

Library of Congress transcript of recorded interview
(Typos in original transcript)

Interview with Clayton Rippey [2/26/2003]

Tom Swope:

This is the oral history of World War II Veteran Clayton Rippey. Mr. Rippey served in the U.S. Army with the 103rd Division, 409 Regiment, Company B. He served in the European theater and his highest rank was PFC. I'm Tom Swope and this interview was recorded by phone on February 26th, 2003. This is a very personal oral history for me, because Clayton was my dad's foxhole buddy during World War II. Clayton lives in California, and he contacted me after he saw a story about the Veterans History Project and my efforts in the February 10th, 2003 edition of the Los Angeles Times. You will hear references to Mike during this recording, and that is Mike Swope, my father. Clayton was 79 at the time of this recording.

Tom Swope:

All right. Where were you living in 1941?

Clayton Rippey:

In 1941, oh, I was living in LaGrange, Oregon.

Tom Swope:

Mm-hm.

Clayton Rippey:

Well, I just left, because I had gone back to the university.

Tom Swope:

So you were --

Clayton Rippey:

I went back to Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.

Tom Swope:

Still in school in '41?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah.

Tom Swope:

Were you in school then on December 7th?

Clayton Rippey:

Yes, uh-huh.

Tom Swope:

Tell me what you can remember from that day.

Clayton Rippey:

Well, I lived in a place called Holgate House, which was kind of a poor guy's place at Northwestern, and was mostly full of music students, which I was one at the time, I was a music student at the time. And since we were in the north -- south end of the campus, there was a great big place called Willard Hall, and it was the incoming quarters and dining room and everything for freshman girls coming into Northwestern, and all of us guys got jobs there as waiters and busboys. And that's where I was at the time the news came over that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I was over there. We usually worked for our meals and get three meals a day, and, of course, access to dating all the girls, of course, and it was a great job, and so we didn't have to worry about cooking or buying food or anything like that. It was terrific. We put in about three hours each day, and that's what you got for it. So, this was, I think -- was it broadcasted noon or in the morning? I can't remember now.

Tom Swope:

Let's see, would that have been the Central Time Zone there? Yeah, it probably might have been early afternoon or somewhere, might have been around --

Clayton Rippey:

Anyway, I remember everybody just suddenly, just stopped dead in their tracks and listened to the news, so that's --

Tom Swope:

What was your reaction when you heard that?

Clayton Rippey:

Well, I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was, for one thing, you know, I wasn't familiar with the Hawaiian Islands or anything about them. I had never been out there into the South Pacific or the mid Pacific or any place along there, so I didn't really know, comprehend where Pearl Harbor was. I just knew it was, what they said was a big naval base in the Hawaiian Islands. Of course, I knew what the Hawaiian Islands were because of the songs and stuff, that my folks used to sing.

Tom Swope:

A lot of ukulele music?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah, a lot of that kind, "Little Grass Shack" and all that kind of stuff was very popular when I was a kid.

Tom Swope:

Now, was there a temptation for either you or the other guys to run out and sign up the next day?

Clayton Rippey:

Some of them did. Some of them -- as a matter of fact, a lot of the music students went down to Richmond, Virginia, to sign up for a big new band that they were going to form, and I went down there and took a look and thought maybe I might, and then I thought, well, no, I will go back and finish, finish the year, because I had, you know three months I wanted to finish up the year. So I did that, rather than run out and join anything.

Tom Swope:

So when were you drafted then?

Clayton Rippey:

I wasn't drafted until 1943, but I finished the year and didn't get my draft papers until --they were in the works, but I came back to Northwestern again and finished a half a year, the next 1942. Then my draft papers came through, and I went home in December, the end of the semester in December, and waited for my draft papers to -- I think it was February I was drafted.

Tom Swope:

So, you inducted then in February of '43?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah.

Tom Swope:

All right. What can you tell me about your training?

Clayton Rippey:

Well, I went to -- they looked at the MOs and stuff, and they sent me to the quartermaster core in Ft. Warren, Wyoming and we had typical, you know, GI training, target practice, rifle practice, walks, hikes, exercise, all that kind of stuff. And we hadn't started, really, much by way of what you would do as a quartermaster soldier, and they took a look at my MO again, and said hey, this guy is a musician from Northwestern University. He plays clarinet. And it just happened that the Ft. Warren band director was a guy who had played French horn in the Chicago Symphony, so the minute he saw that -- at the time, Northwestern was about second to Juilliard in status, which is way up there, as far as music schools are concerned --

Tom Swope:

Right.

Clayton Rippey:

-- so the minute he saw that on my MO, I just got notice to report to such and so, and, in the barracks. I went in and I was in the band.

Tom Swope:

What's the MO exactly? What does that stand for?

Clayton Rippey:

I don't know. It's an MO, I don't know exactly what the words, the --

Tom Swope:

What the initials mean?

Clayton Rippey:

It's all of the -- it's the information they have on you --

Tom Swope:

Right. Okay.

Clayton Rippey:

-- where you studied, and what year you graduated from high school, college, or whatever, and what your subjects were and that sort of thing.

Tom Swope:

So your resume?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah, like a resume.

Tom Swope:

So, how long were you in the band, then?

Clayton Rippey:

Well, I was in the band, oh, dear, three or four months, I think. It was a posh job. Gosh, I could have stayed there -- a lot of guys stayed right straight through to the end of the war. And you got up in the morning and you went out and played a little reveille and stuff for the troops that were marching and maybe did a parade or two once a month, and then you rehearsed, and then you gave concerts. It was really a concert band, and they were all top-notch musicians from all over. And they had a really great jazz band too, about an 18-piece jazz band and a kid that could sing like Frank Sinatra. Anyway, I couldn't stand it. It was driving me crazy. So I went and I applied for the air force. At that time, it wasn't all one service, it was -- I mean it was all one service, it was Army/Air Force, rather than Air Force, so I applied for that, and then an interesting thing came up. They had an art thing, an art contest on the base, and they asked us to submit drawings or paintings or whatever, and so I put two or three things in, and then I get a notice to go see a warrant officer -- I can't remember his name -- at another place, and he said, Listen, I'm the warrant officer artist for the base. And he says, I need a guy to help me do silkscreens and also paint portraits of the officers' kids and their wives and stuff. He said, I have got more than I can handle. And he said, if you want, I will transfer you over to me and teach you all I

know about silkscreen painting and all I know about portrait painting. And he was really good at it. And I said yeah, that's going to be great. And about that -- two days later, the air force papers came through, okay, you are out of here. So I was on the train and headed for Louisiana.

Tom Swope:

So then how long were you in the Army/Air Corps?

Clayton Rippey:

Well, we started -- let's see, was it Denton, not Denton, a little place near Denton, Texas. There was a little junior college -- we started training. We did a little training in Louisiana, because they wanted to keep us busy, and then finally, they transferred us over to this little hot college in Texas, and we took all of the courses and we were just about oh, two or three more weeks from flight training, and all of a sudden, all of the WC2 -- no, what is it?

Tom Swope:

The ASTP?

Clayton Rippey:

The officer training?

Tom Swope:

No, that would be OTS.

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah, all the people that were coming in for officers training, all the people that applied for Air Force, all of that kind of stuff, suddenly said, okay, we need you guys. There's been a big reversal in Europe, and you guys are all now in the infantry.

Tom Swope:

So this would be what, March or April of 1943?

Clayton Rippey:

A little later than that, I believe, probably. So anyway, we were transferred into Camp Howell's, Texas, and this great big guy that looked like Victor McLaglen -- you might have even interviewed him or somebody that knew him -- and he was a terrific sergeant. He came out, and

he said, Well, now, we're going to make you guys soldiers. And he started growling, and everybody went, Oh, man. Are we in trouble. But he was terrific, and a favored guy you never saw, for gosh sakes, he would just get up and run, go right up in front of guns and stuff and never seemed to get touched, but he was terrific.

Tom Swope:

So what else can you tell me about Camp Howell's?

Clayton Rippey:

It was hot, and we had chiggers all over the place, had to have, oh, crammed ourself with sulfur, rubbed sulfur all over us. Every time we went out on any hikes or forced marches or whatever, and that's about the main thing I remember was typical army training, you know.

Tom Swope:

Did you have any buddies in camp?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah, that's where I met Mike, and all of the, well, all the guys that went overseas from there.

Tom Swope:

So when did you meet my dad?

Clayton Rippey:

Well, it was, pretty much right, after I got there, and then we met, ran into Lou Renee, and the three of us kind of palled around quite a bit. And then there was a guy by the name of Winters that we liked a lot, and then another fellow by the name of Eckenrode (phonetic), and there were four or five guys that we were really good friends, but Mike was my best buddy, and then Lou Renee was the next one.

Tom Swope:

So what can you tell me about any fun that you and my dad might have had during camp?

Clayton Rippey:

Not a heck of a lot of fun was to be had during -- well, we did get a pass into Dallas, and we went to a joint called Leon and Eddie's. It was a real neat bar. So we had a lot of fun on that trip,

but most of the time, we were just worried about training and stuff. And we did have a big PX that we could go over to. And I remember the night we left, that PX was full of about three or four hundred guys, I guess, over there drinking beer. And somebody slammed a bottle down and broke it, and then that was a signal for everybody to do the same thing, I remember. They had a thousand pounds of -- 10,000 pounds of broken glass over there.

Tom Swope:

Was that a tradition or somebody just came up with it?

Clayton Rippey:

I don't know whether it was a tradition or not, but we were being shipped out the next day, so, what could they do with us? So we just trashed all the beer bottles in the place.

Tom Swope:

I don't know if I told you, but several months ago, I went to the 103rd reunion in Dallas and drove by the site of Camp Howell's. There's really nothing there --

Clayton Rippey:

Nothing there?

Tom Swope:

-- right now, but we drove around the perimeter of where it used to be, and there's a couple of structures there in the middle of the field.

Clayton Rippey:

Deservedly so. There wasn't much there even when it was an office setup (inaudible.)

Tom Swope:

Now, were you thrown together with my dad and Lou Renee because your last names were -- you ended up standing together or what?

Clayton Rippey:

Could be, could be. I don't recall that, but, yeah, that might have been the case. I think we were all in the same squad.

Tom Swope:

Right.

Clayton Rippey:

We were certainly in the same company, and then we were in the same squad too I think.

Tom Swope:

Actually, I had -- did my dad come from the air cadet or the ASTP program, do you know?

Clayton Rippey:

I don't remember. I think he came from air cadets too.

Tom Swope:

Yeah, that's what I thought. I think he might have been with the ASTP for a short while. I'm not sure, I will have to check his diary, but I thought he mentioned both and I wasn't sure what was right before he ended up in the 103rd. So let's see, we're ready to ship out then?

Clayton Rippey:

Right. We went to New York City, and we were there, not too long, but we did have some fun. We went out to a lot of clubs and stuff, and there was one downtown New York, where they had portraits of all the famous people that had been drawn, I can't remember the name of it, very famous.

Tom Swope:

Sardi's?

Clayton Rippey:

Maybe it might have been Sardi's, I don't remember now. But we went there, and we got out towards Harlem. I don't know if we went -- I can't remember for sure whether we went to Harlem, but we went out to listen to some really good jazz.

Tom Swope:

Was my --

Clayton Rippey:

Duke Ellington.

Tom Swope:

Was my dad a big jazz fan back then?

Clayton Rippey:

Oh, yeah.

Tom Swope:

Oh, well, that's interesting. I knew he liked Bing Crosby, but I didn't remember that he was that much into jazz.

Clayton Rippey:

Your dad had a real good voice too.

Tom Swope:

Oh, yeah. So, did you -- now, did you sing together with him?

Clayton Rippey:

No.

Tom Swope:

You didn't? Just for the fun of it, I mean.

Clayton Rippey:

Well, just we might have just a little bit, but I'm not much into singing.

Tom Swope:

Now, before you went overseas, was there anything about the -- you went on Louisiana maneuvers; is that right or not?

Clayton Rippey:

Right.

Tom Swope:

Is there anything about that that you remember?

Clayton Rippey:

No, they were just -- I just remembered that there was snow down there one day, and it was really cold.

Tom Swope:

Was that -- was that shortly before you went overseas?

Clayton Rippey:

Had a freak snow. No, no, the Louisiana maneuvers took place before we went over to Camp Howell's, Texas, that was just kind of an interim, you know, we were just kind of on a holding place that they assigned us.

Tom Swope:

All right. So you shipped out, if I remember, it was somewhere around in the fall of '44, right?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah.

Tom Swope:

So what can you tell me about the crossing?

Clayton Rippey:

Well, it was very rough. We had hit some storms, and Mike and I never, would never get sick, so we would always find some guy that we didn't particularly like, and go up and say, Hey, how would you like a nice big greasy pork sandwich and the guy would just be ready to kill us. So, other than that, it was crowded, and it was hot. And I was the cartoonist for the ship paper, so I did a lot of cartoons of funny stuff that took place aboard ship, and the cartoons -- well, for one, that we kind of, that I recall specifically, was of a fatigue suit standing up all by itself, it was so raunchy and rancid that it could stand alone. And there were a few others. Things that happened aboard ship that you hear about, so then you do a cartoon for the paper.

Tom Swope:

Did you save any of those cartoons?

Clayton Rippey:

I think I might have -- I don't know, I didn't save much. I might have some still around somewhere.

Tom Swope:

So how did you two avoid getting sick?

Clayton Rippey:

I don't know. We just didn't get sick, but some of these guys were just so sick, they could have died right there and wished they had.

Tom Swope:

And you crossed -- was it the Monticello; is that right?

Clayton Rippey:

I think so, yeah.

Tom Swope:

Yeah, I'm trying to remember. It's in my dad's diary somewhere. So anything else about the crossing that you remember?

Clayton Rippey:

No, not particularly, just that it was very rough. I think we were five days crossing, and then we landed in Marseilles.

Tom Swope:

And what can you tell me about that, when you landed in Marseilles?

Clayton Rippey:

Well, I got a pretty good story on that. We -- they took us out on this hillside, and said, okay, set up your, gave us tents, and said set up the bivouac. And it was colder than all get out, and damp, and just miserable. And so they said, okay, we need some volunteers to go out and down and help unload the dock, you and you and you and you, you just volunteered. So Mike and I were two of the volunteers. So we were down in this big warehouse, and we would go aboard the boat and take it. And back in the warehouse -- and we were walking along, and Mike says look at this stuff here? And he looks where we were looking at, and it was a whole big, huge pile

of stacked-up sleeping bag liners, wasn't the bag, just the liners that go inside, which were all wool. So Mike says take your coat off real quick. And so I took my coat off, and he said grab a hold of this and I took them, the end of the liner and held it to my stomach, and he said now turn around two or three times, and I did this as fast as I could. And he would hold it real tight, and we tied it, took the belt off and tied it, and put the coat back on. But he said, you look a little fat, but you're all right. So he said, Now do me. So I did him. So we each had a liner all wrapped around us. So we were working there almost all day, and we found one other spot, little boxes, about a foot long, and, oh, 8 or 10 inches wide and 6 inches high. Oh, wonder what's in those? So we opened up one, and it turned out to be army chocolate bars, those great big kind of pure chocolate, milk chocolate. The kind they melt up to make cocoa out of? So we stuffed all of our pockets, our coats, our pockets, dropped them down our pants -- they were in combat boots, so, they were bloused at the bottom -- and dumped those chocolate bars down in there, and we emptied out a couple of those boxes. So when we came back, we were sitting up there in our tent. Everybody is freezing to death, and Mike and I are nice and warm in those sleeping bags eating chocolate bars. I don't know how much work we got done. I don't even remember all that part, but we sure cashed in on the chocolate bars.

Tom Swope:

Very good. Do you remember your first day of combat?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah, we got in a fight with our own outfit.

Tom Swope:

Really?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah. Somebody shot at something, and it was another company. Nobody got hurt. Nobody got hit. It lasted about half an hour maybe. Finally, somebody realized, hey, whoa, we're shooting our own guys.

Tom Swope:

Guys pretty nervous?

Clayton Rippey:

Everybody was nervous, yeah.

Tom Swope:

So then was your first day of combat with the enemy?

Clayton Rippey:

Gosh, I'm trying to think about that one. I don't even recall that. I think it was up, in France, of course, up around Dambach, a little town called Dambach, and before that too, there was an interesting thing happened to me -- I don't remember what the situation was with Mike -- but they took us up to a place called Lyon, and said, stood us on the street corner, and the guy says, okay, when the army truck comes by, point that way. And that's all I had to do was just point. Because they were shipping big army convoys north towards the front, and they needed somebody to point them to make sure they took the right turn at the right direction, so, I, maybe I took -- did I tell you this story?

Tom Swope:

I don't think so, no.

Clayton Rippey:

Okay. We -- I was sitting on the street corner, and so I'm pointing at the trucks and stuff, and they, once in awhile, two or three would come by, and then four or five more, and then maybe a dozen or whatever, and they were shipping them all day long, and I was there until about seven in the morning. A bunch of French kids came by on their way to school, and they were about teenagers, junior high age, and there was three or four boys and four or five little girls, and they all wanted to learn some slang terms, in English. So, they stopped, and, of course, I couldn't speak any French, just, just what little bit I could pick up earlier. But they were fairly good with their English. So, I taught them a few slang terms, and they went on to school. Then they came back, and, at lunchtime wanted to know some more, so they stopped for a minute, and then they went on home for lunch. They came back, they brought me a great big delicious scrambled egg sandwich -- which must have been quite a sacrifice for them to be able to rustle up the egg and stuff -- anyway, they brought that to me. And then on the way back home from school again, they stopped. And so then the little girls were giggling all over the place, and they met an American soldier, and they wanted to know my name, so I told them. And then they wanted to know my address. Of course, you are not supposed to do that, name, rank and serial number is all. I figured what the hell, teenage kids going to school aren't going to cause us to lose a war,

so I gave them my home address. And they said, we'll write to you when the war is over. Well, sure enough they did. And I wrote to four of them. I came home and I was married. Got married. And I told my wife all about them. And so I wrote to four of them, and she wrote little notes to them and so on. So then when my son was born, they sent me booties that they knitted and some clothing and stuff, and then two of the girls dropped out of it -- four of them at first and then two of them dropped out -- every Christmas, we heard from them, and then finally, the next one dropped out. And then in 1960, I was -- which then, I had graduated from college, and in art and got a job as an art teacher, and I got in my seven years -- I take a sabbatical. And we had the kids down to Mexico several times, see how they traveled, and they did really well. We had both a son and a daughter by then, so we decided, okay, let's go on a plane trip to Europe. So while we were there we looked up this one girl that was still left, and she had grown up into a beautiful gal. She looked like Shirley Temple, and she was married. Her husband was a pilot. He took the kids up, flew them all around Lyon in an airplane ride and then we went out to dinner with her. And the second girl that dropped out, was the last of the dropouts, we went out to see her on her farm where she lived, and she could barely speak English, but we had a nice visit, so it was fun.

Tom Swope:

Very good.

Clayton Rippey:

I have lost track of her since.

Tom Swope:

Did you, for the most part, get along with the French people then?

Clayton Rippey:

Oh, yeah, yeah. They were great to us.

Tom Swope:

Now, you pretty much shared a foxhole with my dad, right?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah, several times.

Tom Swope:

What would you guys talk about when you were waiting?

Clayton Rippey:

Oh, mostly, whether we're going to get out of this alive or not, how long it was going to last, things like that. I remember one was especially tough one was when -- this was when my friend Dick Magetic (ph), that I told you about -- maybe did I tell you about him?

Tom Swope:

No, I don't think so.

Clayton Rippey:

He was in another company, but he was in the same division. He was 6 foot 7, I think, big, tall guy, and he was always the front of the parades, you know. They graduated them according to height quite often, and so, he -- and he was a machine gunner in this other company -- and so I got to know him later, but we went into this little town. That's when he got hit by about a two-inch piece of shrapnel. We got into ADH (phon) shelling, and they just creamed us. They pulled out of the town, and then set up their guns and then just waited for us to come down this road. And then they nailed the hell out of us. So he got hit -- and another one, there was a guy by the name of Corby, a real nice pleasant guy, and everybody really liked him -- he was kind of a gentle sort of guy, and I remember having to step over him to get into a house, to, you know, to get in, to take cover, and he had been hit by a sniper right between the eyes. And that was a very tough thing to have to do.

Tom Swope:

Yeah.

Clayton Rippey:

But anyway we came out of that, and then we went on to a place called Selestat.

Tom Swope:

In France, right?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah, southern France.

Tom Swope:

Okay. Go ahead.

Clayton Rippey:

Alsace, Lorraine.

Tom Swope:

Right.

Clayton Rippey:

And on the way, we ran into quite a bit of fire, and a lot of the -- well, our company was 150. I think we were down to about 117 or so when we went into Selestat, and oh, most of the officers, boy, let's see, I think we had about two officers left, and anyway, we took three or four houses in the corner of Selestat. And that's the incident I mentioned to you earlier, when --

Tom Swope:

Go ahead and tell that again. I didn't get that on tape.

Clayton Rippey:

Well, there were about seven of us in this one house, a guy by the name of Winters and Mike, and myself, and all -- oh, I can't remember who all else was in this house. And we were in this second floor because the bottom floor is where they keep the livestock, and the storage, and so on, and that's where the big pile of turnips was down in the corner there, they're great big things, big as cantaloupes. So anyway, along about two or three in the morning, I guess it must have been -- maybe a little later -- we could hear this big motor, engine, whatever you want to call it. It was big, and we peeked outside, and you could barely make them out, but you could see all these soldiers coming into this area where we had the three houses with a huge tiger tank. And so the first thing they did was pull the tank up and surround the house, and the tank shot the bridge out right behind us. And the river was maybe -- not a big river -- it was probably 15, 20 feet across. So, they shot the bridge out, and then they just started yelling for everybody to come out. And some of them didn't come out, and so the tank just, just would turn its guns on whatever house they were yelling, come out of there, and give them a blast of two or three blasts, about two or three at a time. And they very quickly learned that they better come out in a hurry. So everybody is surrendered, and I'm up there with all of this, my pocket full of souvenirs, German flags and an iron cross, and stuff like that, little automatics, and so I'm trying to find

where all these souvenirs are stuck; they're all in my pockets everywhere, and I wanted to get rid of them, so I didn't get caught with any of them on my person, because we heard that if they caught you with German souvenirs, you were a dead guy. So by the time I got them all fished out, I reached down in front of me. I thought Mike was right in front of me, and he wasn't. It was pitch black in that house, and I couldn't see anything, and I whispered out, Mike. Mike. Nobody answered. So, then I came to this opening and took a step and fell about halfway down these stairs, and that I was down into the storage area, and the cows and pigs and stuff down there. So, I found these turnips and pulled them all back and dug a hole and climbed into the hole and then pulled the turnips in on top of me. Nobody came in there. I was in there, cranked up for, oh, I don't know, a couple three hours, I suppose. And then I heard an American voice, a couple of guys talking. I thought, oh, man, something has happened here. This is in the daylight by then. So, I got out and peeked around the corner, and there was a GI, and they had come, the Germans had just taken the whole batch of guys, and went back into town, marched them all back into town and left the houses empty. And I guess they figured because the bridge was out, they didn't have much to worry about anyway. But then they came back and retook the house, and I ran into this guy, and then I ran into a couple of others -- by then, Mike was gone -- I ran into a couple of other fellows and we were thinking gees, that Swiss border is not too far from here. Get to that. We ran into this Frenchman coming down some stairs in this house. We kind of peeked in the door, and he said, Oh, Americans. He ran, ran down to the wine cellar and brought up three or four bottles of really, really good French wine and popped the corks, and then insisted that we stay long enough to have a couple of glasses of wine. So, then, we decided well, we better get back. So we went back to the division, and I think there were 17 or 18 of us that made it out of that. A couple of them swam the river, and a couple more was hidden in the houses. I was the only one in the house that I was in, I was the only one that got away. So, I went back and collected all my souvenirs.

Tom Swope:

Now, were you guys put in a bad position there? Is that how they managed to cut you off and capture you?

Clayton Rippey:

I have no idea. All I know, we were -- it seemed like we were in a pretty secure situation, and all of a sudden, I, we obviously didn't have any real backup, as far as huge artillery or tanks or anything like that is concerned, because that tank pulled right in there and started shooting the

buildings apart, so it was a pretty easy pick for the Germans, and there was some fire fighting at first, but it didn't last long with that tank there.

Tom Swope:

But when the Germans came in, they knew there were some Americans in that part of town?

Clayton Rippey:

Oh, yes, I think they knew that.

Tom Swope:

Now, I'm trying to think of the layout of Selestat. Were these like three houses outside of the walled city there?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah. As a matter of fact when I took the kids back, and my wife -- I said you got to go to Selestat with me. So, when we went, we had gone down to Spain, we were down in Majorca for a long time, went down to Africa, came around the Italian, French Riviera, and on down the coast of Italy, as far as Naples, and then came back up through Switzerland, Austria, and I took them all around Innsbruck, where we were later, and took them there, and then we took a boat down into Germany, and then we had our own car. Because we had ordered a car to be delivered in France when we landed. So, then we drove down over to Selestat, and I showed them. The house is still there. And it's all fixed up. And I said, here's the window where I was, I looked out, and here's the kind of little plaza place. This is where the Germans were. This is another house, this is another house, and this is where the Frenchman came down and gave us the wine, and that was it. We didn't stop or talk to anybody.

Tom Swope:

So, which window -- somebody gave me, one of the guys from the 103rd, gave me some home movies of this house. Which window should I be looking for?

Clayton Rippey:

I think ours was the one, if you are coming out of town, ours would have been the one to the right, I believe.

Tom Swope:

Is it closest to the bridge?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah, fairly close, yes.

Tom Swope:

And, so these are the windows looking out on the street, right?

Clayton Rippey:

Mm-hm.

Tom Swope:

Yeah, I was trying to picture it, but these guys sent me some home movies.

Clayton Rippey:

Oh, probably, we went on up to, after we finished Selestat, we drove up on up to a little town of Dambach, and I met an old Frenchman there, who remembered the night we came through there, the time we came through. Oh, another time, Mike and I -- this is before Selestat -- there was a little town right in about -- it was hills on both sides, steep -- and the little town was right down in the middle of it. So, our company had taken that town. And so we -- they took, found a big old truck that was kind of like a Mack truck, and they rolled it up, so it blocked the street, so that if anybody came down the street to try to get us -- we had taken that town earlier from the Germans and captured a few of them, and so on, they were down in the town. We came down over the hill, and took them by surprise and took over the town. So then we put this big truck down there. So, Mike and I drew guard duty, and we're sitting in this truck, just talking about what are you going to do when you go home, and all that kind of stuff, you know, just gabbing, and we were looking around, and we opened up the glove compartment of the truck and looked in there, and there's this bottle about the size of a ketchup bottle. And Mike says, What do you suppose that is? I don't know. Let's taste it and see. We took a taste of it. It turned out to be schnapps. So we sat there and drank all the schnapps. And by the time our relief came, we didn't really care whether the Germans, if the Germans even had an army or not, but we were relieved, we were relieved, and we went back to the barracks, and then, along about an hour later, the Germans counterattack hit that truck really hard, and boy, it's a good thing we weren't in it.

Tom Swope:

Any other stories like that that you can remember?

Clayton Rippey:

No. But anyway, that was a good one. But I started to say, this old Frenchman in Dambach remembered when we were there. They brought us wine and bread and stuff and fed us, and they were really helpful and welcoming to us.

Tom Swope:

So, how long was it that you found out what had happened to my dad?

Clayton Rippey:

Oh, that was, that wasn't until after the war.

Tom Swope:

Okay.

Clayton Rippey:

I knew he had been taken prisoner, that's all I knew, but I went on from there, we went up to the Maginot line and the Seigfried line, and I got hit, and was in the hospital, and while I was in the hospital, I wrote to my mom and my dad, and I said, send me my old clarinet -- it was worth about 25 bucks. And that thing got to me -- it must have been put on an airplane -- because it got to me before I was out of the hospital. And the day I was supposed to go back to the unit, they were coming down through Germany. They had already made it through Ludwigshaven, I guess it was, come down through Germany, and were ready to go into northern Austria. Oh, I will tell you another funny one coming down on the way -- we were walking along, and towards Austria, on one side of the road, and there was another group of GIs coming back from the front on the other side of the road. And a guy by the name of Bob Kittle that I knew when I was in high school -- as a matter of fact, double-dated with him a lot of times and kind of chummed around with him quite a bit -- and I looked up, and here comes Kittle the other way. And we were both covered with mud, wet, and miserable. I said, Hi Kittle, and he says Hi Rip, that's all. I just kept going. (Laughter.) But anyway, we -- I was coming out of the hospital, and the clarinet arrived. And so I'm waiting in a little room there for the troop truck to come and pick me up, take me back to my outfit. And so I got the clarinet, I started playing. And I was playing some blues and a little bit of Gershwin stuff and there was a knock at the door, and this guy comes in, a little

short, chubby little guy, and he's about 35 years old, which is an old man for me, and he says, Hey, man, you sound pretty cool. Do you play sax at all? And I said, well, I have played it a little bit, but not much. And he said, have you been into music quite a bit? And I said, Well, ever since I was about seven or eight, I guess. And he says, Well, you can read, sight-read music then pretty easy? And I said, Yeah. And he says, Look, I have been signed to put together a jazz band, a swing band to entertain the troops, the minute the war is over. He said do you want to be in it? Are you kidding? So, he said, we don't have a sax for you now, what you will have to do is transpose everything an octave lower, so you will sound like a tenor sax, you won't be as loud, but at least you will be in that range, and you can play in the sax section. So then that's where I met this Magetic machine gun player, machine gunner, because he played alto sax and also a very neat swing accordion of all things, so Magetic (ph), who had been in the hospital with that great big shrapnel thing in his chest, and he was on the way back, when Davis looked up his MO, and said, hey, this guy plays sax and accordion, we will get him. So that's where I met Magetic and got to be good friends with him. So anyway, they formed the band, and we played all over the Innsbruck valley and mostly in Innsbruck, but we would go to the outlying towns, where GIs were staying and put on shows --

Tom Swope:

So -- go ahead.

Clayton Rippey:

-- well, that's how we finished up, well the war -- just about the time the band was ready to go to war -- it ended, so that was our job.

Tom Swope:

So when did you get hit?

Clayton Rippey:

Let's see, that was about December 21st, I think, somewhere around that time. I can't remember the date exactly.

Tom Swope:

So what happened that time?

Clayton Rippey:

When --

Tom Swope:

Tell me about the day you were wounded.

Clayton Rippey:

Well, we were in, we were protecting a German bunker, the Germans counterattack, and they were throwing grenades all over the place, and I guess I forgot to duck, so, it knocked me out. It didn't inflict any terrible wounds or anything, you know, it went off so close. I didn't even know what happened. It was just like being punched out. But then, one of the GIs found me, one of my guys in the company found me, and we were -- some of us were outside, particularly in this bunker, and quite a number of days, and then before -- my vision came back.

Tom Swope:

And that was the concussion --

Clayton Rippey:

It must have been.

Tom Swope:

-- that caused it?

Clayton Rippey:

So then from this point on, I have been fine. There has never been any recurrence of whatever it was that happened.

Tom Swope:

Now, would you get a Purple Heart for that?

Clayton Rippey:

I did. I guess.

Tom Swope:

You did. You don't have it?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah, I got one.

Tom Swope:

Yeah, I guess I thought for some dumb reason, they thought you had to drop blood, so maybe you did draw some blood?

Clayton Rippey:

I know they awarded me one.

Tom Swope:

And speaking of -- well, actually, not speaking of, but my dad, I don't know if you can clear up this mystery or not -- but when I went through his stuff after he died, I found a little piece of shrapnel. Do you know anything about that?

Clayton Rippey:

No.

Tom Swope:

You don't remember him getting a close call or any reason why he would have carried that around?

Clayton Rippey:

Well, he had plenty of close calls, but I don't really know.

Tom Swope:

Nothing that he talked about?

Clayton Rippey:

No.

Tom Swope:

And then the other mystery is how did my dad actually get his Purple Heart?

Clayton Rippey:

I don't know unless he was, maybe that shrapnel was hit, I don't remember.

Tom Swope:

Well, according to this one thing that I saw, it was issued for wounds received like in December '44, which would have been two or three weeks after he was captured.

Clayton Rippey:

Could be.

Tom Swope:

So, maybe it was something that happened then, I don't know.

Clayton Rippey:

Might have been.

Tom Swope:

Well, I have asked my dad's brother, and I thought I would ask you.

Clayton Rippey:

No, I don't know anything about that.

Tom Swope:

Do you have any -- did we already cover mail call, that sort of thing? Do you have any memories of that?

Clayton Rippey:

Oh, yeah. That was always a very special time, because my wife-to-be always wrote really nice letters, lots of them, a letter a day, but we weren't married or anything, but she never missed.

Tom Swope:

So, what kinds of that things would she write?

Clayton Rippey:

Oh, I don't know, just write and tell me about -- she was in nurse's training at the time -- and she would just write and tell me what she was doing and everything.

Tom Swope:

And what were you -- were you able to write back to her?

Clayton Rippey:

Oh, lots of stuff. Lots of stuff. That's not for the Library of Congress.

Tom Swope:

That's personal?

Clayton Rippey:

(Inaudible.) She saved every letter.

Tom Swope:

So --

Clayton Rippey:

(Inaudible.) They're stored away somewhere. She saved them all.

Tom Swope:

I hope they are preserved somewhere.

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah.

Tom Swope:

When you think about that experience during World War II, does one particularly vivid memory come to mind?

Clayton Rippey:

Which -- let me have that question again.

Tom Swope:

Is there a particularly vivid memory, when you start to think of that time?

Clayton Rippey:

Oh, I think that incident in Selestat was one of them, and the -- oh, I remember another one too, when we were up there on the Maginot line and the Seigfried line, we had a lieutenant by the name of Keith Crown was in charge of our squad, and he -- the officers, of course, always got a liquor ration, a quart of booze or whatever it was, bourbon, I think. So he would get -- line up

everybody, and said, everybody fall out, and he would line up and put us at attention, and then he had a great big tablespoon and he would go all the way down the line, and open your mouth, and give us each -- open your mouth again -- right down the line, feeding everybody a great big tablespoon of booze. He always shared his bottle with us.

Tom Swope:

Do you remember the necktie story?

Clayton Rippey:

Necktie story?

Tom Swope:

My dad used to always tell the story about an order that came down from the top, even in combat, you'd have to wear your neckties?

Clayton Rippey:

No, I don't remember that.

Tom Swope:

That must have been something that stuck with him.

Clayton Rippey:

I know when I got out of the Army, I went home and had a little ritual burn and the necktie and the hat were the first two things to be tossed in the fire. Built a bonfire in my folks' backyard and have a ritual burn.

Tom Swope:

Did you write that song with my dad, "After It's Over"?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah.

Tom Swope:

Do you remember the song at all?

Clayton Rippey:

Yes, sure.

Tom Swope:

How much of it do you remember?

Clayton Rippey:

Let's see. "After it's over, over a year, I will come home to you." Something, "We'll build a little cottage, oh, just a little home for two. It will be so happy there, we'll" -- I can't remember it all.

Tom Swope:

It's not like you remember exactly what my dad remembers.

Clayton Rippey:

Well, we never quite got it completely finished. But I remember writing it, and the melody turned out to be a pretty good little melody. And let's see, I don't know, I can't sing it. Maybe I can whistle it. (Whistled the song.) Something like that.

Tom Swope:

I'm going to send you a recording of what I have.

Clayton Rippey:

Really?

Tom Swope:

My dad, 25 years ago, sitting at the cabin up there in Pennsylvania, he recorded what he could remember. He sang it.

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah.

Tom Swope:

So, he sang about to that point, and then he said, I can't remember any more.

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah.

Tom Swope:

But I think the melody is the same, so....

Clayton Rippey:

I think we wrote that when we were in the tent at Marseilles. We had those nice comfortable sleeping bags, and it was, as I recall, it was raining like heck, and we were just lying in the back. He didn't have anything to do, and everybody was holed up, and we had our chocolate bars, and so we decided to write a song. And I believe that was when we did it.

Tom Swope:

And my dad said that somebody offered to buy that song from you guys.

Clayton Rippey:

I didn't know that.

Tom Swope:

Well, he didn't get you in on the deal. It was some sergeant or something had offered to buy the song, but he said, he said you didn't sell?

Clayton Rippey:

Oh, no.

Tom Swope:

Do you remember at all -- my dad in his diary refers to a night when a Sgt. Millisec (ph) saved his life, basically. There was a German aiming a rifle at my dad and Millisec took him out. Does that sound familiar at all?

Clayton Rippey:

No, I didn't know them.

Tom Swope:

Did he ever send you a copy of his diary?

Clayton Rippey:

No.

Tom Swope:

Well, maybe I should send you a copy of that. That was about, oh, 20, 25 years ago that he wrote this thing up.

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah.

Tom Swope:

That he -- well, you knew that he was keeping a little memo book, right?

Clayton Rippey:

No.

Tom Swope:

Oh, yeah. He has a little memo book that I think he carried with him for a long time, and that was the first part of the diary, and then he finished the second part 20 or 30 years later, what he could remember, and fortunately, he left me tapes too, so I have lots of tapes from him.

Clayton Rippey:

Oh, that's great.

Tom Swope:

Most of them are concerning when he was a POW, but he has some stories about you on the tape, so I should send you those, actually.

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah.

Tom Swope:

You might be interested to hear those. They were recorded probably in 1977, I think, when I was living in Colorado. He was sending me cassette letters, so he recorded these on the cassette letters, and sent them to me, so, yeah, he recorded probably two hours' worth of what he could remember, but probably, about 20 or 30 minutes would be stuff that you could relate to.

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah.

Tom Swope:

Let's see. Oh, here's kind of a silly question, but I guess I feel like I want to ask you. Do you think my dad was scared?

Clayton Rippey:

Probably. But he never really, as I recall, he never really acted scared, but I think he was probably, probably scared.

Tom Swope:

Just like everybody?

Clayton Rippey:

Oh, man, I was terrified.

Tom Swope:

Yeah.

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah.

Tom Swope:

So you --

Clayton Rippey:

I know, they gave the division a bronze star, you know, after, I guess everybody in the division got it. I know I got one.

Tom Swope:

Yeah, dad got one too.

Clayton Rippey:

And I always figured as scared as I was, and as lousy a soldier as I was, I didn't deserve it.

Tom Swope:

So, were you part of the occupation forces for a while before you came home?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah, that's -- well, we were listed as occupation forces. That's when we were doing all the entertaining in Austria, and then the temporary occupation. We weren't the official occupation forces. I think they came in and then they broke up the band, and they transferred us into the 45th division, and so when they transferred us there, they moved us to a new -- broke everybody up into different divisions, and so on, and so we lost track of a lot of people. And that's an interesting story too, because we were in, I think, France waiting to be shipped home to England, and this officer had been looking through, I guess, the 103rd stuff, and the information and stuff about the 103rd GIs. And he ran across the cartoons that I had done coming over, and he said, hey, how would you like to be a cartoonist for the 45th? He says, Bill Mauldin's old job, and I thought, whoa, that's pretty big shoes to fill there. And I said, well, yeah, I guess I could try it, but about that time is when they dropped the bomb and everything just ended pretty fast at that time. And so -- we typically went over to England, so I never did draw any cartoons, but I was offered the job anyway.

Tom Swope:

Now, at that point, were you being considered to go to the Pacific?

Clayton Rippey:

Yes. As a matter of fact, we found out that, I guess, we were scheduled to become part of the invasion of Japan. We would have been if they hadn't surrendered.

Tom Swope:

So when did you finally get home?

Clayton Rippey:

Oh, boy, let me think. I don't even remember the date. All I know is we had, we had a flight from New York, all the way out to Seattle. Went into Fort Lewis, and I can remember the main part of the flight that I remember is flying over, down through Mount Hood and Mt. Rainier, and seeing them. Boy, it was a gorgeous clear day, and I was all covered with snow and stuff.

Tom Swope:

What was your reunion like with your family?

Clayton Rippey:

I don't recall that much either. I just got home is all, and Marsha was there to see me, and my mom and dad and everybody. But it was interesting, that was the kind of an interesting story too. I got off the plane, and, in Fort Lewis, and they said, I didn't have enough points -- remember the point system?

Tom Swope:

Right.

Clayton Rippey:

They were letting us out according to the number of points, and I think I was about two points short. So, they said, okay, you guys that have nothing to do if you want a pass into town, you can, you can get a pass to Seattle. So, this one guy who lives in town, near where I lived, he lived in a little place called Union, which is about 16 miles or so from LaGrange. I said, Why don't we go into town? It's about 8:00 in the morning. He said, okay, let's go. So, we took off, got on the bus, and went into town, and there wasn't much going on, and I was interested in some of the art exhibits and stuff that were around still, so, he got tired, he says, aha, this is no fun, I'm going back to the barracks, and just flake out, read a book or something. I said not me, I'm not going back until my leave is up, which was at noon. I said, that's when I'm going back. So, he says, okay, I will see you. So he took off and went back to the base, and between the time that he got to the base, a train came in, and they put him and everybody else on the train and shipped him to Texas. By the time I got back, they had dropped the point system by five points, and I get back at noon, and I came in, Where is everybody? Well, they all got shipped off to Texas. And I had said, well, I was supposed to have been on that train, I guess. Well, your leave wasn't up until noon, but they just grabbed everybody that was available and shipped them off. And he said, but you are out of here, you got enough points to go. So I was on the bus that afternoon and went home. I saw the guy about six months later, he was eventually discharged, and he says, those damn people took me down to Texas and we went through basic training again.

Tom Swope:

Did you have any trouble adjusting to civilian life when you were finally home?

Clayton Rippey:

No, not at all.

Tom Swope:

Now, where did you teach art?

Clayton Rippey:

Bakersfield College.

Tom Swope:

Bakersfield?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah.

Tom Swope:

How long did you teach there?

Clayton Rippey:

30 years.

Tom Swope:

30 years. Okay.

Clayton Rippey:

I gave up music, because -- well, I wanted to, first of all, maybe be a concert clarinetist, go from city to city and be a guest performer with the various orchestras. I realized that I did not want to do that because that's no way, no family life, and I had enough in Austria to know that I didn't want to play with the big band because -- as a matter of fact, a lot of the people that was in that band in Austria, went with big bands after the war. Two or three of them, I have heard. We had two trumpet players who went with big bands, and then there was a violinist who went with somebody important. Anyway, so I made up my mind that I didn't want to do that. And so I just switched over to art, which I had been very active with ever since I'm a little kid, and I went down to Stanford University and finished up all my training and graduated in 1949 and then they came through interviewing for teachers, and I accepted the job at Bakersfield.

Tom Swope:

And taught there until 1979 or so?

Clayton Rippey:

1980.

Tom Swope:

1980?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah, and by then -- my wife and I got married right after I got back, and that was 1946. We were married in LaGrange, and then she went up, and she had to finish her nurse's training. She had a little bit to do, so she went up there, and I worked in LaGrange that summer, and then I joined her up in Spokane, Washington where she was, and I stayed, we stayed there for a year until she was finished.

Tom Swope:

So you said you found out about my dad sometime after the war, right?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah.

Tom Swope:

That he had made it, that he got back?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah.

Tom Swope:

And you kept in touch with him all those years, what, just through the mail?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah, usually at Christmastime. Sometimes we would write back and forth.

Tom Swope:

But you never really talked to him that much. You just kind of corresponded, right?

Clayton Rippey:

Yeah.

Tom Swope:

I wondered about that, because I know I always saw your letters and notes and your Christmas notes, and that sort of thing, but certainly I don't remember my dad talking about talking to you.

Clayton Rippey:

No, we didn't do that much. It was mostly just by letters and notes, and -- I don't know what else I can tell you. The teaching, just didn't -- nothing much of it, but we were there. I did have a fairly good run as a painter. I had about 100 one-man shows, one in Paris, one in Rome, a couple of them in Florence, Madrid and Stockholm, all over California, Oregon, Washington and Hawaii, so they've been fairly successful.

Tom Swope:

So you have a fairly big reputation, especially in the West then?

Clayton Rippey:

Not fairly big. It's, it's bigger in Bakersfield. They're out of sight, out of mind, so they tend to forget a little bit, but anyway this is the paintings that have, what they've enabled us to do is to be able to travel a lot because to have the sales of the paintings. We just used the money to go someplace else, so my wife and kids and I have been pretty much all over the world.

Tom Swope:

Of, that's great. So you had exhibitions everywhere, huh?

Clayton Rippey:

Mm-hm.

Tom Swope:

And you lived in Hawaii for awhile or did you just have a home there?

Clayton Rippey:

Yes, in Maui in 1967. They went from a trade school to a community college, and so they were going to be completely redoing the school, hiring a whole new batch of teachers, and so on, to make a community college out of it, so I interviewed and got the job as the art department. I was

it; one person. So we moved to Maui for a year. I took a leave of absence in Bakersfield College and set up the entire program for the art department. And it was fun. We just had a great time while we were there. My son, by then, was already in college, but my daughter was a junior in high school, so she really liked it, and then when I retired, in 1980, we moved to Kauai, and we were there for two years.

Tom Swope:

And so you don't still have a place there, right?

Clayton Rippey:

No, we sold that. We had a museum and an art gallery there and decided this was no way to retire, it was too much work, so we just decided to pull up, so we sold the whole thing and moved. We had a summer place on Orcas Island, about 70 miles north of Seattle, a beautiful place, so, we just concentrated on Orcas until my wife got too ill to handle, the, well, the ferry ride, and we had almost an acre of land and waterfront and everything on it, and so we decided, well, we would sell it and move over to Anacortes, and that's where we were until she died.

Tom Swope:

And now you are planning on living down there in Southern California?

Clayton Rippey:

Yes, I had -- I have had a friend -- well, Marsha -- she was a friend by the name of Mary who was married in Bakersfield. She was a teacher in Bakersfield, and her husband was a teacher, so we chummed around with Mary and her husband for years, and then he died, and she remarried again, a doctor, in Pasadena. And then he died, so we have shared with Mary, all along these times, and so she's always been a very good friend and very close to both of us. So then when Marsha died, she was one of first ones to get in touch by phone, and so on, so we decided -- she always felt like a third wheel a little bit, and when Marsha, because Marsha and I had a 56-year-run there, and so then when she was no longer the third wheel, while things got a little more serious. And I'm going to be married next month.

Tom Swope:

That's really nice. Congratulations.