEHLER: Oh, that's right, because of that desegregation act...

DAVIDSON: The Desegregation Act. They would pay...equal...so they would pay for you to go to Meharry, cause you couldn't go to UT. So if you got accepted to med school and you're from Tennessee, the state of Tennessee paid your bill. And a lot of guys came here and established residence and then they applied for the state...which made sense. I told them I was too dumb to do that, because you know, I'm...not a Tennessean. And of course I am now, but at that time I just never really got around to doing it, but my wife went to nursing school on that. They paid for her to go to...

PIEHLER: So otherwise...

DAVIDSON: Cause she couldn't go to UT. So they paid for her to go to Meharry. In fact all the girls from Knoxville that were in Meharry at that time were sent...the state paid for them because they had to pay that separate but equal and they had to pay for it. Wouldn't let 'em in UT, then you have to pay for it. And they did. So that was one of the things that a lot of guys from Tennessee that's how they got in med school. Yeah, you won't let me go to UT, got to pay for me to go to Meharry. So they did pay for them. So a lot of guys...the veterans got both of them. They get the GI Bill and also get paid by the state to come to school.

PIEHLER: Ah, they were getting both...

DAVIDSON: Double, yeah...state couldn't stop you, they had to pay for you and what you got was your GI, the only thing I got out of Tennessee was they had to pass the veterans bill, if you had served in a service and were honorably discharged you could apply for your pension. And I applied for, I think about \$250 sometime in the '60's or '70's they had this law that they passed, the veterans got...and New York state had that law. You know, every veteran of World War II got \$250 bonus when you got out, so I applied for that, got that and then when I came out of the Army I got that \$20 dollars a week, you could do that for...fifty-two weeks. 52/20. I didn't draw a lot of it; I got quite a bit of it when I first came out. I went to work, then I'd stop, aw shoot, it's too much trouble to go down there, sign up and get \$20 and keep going.

PIEHLER: You mentioned you did buy your house on the GI Bill in Knoxville.

DAVIDSON: Yeah, the house I'm living in now. We were already buying a house that we'd got on our own and we saw this other house that I'm living in now and I'd called a realtor and...we're talking about it. I said, my wife really likes this house. I said, she's really interested in it. And I said, well, we're buying the house we're living in now, so...I don't want to get into trying to change in the middle of the stream. He said, were you ever a veteran? I told him, yeah. And

he asked me when. I told him when I got out of the service. He said, let me check the VA and see if you're still eligible. I said okay. So he did. He says, you know what, you've got 30 days, 30 or 90 days to use of your GI Bill. If you use it within the limited time, he says, before it expires on you. I said, what do you mean expires? He says, oh yeah, you got a statute of limitations so many years after you get out of the service to use it. I said, aw, let's use it. He said, okay. So he put in the motion. I went to the bank and they agreed. The bank said yeah, we'll underwrite it, so I got that 6 ½% loan and bought the house I'm living in now on the GI Bill. And the bank tried every year to get me to refinance it so they could increase the interest. I said no, I'm not interested. Oh, now, Dr. Davidson, we could do you a good... Oh no, you can't, I don't...forget it. I get a 6 ½% loan and I'm not going to turn it loose.

PIEHLER: And um, have you ever been back to Italy?

DAVIDSON: No, not yet. I've thought about it a couple of times, but I just never really...

PIEHLER: But you were at one point tempted...

DAVIDSON: I was tempted, but I just never followed through.

PIEHLER: You were also tempted in 19...you mentioned that you had gotten an invitation...

DAVIDSON: Well, I got...when I was in my...senior residency...I got an invitation from Kwame Nkrumah, who was the president-elect at that time of Ghana to come to the inauguration and to also to become a part of his medical team at that time. Cause Kwame went to...he was a graduate of Lincoln University and he was inviting all these Lincoln graduates, alumni, that were interested or were professionals to come to Ghana to help them to establish an independent country and to be a part of the government and stuff like that. And my wife and I talked it over and we decided we didn't want...it was a free trip to Ghana. But she says we'd go over there and get some kind of disease and die and...

PIEHLER: But you were somewhat intrigued...

DAVIDSON: I was tempted. I told her...I said...I really said if I had not been married you know, at the time, I really would probably have gone.

PIEHLER: At least to the inauguration.

DAVIDSON: No, I would have probably gone and stayed like you'd go and stay for two years, three years something like that. I probably would have gone and stayed a couple of years. You know, just to see how I liked it over there. I probably would have come back. But I would have gone and I'd have tried it. But she was against it, so I said well, it's a two way street. You don't want to go and I ain't going by myself, so...

PIEHLER: Well is there anything we forgot to...ask you?

DAVIDSON: I think I told you all I can remember. (Laughs) I think you've picked my memory clean.

BOWEN: I just want to say thanks...this has been amazing. It's been a pleasure. You've led quite a fascinating life and continue to do so. And I want to thank you for your time.

DAVIDSON: I thank you for asking me.

PIEHLER: We'll have to bring Doc for the Oral History class next year.

DAVIDSON: (Laughs) With this to go on, I can remember now.

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

