Clarke Chambers was born on 3 June 1921 in Blue Earth, Faribault County, Minnesota, one of three children. He attended local schools, graduating from Blue Earth High School in 1939, and then enrolled at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, to study history and political science. In the middle of his junior year, December 1941, the US entered the war. Clarke completed his degree early, in December 1942, and was called to military service the following month.

Following Basic Training in St. Petersburg, Florida, Clarke received additional schooling in the intelligence field, specifically weather and cryptography. In mid-1944 he was shipped to the Pacific and assigned to the 20th Air Force, 20th Bomber Command. Over the next twelve months Clarke was stationed at bases on the islands of Saipan, Tinian, and Guam; he then spent June – November 1945 on Okinawa before being rotated back to the US and discharged with the rank of sergeant.

Again a civilian, Clarke used GI Bill benefits to obtain a Ph.D. in history from the University of California-Berkeley in 1950. He taught there for one year before moving, in 1951, to the History Department at the University of Minnesota, where he remained until retiring in 1990. Clarke was married in 1944 (wife Florence) and raised a family of four children. At the time of this interview (December 2002) Clarke and Florence Chambers lived in Falcon Heights, Minnesota.

Wide-ranging interview on personal experiences, also the meaning and consequences of World War II. Very well spoken.
T: Today is Friday, 20 December 2002, and this is our interview with Clarke Chambers at his home in Falcon Heights, Minnesota. First, Clarke, on the record, thanks very much for taking time to see me and speak with me. We’ve been talking for some minutes now and I’ve learned a little bit about you. On tape I can say that you were born 3 June, 1921.

C: Pretty close.

T: In Blue Earth, Faribault County, Minnesota. Graduated from Blue Earth High School in 1939. Went to Carlton College, here in Northfield, Minnesota, and graduated Class of ’43, but early, in December of 1942, and then went into the US Army, specifically the US Army Air Corps. Basic Training at St. Petersburg and then training in intelligence. Shipped out...

C: Weather cryptography would be a better word.

T: Weather cryptography?

C: Yes. We were an intelligence outfit, but that’s all right.

T: Trained in that. You shipped out to the Pacific in June of 1944 and your duty stations included stops in Saipan, Guam, Tinian, and in June 1945, Okinawa. You were on Okinawa until November 1945, when you returned to the US and were discharged, that same month I think, November of ’45. You stayed in San Francisco for a number of years. Went to the University of San Francisco.

C: No. University of California, Berkley.


C: American history, 1950, June. Yes.

T: And taught out there for one year. In 1951 you moved to the University of Minnesota, Department of History, where you remained until 1990, when you retired.

C: Yes.
Oral History Project: World War II Years, 1941-1946 - Clarke Chambers
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T: Married February 1944 in San Francisco. Your wife’s name is Florence, and you and Florence had four children, the first of whom was born, I understand, nine and a half months after you got back from...

C: That’s close.

T: Clarke, let me ask you, growing up in the 1920s and 1930s in rural Minnesota, what kind of memories do you have of that?

C: You ask an old man or an old woman that question and nostalgia creeps in right away, but I think in small town mid-America in 1921 to 1939 what I remember best is the security, the psychological, social, cultural security that young people had. We had the run of the town. It was a good school system. We had the run of outside the town and the friendships were liquid and shifting and changeable. However, my position was a bit privileged. My father was a small town doctor, physician, and surgeon and I really think that I had access to more places. I used to go to the County Courthouse because his friend, David Morse, was attorney at law and would just get bored, you know, and I would just go down and sit in the courtroom for half a day or whatever. So there was an access to the whole town. I still more about that town than any other thing that I can imagine.

T: Did you have any siblings growing up?

C: I had an older sister who was four and a half, five years older than I, and a half-brother who was fifteen, sixteen years older so that he wasn’t really in my life very much. A lot older.

T: Was he around the area or was he pretty much gone by that time?

C: By the time, the mid-20s, he was in college and then he was into salesmanship and he traveled the country and he ended up in Seattle. But I think he's an important figure, more like an uncle than a brother.

(1, A, 76)

T: Yes. With that much age difference I can see how that would be the case. What took you to Carleton College?

C: I had a fifty dollar scholarship. And I think the total cost in those days was nine hundred dollars, room, board, and tuition. So that was a good start. My family had gone there. My brother had gone there. My sister had gone there. My mother went there when it was a female seminary back in the 1890s.

T: It was a known quantity for you.
C: Yes. And I think it was known as a good school. I can’t remember even making a choice. Some old fellow came down and said would you like to go to Carleton, and I said sure.

T: You were a student at Carleton when the US entered World War II, specifically in the aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 1941. I’m wondering, Clarke, if you remember what you were doing when you first heard that news?

C: I was listening to one of those broadcasts, symphony orchestras, by radio. Was it the Philharmonic probably? And the news broke in. This is my memory. I was active politically in the student body and we had a little committee about foreign policy and things like that, so we went and got the right professors and put together a symposium that evening in Severance Grand Hall. Right away we were into it.

T: Do you remember much about the symposium that you put on? What happened that evening?

C: I think that everybody was just eager to know what on earth this was and where it was going to turn out. Some of us obviously, as all student bodies, were better informed than others, but it was an information. And also, implicit there with the young men was, okay, where do I go to sign up? At that time nobody knew. But there was a sense of real crisis and emergency that we were going to be the hell out of there.

T: Sure. How would you describe your emotions? How did you respond?

C: I’m sure it was not fear... I don’t think. My closest buddies and including myself, within a week were up at Minneapolis trying to register. A lot of the really gung ho guys were going in the Marines; if they were physically able and they could see, they went there. But the people were going up fast. I think it was a rush to be part of that generation. I think we knew, my friends, this is not universal, knew that this was really an important war that had to be won.

T: So you saw pretty quickly, this was something, a big event.

C: Very quickly. You’re darned right.

T: Were you yourself possessed by this desire to go and enlist?

C: I went up. It was January or February of ’42. It was a program for Officers’ Training and I figured, oh, a college boy... I remember coming into this great room and the man who was in charge said, “Well, take off your glasses and walk until you can see the top line of the chart.” And I walked quite a ways and he said, “All right, walk right out the door.” (laughs)
T: And you weren’t going to be an officer anywhere.

C: No. In the meantime, of course, I was registered for the draft in my own home.

T: In Faribault County.

(1, A, 139)

C: Yes. Once I had told them that I had made this gesture [attempting to enlist] they said, “You stay and we’ll arrange for you to stay in college, get your degree; you’ll be better for the Army and the country if you have that extra learning.” I’m not sure that was the case but that’s what I was told. So what Carleton, did for the first time in its entire history, was have a summer school. And it was an accelerated school. I think it was eight or ten weeks. It was hard work. We went every day all day long, and what the curriculum was, was physics and mathematics.

T: This was summer of 1942.

C: Summer of ‘42.

T: Was this a voluntary thing, this summer school?

C: Oh, yes. There were only eight or ten of us who went.

T: Were they all boys?

C: Oh, yes. All men. And all of us went into the service once we got our degree in December. We went in January of ’43.

T: So you knew this would accelerate your path into service?

C: Oh, yes.

T: Did you talk about this much with your folks? About the implications of war and you going off to the service?

C: My father had served in the First World War, my grandfathers, both of them, had served in the Civil War, and that kind of service was expected and in the family legends. All my buddies were going to be in the war. It was a thing you didn’t want to miss. Even that early we perceived it as being a “good” war.

T: So [the author] Studs Terkel was beaten by several decades here.

C: Yes (laughs).

(1, A, 162)
T: Now, do you recall some kind of social pressure from your cohort groups to be part of this?

C: No. It think it's just organic. There were many of us in the ‘30s who were, if not isolationist, were pacifist. We were skeptical. And if you were a bright undergraduate, which most of my contemporaries were, there was a great skepticism about going to war. We knew about the First World War and so forth. But the minute 7 December happened I just think that all of us... Everybody says that, and I think it’s really true. You don’t even have to talk about it.

T: How much discussion was there of the war at Carleton? Because you started there in ‘39 when the war in Europe began.

C: In 1939, a great deal of discussion. And arguments. Because I was precocious, you don't mind me saying that on this tape (laughs)? Somewhere, I have no idea, 1940, 1941, they selected some of the good political science students and history students—I was a history student—and several of the faculty, and we had a little talk about the war. This was long before we got in. I remember Professor Clark, a woman, professor of political science, was very impatient with me. She was an interventionist as so many of our faculty were. At the end of the conference I asked her some, what I thought were good, solid questions, and she said, “Mr. Chambers, you come from a flat country and you have a flat head.” (laughs). Which may have been true.

T: When you finally did join the service, did the reaction from your parents change at all? I mean, now it was for real. You actually had gone off to service.

C: No. They knew what war was. My mother was anxious the whole war long that someone would shoot me. They did shoot at me a couple of times but they weren’t that good.

T: And your father had been a World War I veteran.

C: Yes.

T: That did, or did not, influence the way he saw your potential involvement?

C: Well, what he wanted before I went off was to have his picture taken in an old Army uniform. He was a captain. He was a doctor then. And me. So that when I came back at the end of Basic Training he wanted me to have his picture in uniform and me in uniform. I think he was very proud of that. And so the continuity. I should say that my father was forty-four years old, forty-five when I was born, so he was more like a grandfather.

T: He was sixty-five or sixty-six by this time.
C: Yes.

T: What do you remember about Basic Training?

C: Damn little, except it was hot and the food was awful. It was in St. Petersburg, Florida. And it was on a golf course. We beat that golf course to sand dunes, I think, in two weeks. I remember only one--I think it was six, eight weeks Basic Training--I remember only one night off or one weekend. Friday night or something like that. I went into town and came back and what it was, was a tent city on a golf course. I mean it was acres and acres. I didn’t know where the hell my tent was. I had to wait until morning to find out.

T: They all looked the same, didn’t they?

C: Yes. But everybody’s at Basic Training and you learn, I guess, a little discipline. It’s not a pleasant experience and you figure something more important is going to happen soon. I was selected to go to weather and cryptography school at Grand Rapids, Michigan, as some of us were. I think that was by testing. I did well on the… it’s like the… what was it called? It’s an Army intelligence test. I did well and they figured I’d better do that. We had mechanical tests, and I was terrible on all of those. I think they knew I couldn’t load a gun.

T: But you were also a college graduate by now.

C: Oh, yes.

T: So they knew that as well.

C: Oh, sure. And a good record. I was a good student.

T: Now, being far away from home. Florida is a long way from Minnesota. Was this the first time you had come into contact with lots of people from different parts of the country? You had been away to college, but…

C: Yes. College. Of course, that was an elite in itself. A select group. I had traveled, you know, with family. I didn’t have those contacts. I was in the Scouts and we went camping in northern Minnesota, but that was with our own troop, so I don’t think so. I think that was my first major exposure and I think that for many folks… I was small town and not elite upper class in that sense, but there is a range of guys in any country, and I think when it’s democratized very fast…

T: How would you describe that range?

(1, A, 234)
C: In Basic Training it was a range you would find in any large public school in a big city. I mean as far as intelligence, or background, or family background, or ethnicity, whatever. Of course, there weren't any blacks.

Could I jump ahead for just one second? I was in the service, as you have recorded, and I, to my memory, I didn't see a black person in service until the war was over and we were coming home, in October, November 1945, and I got on a troop ship. We flew back part of the way and then they put us on a troop ship. I got on a troop ship, and there must have been four or five hundred African-Americans and I thought, "My God! They're out there! Why did I never see them?"

T: Something you remember. You did not see them when you were out there?

C: Did not see them, and I have made inquiries about that, subsequently. I think in a lot of airbases in the Western Pacific, on these rocks, that they were assigned to mess with officers, and I was not an officer; or they were in anti-aircraft at the edge of the field and had their own mess hall and had their own tents. Now, I may have seen them, you know, but I don't remember their presence. No interaction. It was white all the way through.

T: How about Mexican-Americans?

C: Nope.

T: So it really was a white experience.

C: Oh, yes.

T: Speaking of other groups, I'm wondering what did the service do to create, in your mind, an image of the "enemy"? And this could be Germans or Japanese.

C: You understand from what I said before, that I was well educated and a lot of that was self-education so that, for example, in the '20s my little Presbyterian church in Blue Earth helped sponsor a missionary family to China. They would come home every three or four years to touch base and raise a little money, I suppose. We had magic lanterns in the church basement. I thought, oh boy! I mean, China! I really got interested in that. I started reading on my own. So that when I got old enough, that is thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, I was reading ahead of my age, in part because my older sister. I was reading Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China*. I was reading about the Fourth and Eighth Route Armies. In 1937 Mao Tse Tung was one of my first real heroes. I mean now that's bizarre – nobody knew who Mao Tse Tung was.

T: I'm sure they didn't.

C: Never heard of him.

T: Yes.
C: So I was reading ahead, and didn’t say that my reading always took realistic paths, but I knew about the world. I had written my honors thesis at Carleton, and it was accepted in the fall of ’42, on “Basic Dynamics of Depression and War.” Now nobody would be allowed to do that anymore, but they knew that I was going to go in and what the hell, maybe I’d learn something. So I did a lot of reading. Background on the origins of war and its relationship to the rise of Nazism and it was a terrible... I mean, I would be embarrassed to have you read it as a German historian. It was pretty good. I knew all this stuff and I got to speak for the class when we marched away--there was a group of us who were there. I was Phi Beta Kappa and they let me give the Phi Beta Kappa address. It was about the war. About Germany and Japan. I’m not a regular guy. I knew a lot. A lot of it was wrong.

T: But let me ask you then, what did the service do either through speakers or through film to create an image?

C: Nothing. I was ahead of the curve. No images.

T: How about the rest of...

C: I knew from the beginning that the Nazis had to be destroyed and Imperial Japan had to be destroyed. I didn’t believe that in 1940.

T: How did the service deal with other people who weren’t, shall we say, so well educated?

C: They didn’t have to. Any propaganda, that’s just foreign to my experience. And when we got to Grand Rapids, into the school which was a basic weather school and then you learned cryptography there and then you... They were all guys like me.

T: College grad types?

C: Yes. Well, some of them hadn’t got that far but they were... they had high I.Q.s. They had good experience, educational experience in their background, and I don’t remember anything from anybody about the political essence of the war.

(1, A, 292)

T: So in a sense, it was either assumed that you knew that...

C: I don’t know.

T: Or they didn’t care to create...
C: I don’t know. I don’t know. It was a question that never occurred to me. They’d call us together once in a while for “how to take care of yourself prophylactically,” but most of us knew that too.

(both laugh)

T: So it was a hands on training, not literally, but figuratively, as far as how to take care of yourself in the real world.

C: Yes.

T: How much different was the training in Grand Rapids from what you had in St. Petersburg?

C: It was all schooling from eight o’clock in the morning until seven o’clock at night with time out for gymnastics and running and they had us play king of the hills. You know, half of the crew would be at the bottom and have to run up and we’d have to push them back. The crew I was with was not very interested in that. I think there was an assumption, once I got to this special training course, we weren’t going to be combat soldiers.

T: Did you kind of know that already?

C: Oh, yes. We were being trained for a specific job in the Air Corps. We weren’t going to be infantry. We weren’t going to be artillery. None of those things. When we got to Hawaii to the staging area, when I went overseas in the early summer of ’44, they had week’s training course for everybody going into the tropics. About snakes and if you get shot down where you could find food and all of that. Here we were, this strange bunch of fellows who were all intellectuals. The people who ran it, I’m making it up, they may have been Marines or they may have been Army, but they saw us coming and they said, “What the hell, we’ll take the week off.” So we had a week’s vacation in the wonderful, beautiful, idyllic little spot in Hawaii with waterfalls and pools and we just had a good time for a week.

T: Boy!

C: So you see, I’m telling a story that you won’t hear much.

T: Before you actually went over to the Pacific, you knew in a sense that your rear end was going to be safer than a lot of other guys.

C: Oh, yes. Now when I got there, groups such as we were--they had no need for us until they got an airfield. You had to have the island reasonably well secured before you could go to the airfield. But there was always still nonsense still going on. I remember in Saipan a lot of the poor Japanese soldiers that disappeared into caves, and how they lived I don’t know. I was on Saipan by now and one of these poor
skinny fellows comes out and he has a grenade. Talk about suicide bombers. He’d let this thing off and he was killed and a couple other people got a little shrapnel. When we were on Saipan and Guam, the Japanese were still coming down from Iwo Jima before we captured it. That was the main reason we got it, because they were intercepting our planes. They came down and sprayed some bombs for quite a while. There were a couple of close calls but I was not in combat. I was shot at. I spent some nights in a foxhole but it was a different experience.

T: You mentioned that the Army, the service, did nothing to create an image of the Japanese.

C: Not in my mind.

T: What image of the Japanese did you acquire while you were overseas? What kind of people were they?

C: We increasingly learned from the combat soldiers who did talk with them, I mean there was a mingling, and from our pilots who flew, many of whom were shot down and so forth, we saw an increasing fanaticism of the Japanese armed forces--whatever they were, Navy, Air Corps. Toward the end, of course, we had the kamikazes and there were many bad battles. Guadalcanal was dreadful, and New Guinea was terrible. I think if one were to look it up, maybe you know as a military historian, but I think Iwo Jima and Okinawa, the casualty rates were as high as in any battle.

T: Correct.

C: We knew that. I had friends who were killed on Iwo Jima. That was a wipeout. If you’re just three hours from Iwo Jima by airplane, you know this. We kept track of those battles. It’s interesting that we kept track less of MacArthur because he was coming the south, and we were with Nimitz going west into the western Pacific and the Marianas. What we knew was the 27th Army Division in Saipan and the troubles they had, and the trouble the 1st Marine had on Iwo Jima. Before my buddy and I volunteered to go onto Okinawa, because we got bored fiddling around in the Marianas, we knew what that battle was. Oh, yes. It came direct. It wasn’t through newspapers or radio. You just knew.

T: Now you say you volunteered to go to Okinawa.

C: Yes.

T: Well, if you heard about what it was like, what prompted your volunteering?

C: Well, it’s an old Army term that I hope some people have used: to chicken shit? Spit and polish? You stayed on Saipan, Tinian, and Guam long enough, and life settles down and then you have to behave better, and your uniform has to be
beautiful, and there’s more stuff that you have to do, and stand when the flag goes up in the evening, and yeah, you just get tired of it. It was fun. Let’s go on. It’s not like we were volunteering to land on the beaches.

T: Right. Did you feel you were missing out on something by being rear echelon like that?

C: It was just a personal thing. It was action and why not? Go and see how things are somewhere else.

T: Was that something that was...

C: And I think our gang was a lot of people. You just go and do this work all the time. What the hell. Let’s get out.

T: What about the fear of the causes of mortality? As a person who’s twenty-three, twenty-four years old.

C: Well, you’ve heard this term from a hundred other people: that if a bullet’s got your name on it, you can’t do anything about it. It’s kind of a fatalism. But you also know that you aren’t a combat soldier--in Vietnam it would be different--but if you’re not a combat soldier, you might get hit by shrapnel in a bomb or something like that, but your chances are pretty good. Except you see at the very end, at Okinawa, before the war was over, everybody there... I talked to the Roseville Kiwanis about this and many came up afterwards. We all knew what our orders were: to invade the homeland of Japan. We knew that was bad news for us. I must have shared some of that. I wasn’t going to land in Japan any more than I landed in Okinawa, but it was not going to be a pleasant affair.

T: Did the prospect of the campaign to invade the Japanese home islands, did that scare you more in a way, even though you were not a frontline soldier?

C: It was scary. You’re twenty-two and you’ve gone through all this stuff, and your buddies are with you, and you hope you don’t have to do it but I never saw... I take that back. We had one fellow who, in our group, who psyched out and really got scared. He got scared in the sense that he could see what was... I think we were on Guam then. All the island was being paved over. It’s all one damn rock anyhow. All these people were here and all these jeeps and all these airplanes. They were using up the oxygen. And he got scared that the oxygen was going to run out. And we said: Why don’t you go see the chaplain? He went to see the chaplain. He was out of there. We never saw him again.

T: That was it? Really?

C: Sent home. You could play that game. He was not dumb.
End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 384.

C: But I don’t think that the unit I was with... Now if we’d been flying B-29s, then the sense of mortality would have been quite different. Of course. It was. Particularly in... When do you want me to get to that, the bombing of Japan?

T: In a moment. Did you know people who were crew members on the B-29s?

C: None personally. Because we were on an airfield, one knew them. You know they would come in. But they were unto themselves. They had a strong... Their tasks and their psychology were quite different from ours. But yes, they’d come into the intelligence office and get the most recent weather, and talk like that. I knew none of them personally.

T: Your job in weather and cryptography, can you describe just exactly what it was that you did?

C: What we did was do the basic work from basic weather data that is collected wherever we could get signals, so that the B-29s would know what the weather was they were flying into and out of.

    The date is very uncertain, but I’m guessing winter of ’45, February or March, something like that, we were taken into a tent and [told] now we’re into top secret stuff. The Soviets are going to send us weather signals from Siberia. The weather systems go in the northern hemisphere like they do here in Minnesota, from Siberia to Japan down to where we were. We could get the Siberian and eastern Russian signals. You could piece it together and know better what the weather was going to be.

T: Over Japan where the planes were flying.

C: Flying now. Someone brought us in. It was oo-oo [secretive]... We had no one to talk to. We couldn’t share the secret. Here were the code books the Soviets gave to us. It was all in numbers. You didn’t have words. And we were trained in how they were going to change maybe daily, maybe weekly, I don’t know, the system they were using. Then we’d have different books, or you’d have to change to another page in the book. It was complicated. We worked on that for about six weeks. The signals would come through. We never were able to get the signals right. Now, we were dumb maybe, or we had the wrong books, or the Soviets weren’t doing it right at the other end. We had no idea. I’m guessing. It was probably six or seven weeks we were trying to break that. And it wasn’t breaking it because they had given us these code books.

T: There were no Soviet liaisons there.

C: No. It was all done somewhere else by people higher up than we were. Just books...
T: And figured it out.

(1, B, 449)

C: But it didn’t work. Okay, this is to me an interesting story; I’ve never read about it. One of our officers in this unit was a Lieutenant Werthen. I’d been on the troop ship with him for forty days and forty nights, just like [the biblical story of] Noah, going off to Saipan. I got to know him pretty well. He got the bright idea toward the end of the war, that is in the late winter, well, January, February, March of 1945, that the Japanese Navy was largely gone. And if we could get submarines, American submarines out of Guam and Agana, and let them go up close to the Japanese coast, surface, take a basic reading of pressure and clouds and humidity and so forth, send it back, we could decipher it, and then we would have something very close to Japan. At this point my closest friend, Bud James from Michigan, and I were chosen to go to the submarine base in Agana, Guam, to teach the submarine crew how to do this and how to send radio signals--that would be so that we could decipher them.

T: So they’d have weather equipment that they would surface, take readings, radio back to you.

C: Yes. And we spent about two or three weeks over there training them to do that and that was fun because, of course, submarines... We hadn’t seen fresh food for a long time. They had ice cream, and they had fresh lettuce, and they had fresh lemons for lemonade, I mean...

T: They ate better than you did.

C: It was fun, and at the end of the short course we had there, the seminar, they said, “You guys did okay. Would you like to go down?” I tell you, soldiers are dumb. Somebody says you want to try something new? Yes. That would be kind of fun, right? At the submarine base they would come back and they would repair whatever had to be done, and then they would take the submarine down and turn everything off, and then they would work the rudders by hand to see if it could be heard on the surface. I didn’t know they were going to do that. So Norm and I went down.

T: You went down in the sub?

C: In the Marianas Trench. I don’t think we got all the way down. I don’t know how deep we were. That was scary.

T: Really?

C: It was like this. You know it was closed in thing. And then we had to walk, and we had to sit down because we were just observers, and everybody took their shoes
off so you would walk in your cotton feet, and they would give signals by hand and someone would go down and run a rudder by hand. Oh, god, that was scary. I was so glad I wasn’t in the submarines.

T: Really. One trip was enough.

C: Oooo! That was a great treat for us.

T: Yes. Sure.

C: Well, but Lieutenant Werthen, you see, it’s an old American thought that Americans are pretty creative and it’s not giving orders all the way down, right. The lieutenant has a bright idea—which Werthen did—they let him go ahead with it. And I think that this may have been just about the time of the firebombing of Tokyo, which was in March of 1945. I think that those signals were beginning to come in to us, because the Siberian thing didn’t work out.

T: Right.

(1, B, 506)

C: So that those planes were coming in low. And we saw them coming back, of course, with scorches on their wings—on the bottom. Later I went to—that’s another story—I went to Tokyo and saw… I think the estimates… We knew that we were… because we had pictures. We had access to photography.

T: You had photos….

C: I wasn’t doing it.

T: But you could seem them anyway.

C: Yes. The estimate we were making then was eighty to a hundred thousand civilian casualties in Tokyo in that week. Wasn’t that the week that…

T: Yes. A couple, several had nights between…

C: Wow, that’s a lot of folks.

T: When you saw information like that, or evidence, how did that make you feel? Civilian casualties like that. Was that something difficult to take or not?

C: I think in retrospect, probably I should have felt more deeply, but by that time we knew the kamikazes—what they were doing. We knew what… The battle for Okinawa had just started at Easter.
T: April 1.

C: Yes. In 1945. When that news began to come back, and then the word comes down all through the system here that it’s going to be a long war and we’re going to invade Japan, anything that hurried that along, that was fine. And after all, in a sense, we were there. We were experiencing it. We were in the midst of it. As I say, sometimes we were shot at. Not often. Yet there was a feeling on the part of the buddies I was with, of observing. Because that’s what we were doing. We were observing. And facilitating. But if I ever were a bomber, I’m quite sure that you would get... You probably have different stories from people who were bombing.

T: Yes.

C: Another trip I took, I met a fellow from Blue Earth [Minnesota]. He was captain of the basketball team. I sat on the end of the bench. By chance I found him. It may have been in Guam, I don’t know. He was just doing patrol. And he said, “You want to come with me?” Yes, sure. So I took off and we spent about twelve hours looking for submarines or looking for Japanese ships and so forth.

T: What kind of plane?

C: It must have been a B-24. I never was in a B-29. Although that’s what we were servicing.

T: So you had one experience in a submarine below the water, one experience in an airplane, and most of your time spent on the ground.

C: Yes. And you see, I never pulled a trigger. We had no guns.

T: No guns. So your experience really was markedly different.

C: Yes.

T: The office you worked in, Clarke, how many people did the same kind of work you were doing?

C: Oh, off and on, thirty or forty.

T: All Army Air Corps people?

C: Yes. I worked at the atomic bomb [but we will get to that story later in this interview]. I’ve got another story to hold on to. There’s no problem with security. You see, and this is one of the differences that I’ve talked with over the years--my buddies who were in Europe and friends who were there. On the islands, that is, the Marianas chiefly I’m talking about now, there was nowhere to go. There were no women. There were no towns. There was no entertainment. There was nothing.
Now I think that the psychology of being a soldier, whether you were a combat soldier or not, was quite different if you were based in England with the 8th Air Force, okay. Every three or four weeks you could go to town. You had girlfriends. You got a bike and you went down to the village and you saw women. I saw a Red Cross woman worker about two hundred feet down there. That's the only woman I ever saw.

T: No kidding.

C: Well, I mean, there were natives. But no access there at all. So, I've talked with so many of my generation about that. I think life without women, for young men who were eighteen to twenty-two, was quite different from soldiers who are in France or England or what have you, even if they're combat soldiers. It's a different... or Italy or whatever. It was quite a different experience. My estimation was... I was an enlisted man, so we had no access to alcohol. They gave us cheap three point two percent (3.2%) beer once in a while. If we behaved well. The slightest occasion would lead to violence, even with this group I'm describing here. Against each other. A lot of fist fights.

T: No kidding. You'd think that with...

C: I think it's the lack of women.

T: Really? Because the stress among your working group was certainly less than you might consider frontline soldiers.

C: Oh, yes. Absolutely. And I can't account for how they behaved. But I just think there was... of course, they had their jobs. They had to stay. If you're flying a B-29 or you're on a crew with ten or twelve of you in a B-29 that's pretty confining and it's a pretty closed group.

T: Boy, I'll say. Yes.

C: I won't say this happened every... twice a week or something. But the closeness to violence of young men under those conditions of confinement... it was a real learning thing for me.

T: And it wasn't alcohol consumption you said.

C: Well, we had three point two beer and that doesn't help much.

(1, B, 588)

T: That was what was officially available. Was alcohol available that wasn't...
C: Some of the dummies got coconuts and you’d poke out the eyes and you’d put down yeast and raisins and you get a drink that made you deadly ill. I never touched that. I mean, you know, we didn’t fool with that. But it was done. It was legend. Everybody knew you get a coconut and then you go see the cookie and get some raisins and yeast. That was terrible. But there was that resort. But I think more often, it was you live eight in a tent and it’s a hundred and two degrees and ninety-five degrees humidity. It’s not pleasant living.

T: So the weather was an impacting factor for how people lived and got along with each other?

C: Well, that’s the way we lived. That’s right. The guys in my tent...

T: How many in your tent, by the way?

C: It was eight or ten. It was cramped quarters. And it was hot.

T: A hundred degrees. That sounds terrible.

C: Yes. And it was humid. Twelve degrees north, eight degrees north, something like that.

T: Very close to the equator.

C: Yes. But you see, soldiers, even soldiers like us, figured we know there’s some lumber. We saw some come in and we rigged up poles and we build an attic so that the heat from the canvas wouldn’t come down directly. We had a wooden ceiling.

T: Did it help at all?

C: Oh, sure. What helped most was psychologically we beat the system. We stole the lumber and got plywood or whatever and put it up and then we were more comfortable. We beat the system.

T: Was that important? To beat the system.

C: Oh, you’re damn right.

T: Why is that?

C: Because it’s hierarchical and no soldier likes anybody above him.

T: But that’s the name of the game in the service. There’s always someone above you.
C: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And enlisted men don't like that at all. I remember one Christmas my wife had sent a silly little Red Cross record, a little vinyl record. Christmas greetings from your bride. Oooo! Where would I take it? I was trying to find a Red Cross tent so I could find somewhere I could play it, and I was walking along in a daze and it was hot. It was five o’clock I imagine, or six, and there was retreat. By that time, they did retreat over microphones. Great blackers, so they would play retreat. I didn’t hear it, and this lieutenant, or whatever, he was fanning in a bath cloth, I mean a towel, and his protected place, roof over him, “Soldier, stand at attention!” Obviously that moment meant something to me. I was really angry. Really angry. But he’s… So you see, it’s class warfare that’s going on here.

T: Was that pretty prevalent, perceived “us versus them”?

C: Oh, yes. Our only entertainment was movies, and when the Japanese came down we’d have to douse it and go back to our foxholes, but see this is the Navy… the Navy is running things administratively. Even though we’re Army and so forth, the Navy is in charge. There was some fellow called Commander Brown. Nobody knew him. Nobody ever saw him. We’d all get out and sit on these hard benches, and usually it was raining. We’d pull our slickers over our heads and all lined up for this wonderful show and someone over in that corner would shout, “What’s the color of horseshit?” And everybody would cry out, “Brown! Brown! Brown!” for Commander Brown, and the Shore Patrol [the Navy police] would run up and down with a flashlight trying to see who was starting this anarchy. They never did. That’s the kind of nonsense thing.

(1, B, 645)

T: Regardless of how nice this person was or wasn’t.

C: You had no idea. Never saw him. The place was well run. It’s just that… it’s just awful being out there. Right. And someone else has got it better. They were seeing the Red Cross ladies, we thought.

T: And all you can do is think it’s true, right?

C: Yes. It was kind of jokeful, I mean it let out more steam… but it was comic to see these shore patrolmen running up and down with flashlights trying to stop it. You can’t stop it. Eight hundred guys.

T: Sure.

C: That’s a dumb story.

T: Let me switch to a slightly different topic then. How did you stay in touch with family and loved ones back home when you were in the Pacific?
C: I would imagine with my bride, who is in the next room, that we corresponded two or three times a week and the mail, once you get located--it would pile up if you moved. With my parents I wrote less often, and they less often to me. We numbered our letters so that we knew if something had been interrupted. I have at the State Historical Society that many letters with my parents (holds hands two feet apart). And with my bride it’s right over there in the closet. She won’t let me give it to the State Historical Society. It’s at least triple that amount. Hundreds of letters. In preparation for this interview, I went back and looked at some of them, and we’ll get to that I hope. You asked me what was in those letters. I wanted to nail something down exactly. But, yes, we corresponded. I was not able, because I was on the move, to save her letters to the same degree. Some I did. But she kept everyone. So that’s it a whole narrative of everything I’ve told you.

T: How much could you say in all those letters?

C: Well, there weren’t any secrets. You talk about life and how nice it would be to be home, and how you love each other.

T: Would you say you waxed philosophic in those letters?

C: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. About the end of the war and what we would do, and how we would reconstruct the world. Oh, yes, all that.

T: Were you an idealist already?

C: Oh, I wouldn’t call it an idealist.

T: Reconstructing the world sounds pretty idealistic.

C: (laughing) No, they never asked me. But, yes, there’s this talk about war and talk about peace and talk about reconstruction when the war is over and how long it’s going... yes, we couldn’t divulge any secrets, but I’d had no secrets I wanted to divulge anyhow. We were censored and I don’t... I was looking at some of these letters and there isn’t a black mark on any of them.

T: Does that indicate self-censorship on your part as you were writing?

C: I don’t think so. I moved to Okinawa I think in June, late June, something like that. Toward the end. From Tinian. So I left before the Enola Gay came with the bomb. But there was a colonel in our unit. I never knew him personally. He was out of my sight, but we all know what officers do. And Colonel Sabode was in late July laying bets with his fellow officers that the war in Japan would be over by September. Now he’s the only one who knew that that bomb was coming. He was the ONLY one. There wasn’t a one of us in that I call it intelligence, but it really was weather cryptography, there wasn’t one of us that knew anything about it. Nothing. So we
had nothing to share, but I have often wondered whether the colonel ever collected his bets.

T: Yes.

C: With his fellow officers. But you see, that’s legend. That’s gossip. That’s scuttlebutt. I have no idea. That’s the end of the story.

T: Is gossip an important thing in the service?

(1, B, 690)

C: Oh, yes. You kept track of how things are going, and that’s one of the reasons, if you hear that things are better in Guam or something, why you can kind of fiddle around. You can’t decide your own life, but in a small outfit people move around. I knew Lieutenant Werthen, and he was helpful in various things. I think he was the one that selected me to go to the submarines, so yes, you gotta keep up with how things are going.

T: In this cryptography work and weather work, how closely did you feel that you were really contributing to the war effort? It seems like abstract work you were doing.

C: Oh, yes. Well, it wouldn’t be the same as being a grunt. I told you I was... I’m ahead of a lot of curves. I mean if I was reading Mao Tse Tung when I was fifteen, you know, there were a lot of things that were going on up here and I wasn’t yet a scholar, but I knew I was going to go to a Ph.D. program. I knew I was going to be a scholar and an historian. It gives a person a certain remove. I’m not saying this is common with lots of people, but how early did you train yourself to objectify, to stand and watch and observe? And while you are participating, of course we were participating in it then.

T: Did you find yourself looking around and sort of observing in a detached sense.

C: Well, of course. That’s personal. That’s not the Army. I am a queer duck. I mean anybody who’s a scholar, there’s something wrong with them, right? I mean in that sense (laughs).

T: I’ve heard that before (laughs).

C: Yes. But I mean that I had a fully participating life when I was here in the ‘60s and ‘70s. I was fully participating as a citizen and so on and so forth. And in the ‘30s certainly was, and in the war I was, but there’s always that certain remove. Certain skepticisms.

T: Just standing back and able to see the page and know you’re on it.
C: Yes. I'm not saying it's well done and I would be embarrassed by a lot of my letters but...

T: You were doing it.

C: It's different.

T: Are there any observations or memories that remained with you afterwards that you thought were sufficiently memorable, poignant, important, in a sense? Things that you observed or ideas you had when you were out there?

C: This is very personal and that's what you want me to be. There's this ambivalence in every scholar's life. I wasn't yet a scholar but I was already...

T: You felt yourself to be one later.

C: That's right. And there's always tension between participating and observing. Right? And I had lots of friends and we had good times and we had bad times, but there was often a kind of distance and not only with myself but others who were part of this group. We were a different bunch. See this is not the war that a lot of people experienced.

T: That's right.

C: But we were right there and it was not... there were times of danger and times of boredom. (pauses five seconds) But we knew nothing about the bomb. But we did know and we say things that turn you, even then I suppose there's a capacity for a certain moral ambiguity in my mind... I think the first really serious one would have been the firebombing of Tokyo [in March 1945], because they knew that was, that was a hell of a lot of folks. Of course they had done it at Dresden [in February 1945]. They did it at Hamburg. The Germans did it in England. We all knew... not all of us, but I knew the meaning of it.

T: You mentioned you saw these planes coming back with scorched wings. In a sense, it's right here in front of you.

C: Yes. And I think it was more serious with the [Atomic] Bomb. There was an enormous relief that the war was over and we were going home, and we all knew. Although my role had been noncombat, you know, it was still getting into that situation that, boy, that was... And yet I think it may have been the firebombing more, because I observed that. I had a closer sense of it. But there is a kind of moral ambiguity that sets in, and I don't want to exaggerate it. It would be a temptation to say that I had this tension, but certainly it was there, and I think it would have been the firebombing of Tokyo that did it. But maybe that's because just before I started
my way home I got to Tokyo for two weeks... two days. I took two days to see that devastation.

T: Talk about that.

C: We were in Okinawa by then and I was going to look up the exact date. It may have been three or four days. Maybe you know the typhoon? Late August?

T: Yes. I read about that.

C: You don’t know, was it the twentieth? It was after Hiroshima.

T: Yes.

C: Hiroshima was August 6 and Nagasaki was August 9. It was after that. And on Okinawa it blew us away. The group I was with, the Okinawans have not burial mounds, but mounds that are very well protected and a very small entrance. It’s a womb and a birth canal. And you go inside. That’s where they put the ashes of their ancestors. It’s a little ledge all the way around. Perfect for a typhoon. Somehow... So we found one of these and got in. I’m sure we had a flashlight, but it was dark and spooky and absolutely still. I mean this whole typhoon raged for at least a day and a half, maybe longer, and when we came out there wasn’t anything left. Our tents were gone. Everything was gone. There was chaos. The war was over. Everybody knew there was no point in doing much. We still went to work, but I don’t know what work we did. There was work to do. We had to keep GIs busy. I walked down to Buckner Bay to see the ships that had piled up and the boats, landing craft that had been piled up by that typhoon. That was quite a sight.

T: Yes.

C: There was a Carleton buddy...

**End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.**

C: He was not only a classmate; we were very close friends. I had ten or fifteen guys I was very close to at Carleton and he was one of them. He had been in the landing at Normandy in a landing craft and, having done some other tours, they flew him all the way over to Okinawa (**). I don’t know how many (**) but he got his feet wet twice. I didn’t know where he was. So we embraced. Now it’s the end of August. The typhoon was over. The war is over. What are you going to do? He said, “I’m just loafing around here. I haven’t got a ship and I haven’t got anything. I hear that you can fly up [to Japan]. Now you’ve got contacts that you can fly up to Japan. Why don’t we do that?” I said, “Well, let’s see Lieutenant Werthen.”

T: It was that easy?
C: It was with him. He was very flexible. He was only (**). Very bright guy. Very nice guy. We said, “Gee, we heard folks were hitchhiking up to Atsugi Airport outside of Yokohama, and going on to Tokyo. Can you fix us up?” “Oh, yes,” he says, “I’ve got a packet of weather stuff here that they need up there at Atsugi, and you can be the carrier.” So that gave me some cover. Now my buddy, who was a lieutenant JG [junior grade] in the Navy, had no such cover, but nobody knew where he was. I mean it really was anarchy. Chaos. Nobody knew where anybody was. So we went. Lieutenant Werthen said, “You can go talk with somebody.” And sure enough there was a C-54 [four engine transport plane] going up. We were the only people on the plane and the only stuff on the plane. I don’t know why it went up there.

T: It was empty except for...

C: Yes. Well, that’s my memory. I have very... and I’ve got the letter in there. Ten page letter I wrote when I got back from this, so I was checking the facts. The [letter is dated] 12 September. So we flew up and we got to Atsugi and it was late in the afternoon. We said, “Can we go up to mess?” They said sure. They said that the Air Force is already there operating this thing. It was a Japanese airport. One of the officers said, “You guys may be interested. This whole air support system is also one hundred feet underground. Do you want to go down?” Sure! So we went down ladders and steps and sure enough, there were barracks, offices, mess, everything. All underground. Really secure. We’d heard that the Japanese were dug in. I hadn’t realized... This whole airfield was--except for taking off, the whole thing was underground. Duplicated what was above.

T: Did you meet any or encounter any Japanese while you were there?

C: Well, that was the night. We had dinner and we went down and explored this funny thing and I was (**). The next morning I said, how do we get to town? We got a truck that was going to Yokohama, and then you get a suburban train and you go into Tokyo. That was fine. We went in. By the time we got on that train it was terribly crowded and my letter, I just reread it, said that the older folks, particularly the women, averted their eyes from us. Others were very curious about who we were because they hadn’t seen many soldiers. The [US Army’s] First Cavalry [a mechanized unit] had just gotten there.

T: 12 September you said.

C: 12 September. The peace was signed on the second. That’s just ten days after that. I have a hard time separating legend from reality except my letter shows that this if this is really real, that home guard and regular Army based in the home island were bringing in their weapons and stacking them on the train stations. We saw these soldiers. We were right ten feet from them. They had their arms with them. They were stony faced. They did that and they would then go away. We saw all the
soldiers doing that. Now that’s a scary... I mean, what were we doing? I mean the chance for... of course, kids were very curious.

(2, A, 93)

T: Were you armed?

C: We both carried 45 pistols. The only time I ever had a... I couldn’t have shot it. It was no good at all.

T: The first time you’ve mentioned a gun.

C: Yes. Never had one. But my friend in the Navy lent me one and he had one too (laughs). This is absurd, and it also is an indication of why they let men age eighteen to twenty-two be soldiers. They have no goddamned sense.

T: It sounds like a surrealistic image you’re painting here.

C: It is. And I would say it was surrealism, except I went back this morning and looked at that letter. I may have doctored... but I think not. I think this is pretty good reporting. So we took the train in and got off and you could always find someone who spoke English. Kind of. So we wanted to go to the Ginza so we could buy souvenirs for—we had been married by the end of the war—we were going to send souvenirs back to our brides. So we got into the Ginza and went up in the second or third floor and I bought a little obi and a little lacquer box.

T: It was open for business.

C: Yes. It wasn’t very well supplied and there were lots of little lady clerks scurrying around, but they tried to be helpful and we changed our money somewhere. I don’t remember. So that we did that. Then we got out and we thought we wanted to go to the Emperor’s Palace. My buddy later sent me a Xerox of the letter he’d sent his bride, so I have two letters and it’s basically the same story. We tried to persuade someone how do you get to the Emperor’s Palace? I don’t know, but somehow we got there. Someone went out and said go and pointed... What we had in mind of course, was paying our respects. We were going to spit in the moat. A gesture of our true feelings. We got there and there was a shifting group of hundreds of Japanese... old, middle aged, young, women, men... all of whom were standing quietly, often the male taking the hat off and looking across the moat toward the Palace. Absolute silence. Boy, that was... I hadn’t expected that. He hadn’t either.

T: What did you make of that?

C: We weren’t about to go spitting in the moat, I can tell you that. You see, what you make of it is what you learn later. That the decision to keep the Emperor was the thing that kept the order in that whole transition. Historians are right. They aren’t
always right about everything. But they must have been right about that. And for the soldiers to bring in their small arms, to be sure, carbines and so forth, and stack them in our presence. They’re not... there were only two soldiers. All alone. I didn’t see anyone from the 1st Cavalry.

T: You were the only two Americans around.

C: We saw some other soldiers because we went... I think we exchanged our money at Frank Lloyd Wright’s hotel.

T: Which was still standing.

C: Yes. Yes. And I think that probably some said, well that’s where we’re going to have headquarters. Why don’t you go change your money, and I think that’s what probably happened. So we saw some other soldiers. Now if it had been the 1st Cav... I had a letter from Lieutenant Werthen saying I was carrying this message up there, but that wasn’t a very official looking document. I mean in a sense we were implicitly A.W.O.L. No one had ordered us there. Lieutenant Werthen had made it possible for me to go.

(2, A, 151)

T: So if someone had pushed you on it, they could have made trouble for you.

C: Oh, I just think that if it had been the 1st Cav, we would have been court-martialed.

T: Really?

C: I don’t know. I’m just making it up. I haven’t any idea but... this train was still running. Now this is only three weeks after bomb. The resentment must have been enormous.

T: Could you feel that?

C: No. Well, women averted their eyes. I mean, I did say that in a letter and so did my buddy. But others were eager to engage us and show us the way to the Palace. And show us the way to the Ginza.

T: So you didn’t feel threatened. I don’t hear you saying that.

C: I should have felt threatened. I should have felt threatened from other American soldiers. But we had no idea what the Japanese would do. And what the history books write is perfectly true. It was not... it was not rushing out like this, although little kids were going like that. They learned that already. I mean, I’m flashing the V sign. We had no gum. We had no candy with us. I mean it was just a lark. We just were going up there. But the thing that lingers most in my mind is these people, the
shifting population. They would come and go. We stayed there for an hour or more...

T: Watching them.

C: And we were the only soldiers there. The only Americans there. And no one jostled us. No one, as I recall, I didn’t record it in my letter, it was just subdued, absolutely quiet. Of course, I’ve read that later as a metaphor of what happened when [General Douglas] MacArthur came in and he told the Emperor what to do and took off. But to my mind that was the dumbest thing I ever did in my life. In a state of alert.

So then at the end of the day we find our way back to the suburban train and went out to Atsugi Air Field and went up and said anybody flying back to Okinawa? Yes. We got on another plane. Went back to Okinawa. And got there. Neither of us had been missed. They had no idea. But now the word gets out. I mean, we weren’t the only ones who did this. Like this buddy of mine, we saw him when we were out there for a long time together and we went to the submarine together and so forth. He was very close. Of course he thought it was a wonderful story. He could do it himself. And he did. A week later, a couple days later, he went up and did the same thing, except rather than going to the Palace he went into a whorehouse. He came back with a venereal disease.

T: So he brought a souvenir back with him.

C: Right. So you know, that’s just an absurd story.

T: Yes.

C: And I’ve never heard anybody else tell it. I mean, how many people did this? No one I ever knew except my buddy and I, and we stayed together. I mean, the Navy fellow. We kept in touch until he died a year and a half ago. We stayed in touch.

T: Now you did encounter people in Japan. Did you also encounter people on Okinawa? Native inhabitants.

C: See, by the time I got there the war was over, and then the typhoons came. It was chaos, all right. But, yes, there were Okinawan women who came in to do the laundry. The only people I saw.

T: What did you make of them or their situation?

C: Well, you know, at that point we didn’t care much. The war was over, and there... we saw some folks on Guam. Natives. Guamese. But had no regular contact with them, so that that relationship again was a very distant one. Now I think some people who stayed on Okinawa had closer relationships right away, particularly with the laundry girls. But by the time that I got to Okinawa, the whole deal was
over. My letters in August would indicate they were just "how many points have you got" and when we'd get home, and in fact, I got home earlier than I should have because there wasn't anything to do.

T: Intelligence and cryptography, you were really done.

C: Yes. You had to have people there because the Air Force needed, everybody needed it, but how many folks were out there, I don't know. In Okinawa at that time or in the western Pacific. I don't know. I remember being in the, it was either Tinian or Guam, and the Navy flew people up to from the Philippines. This is after Leyte Gulf and the reoccupation [of the Philippines]. I'd leave and watch the airplanes if I wasn't duty. Something to do. A lot of the young Filipinos, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen I'm guessing, skinny... but speak English. One of them came off the plane and he was there to be a mess boy and he spotted me and a couple others and his eyes brightened and he said, "How are the gooks up here?" Meaning: how are the women? He had picked up in the Philippines this word "gook" and then would apply it himself to native women, not Filipino. So there were little things like that. But we had no contact with that group, or with the Okinawese, or the Guamese. Very, very little. Some officers had their laundry done and perhaps more. I don't know.

T: You mentioned keeping people busy. Does that suggest that boredom was a problem?

(2, A, 232)

C: Oh, yes.

T: Was this more pronounced after the war was over, or also while it was on?

C: Once the war was over it was just a lot of excitement to get home. So there was no boredom then. But as I've described this, the people in our unit, I suppose there were eighty, one hundred folks all together, we played a lot of chess. Soldiers?

T: You were a different kind of group, weren't you?

C: Played bridge. Played a lot of chess. Then there was a certain type of guys that played poker. Some of us played poker. But it was really bizarre to think of being in Guam playing chess.

T: So you had time to kill, didn't you?

C: Well, there were three shifts, eight hours each, and the shifts were rotated every week, so you were day, swing, graveyard. So you had lots of time to kill. I read a lot. I wrote a lot. Played chess, played bridge, talked. The story is quite different.

T: It is quite different. It is quite different.
C: But now I raised this Hiroshima thing with the [people at the Kiwanis Club, the] Kiwanians. They asked me to come and talk about how wars end. I said, well, as an historian I went back to Carthage and a few other places. Thirty Years War, which I guess never did end, just petered out. That was a bang-up end for Japan, more so than V-E [Day in Europe in May 1945]. I mean that [in Europe] was a more cluttered kind of...

T: It really was an end in Japan.

C: It was an end. And it was an end... fortunately folks my age came up and said, I was there or I was, you know... what a relief. I say, yes, that’s true, but now looking back upon it and the fear of these weapons that Iraq has, everybody’s got, right... and I just wonder in the American psyche how much of it... I rarely hear it said on TV or in newspapers or letters to the editor, that we had the bomb and we used it twice. It’s not said... sometimes in a letter to the editor. But this is not part of what the conversation is now, but I just wonder at some depth, or maybe I’m just speaking as a scholar, that we know about [the Allied fire bombing of] Dresden [in February 1945], we know about [the Allied fire bombing of] Hamburg [in 1943], we know about [the German bombing of] Guernica [during the Spanish Civil War], and we know about Tokyo. We had these weapons of massive destruction and we used them. At a certain place I’m glad they did. It brought the war to a... just a bang-up conclusion.

Now as an historian you would know also that... I used to give a lecture on the dropping of the bomb in American history, in my class here at the University. I made a point of changing about a third of my lectures every year, on whatever the subject was. The Jackson administration, or what have you. You read something new and you figure it would be more fun. I re-did the Hiroshima thing every year. And I hit those notes so I have a sense that, you know, you learn with the enormous literature that came out on Hiroshima starting in the 1950s when I was teaching the sophomore survey. When I began to change my mind about it, I remember I picked up that at Yalta, Stalin, the Russians, agreed to come into the war in Asia ninety days after V-E Day, which was May 8. And sure enough, they came in.

T: They did. With a vengeance.

C: And you see, and then of course, there’s a whole school of historiography that says Truman knew that and he wanted to end the war before the Russians got...

T: Alperovitz’s book, Atomic Diplomacy for example.

C: So we think that’s pretty complicated if you’re an historian. Now how much I read back then, you see... It’s very difficult. But I had said earlier, and I think it’s true, that I think the awareness of the human cost was more the firebombing, which I didn't observe directly, but I was close to it and was helping to facilitate.
T: Was that atomic bombing too abstract?

C: You see we didn’t know what it was. No one said atomic bomb. It was a new weapon, or what was the words that were used at first? We didn’t know what… if they said “atomic bomb” it didn’t come out until mid-August and if they said that, we didn’t know what that meant anyhow. We knew it was a hell of a big bomb and if Tokyo was a hundred thousand dead in a week, Hiroshima was eighty thousand plus or minus. Nagasaki was about seventy thousand.

(2, A, 293)

T: Yes. Sources say it was probably less than that.

C: So that’s two hundred and fifty thousand folks to end the war. That’s a lot of civilians.

T: A lot of civilians.

C: And we always say now “innocent,” right? If I hadn’t been reared a Presbyterian, I have a hard time conjuring up a thought of innocent human beings (laughs).

T: See how hard those childhood lessons are to shake? (laughs)

C: Yes (laughs).

T: You were in the Pacific when the war in Europe ended in May of ’45. How much of an impact did that have?

C: Very little. So that’s over and we’re still at it and we still have to go a year and a half to land...

T: That was the common wisdom then? That it would be into ’46 until the war would be over?

C: Yes. Yes. Universal. And people have different sets on it. You’re a combat soldier you have a different set.

T: Yes. Sure. I guess that did make it easier then to accept the fact that this weapon had ended the war, the atomic bomb. It had saved a year and a half of your life.

C: And saved how many million lives, Japanese and American? I don’t know.

(2, A, 307)

T: Yes. What kind of a reaction was there on Okinawa when the war ended? When you got the word that the Japanese had surrendered.
C: We all had to go in the foxhole because everybody shot off everything they had that night. Now where it was coming from I don't know. They were shooting it in the air. But there was... I tell you there was lots of flak.

T: The safest place to be was on the ground.

C: Yes.

T: Or under the ground.

C: (laughs)

T: Did things in your mind, get out of control? Was there a lot of drinking?

C: The folks I was with had no access to any liquor. There weren't even coconuts in Okinawa. You couldn't make your own poison.

T: You really had to just take the three-two beer.

C: I think when you're eighteen to twenty-two to twenty-four there are heavy drinkers, but it isn't as much a part of one's life as if you have access. There's no access, you don't drink.

T: You were on Okinawa for a number of months after the war ended.

C: No. We started... let's see, the caper I was telling you about is 12-13 September. By early mid-October many of us were beginning to go the right direction. It took a couple months to get there. The group I was with went by air, and where all the places we set down to refuel, I couldn't tell you. We just got in the airplane and then it would stop and then they'd bring a load of bad food and then you'd take off again. I do remember though on one of the landings we were making... The life rafts were above us and some fool had tied them down by their nozzles and we were making a landing and the gear wouldn't come down. The landing gear. We weren't fully aware of that then, but obviously the pilot was told to go back and shake the airplane to get the wheels to fall down. It released the nozzles on all these self-inflatable rafts up here and... there weren't any seats. It was all on the floor. I suppose there were two hundred of us. And these rafts began to come down on top of us. But we were on the way home and it was a lark. We weren't in danger. And of course we didn't know about it. But we did make the landing. Then we got back to Hawaii and they put us on a troop ship. Went home. So you see it takes two months to clear out. Or more. Ten weeks I would guess.

T: What did you observe as far as souvenir collection?

C: Except for the souvenirs I bought in the Ginza, none.
T: How about other people? What did you see?

C: Nothing. We weren’t combat. They weren’t cutting off ears or they weren’t buying... getting bayonets or anything. I know about that. I read about it. But I never saw it directly.

T: It’s another thing that’s not part of your experience. When you got back to the States, you were discharged in November of ’45.

C: Yes.

T: Your wife, you were married in February of ’44, your wife Florence was out in the Bay area?

C: Yes. She worked for Marin Ship, which is over in Marin County. She wasn’t Rosie the Riveter—she was a clerk. She worked there most of the time I was gone [in the Pacific]. I remember, we came in through San Pedro in southern California and another buddy of mine said, “My father is meeting us and we’re driving back north. You can just drive with us.” So once we were dismissed from the service his father was there. We got in the car and I said, “Gosh, you need to just drop me off in San Francisco. I’ll hitchhike over to San Anselmo and surprise my wife.” He said, “Soldier, that’s not a very good idea.” *(laughs)*

T: Why not?

C: Well, you can’t surprise a bride. Been gone for a year and a half. So I took his judgment and called up and she came over. I was home just in time for Thanksgiving.

T: So it was November. Late November of 1945.

C: Yes.

T: Did you visit Minnesota at that time or did you stay out in the West?

C: Two of us took the train back to... her family is in St. Paul and we came back together and then we went down to Blue Earth and saw my family. Went back to St. Paul and went back to go to school in January.

T: So you were back just to visit for a while.

C: Yes.

T: In Minnesota--let’s talk about the process of change here; when you came back you’d been gone in the service almost three years. January of ’43. How do you think
as you looked around, how had things changed? Either your family or the community.

C: You see, it’s just a visit. Now my life was with my bride and with my career. But I do remember being struck by the prosperity that had come even that soon to Faribault County.

T: Really? What kind?

C: The farmers.

T: That was largely agricultural down there, correct?

C: Yes. And of course everybody was happy to have us back. I might share a Blue Earth story with you here: One of my close high school buddies. Never saw him afterwards. Eddie Williams. He played the bugle. He went into the Navy Air Corps and he saw combat as a Navy pilot. I don’t know much about his Navy career but... so he comes back in the winter of... He was a popular boy. Oh, just a swell kid. Everybody loved him. So he stays in Blue Earth for a while. I think he was just waiting for what he should do with his life and it’s Memorial Day 1946. Someone says gosh, you’re a pilot. We’ll get you a plane. You can go up and you can drop poppies out on the cemetery when the crowd is there and the band. You know the story.

T: No, I don’t.

C: Well, you can guess. He went up in the plane, and he’d been flying a Navy pursuit plane I think. This was a flimsy little put-putter and he went up and went down. (crashing sound) Fell in a cornfield about a block and a half from where the service, memorial service, was being held. That was the end of him. It’s one of those ironic stories, that he had survived the war and he was such a popular fellow, and Memorial Day, there he went.

T: You heard about this, obviously, when you were out in California.

C: Family, you know. My mother would send things to us. Of course, Memorial Day in small town mid-America was Lincoln’s country, and Memorial Day was the most important holiday of the year. More than Thanksgiving. A community day. Everybody came for that. More than the Fourth of July. More than Thanksgiving, because that’s a family day.

T: Interesting.

**End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 379.**

T: When you saw your folks, how were they different? How were you different?
C: Sons and daughters, you know, they leave home when they leave home. My mother was laughing, you know—I survived. My father was proud. But you know, then we took off. We went back. I did learn, however, two years later at a family reunion my brother and my sister happened to be around, and my father said, “Can’t you take off a week and come back just by yourself and go to the family reunion.” So I did. We were not a drinking family, but I think my mother must have had a martini or something and her tongue was loosened and she said that she had a confession. She said, “In 1944 when you, Clarke, were overseas I was afraid you would never come home, and I was afraid you would never get a chance to vote.” Her family, my family, had voted Republican since 1856 and she said, “In 1944 I voted for Franklin Roosevelt, because I knew that’s what you would vote for, and maybe you wouldn’t get a chance.” My father was just devastated. He said, “Oh, hoop!”

T: That’s the first time he had heard that.

C: First time. And she had to screw up her courage to tell that story. So I mean that story... relationship of family later on. But we had a baby you see and...

T: When was your first child born?

C: October of 1946. And graduate school, as you know, is all consuming. California is a long ways away. In any case, my mother voted Democratic once in her life. The only Chambers ever to do so until I came along.

T: Out in California. You’re out of the service now, and in a sense, post-war world. How did you look at the future as a former service member? The war is over. What did the future look like to you?

(2, B, 433)

C: Well, you’ve been in graduate school. You know it’s all consuming and you’re having... we had two children when I was in graduate school. My wife was working part time as a waitress. It’s a pretty tight thing but as far as the world is concerned, by 1949 the Soviet Union had the bomb. By 1957 they’ve got Sputnik. And the Cold War had started. And right away, I mean, even as a graduate student, I mean, the students of history and lots of other things are concerned about the world. There was a lot of concern about the Cold War. I remember [in] 1949 saying, “Wow, we’re in for some challenge.” Now the campaign of 1948, with Henry Wallace and [Socialist] Norman Thomas [running for president]. I voted for Norman Thomas in 1948. I think the last chance anybody had. [Anyway,] the thing is to get your degree and make enough money so that you can pay health insurance on these babies that are coming along.

T: Were you thinking that way then too? Did you view it as, I want to finish my degree so I can earn a salary and get on with it?
C: You're a family man. You're responsible. Sure. And you don't have much time for... later in the 1960s, when I had tenure, then you have more elbow room to engage in various things. Which I did.

T: That's a difference.

C: Yes. It makes an enormous difference. But it's just overwhelming. And when I got out in 1950 there were no jobs. And my mentor happened to be a Harnsworth professor at Oxford that year, and he didn't tell anybody until the very last minute, and they said, “What are we going to do with your course?” He said, “You've got Chambers here; he'll do it.” That's the only job...

T: You backed into the job in 1950, then, didn't you?

C: So that when this job came open in Minnesota, at least I had one year [of experience] and I also had my dissertation accepted for publication. Most of my contemporaries who were graduated in 1950, ’51, ’52 went into library work or they went into something related.

T: So the market was bad in the early ’50s?

C: All the GIs were gone and all the Ph.D. GIs were coming out. It was a terrible distortion of the academic market. So that's a chief worry. Then you get into the ’50s and you kind of ride along. You're establishing a career, you're establishing family but it's not until the end of the ’50s that things begin to break loose. The ’60s don't begin in the ’60s, as you know. Right?

T: Right.

(2, B, 484)

C: I think they begin with Sputnik.

T: It’s an argument to be made, because it changed fundamentally the geopolitical landscape.

C: I remember my mother died on All Saints Day of 1957. She was up here. We were living in St. Paul then, and went out in the back yard and here was Sputnik tumbling through the sky.

T: Could you see it?

C: Oh, yes. It tumbled. It picked up light. All kinds of people saw it tumbling through the sky. And it was a tumble. It was like somersaulting through the sky. And my mother who is a devout Presbyterian, but much more than that she was a
poet, and she looked up there and she said, “That’s going to hit an angel.” Now she knew there were no angels, and she knew that they weren’t flying around in the air, but I just... in my life, I took that as kind of a metaphor that she had that picture of things being changed in a moral and religious way.

T: As indeed it was.

C: Yes. And three weeks later she was dead.

T: When you were in school after the war, can you say something about how important the GI Bill was for you as far as...

C: That was very crucial. I never could have done it without it. My family could not have afforded to do that. They got me through Carleton and my father said, after that you’re on your own—which is perfectly proper.

T: In a sense your choice to go to graduate school was really dependent upon that money that you got from the GI Bill.

C: Well, how would I piece it together otherwise? I don’t know. It would have been very, very difficult.

T: You had to work.

C: I did work summers as a custodian at Oakland Technical High School, and by that time our daughter was three years old, and people would ask Jenny, “What is your father doing?” “He’s grubbing and weeping,” she said. She couldn’t pronounce her s’s. “Grubbing and weeping the high school.” So you know, you piece together all kinds of things, and my mentor, my advisor, was chairman of the department and he was dean of the graduate school, so there were little things, little fellowships that would come along, five hundred dollars or something and I was in line for that. The old boy system worked much better then than now.

T: Yes. That’s right.

C: See, it’s like Hiroshima. I’m glad it did work like that [the old boy system,] but later on, I had to work against it as chairman of the department [at Minnesota].

T: It’s very ironic too, isn’t it? Clarke, I’m wondering at the end here if you want a chance to be a philosopher? Specifically, I want to ask you, when you were in the service and the war was on, what did the war mean for you personally? What was it all about from your perspective?

C: I was a part of my generation, immersed. Even though I had that objectivity and distance, I was right in the center of it. I shared that experience with my generation. It was an enormously important thing. I think that personally, it was a force that
opened up a much more democratic kind of view of this country. When you’re young and you’re bright, you know. But I think there was a democratization in the way I look at things, the way I behaved, so that when the ’60s came along I was all ready for it.

T: I see. That’s very interesting.

C: But I think the experience of sharing with a generation... and you see, it’s a whole generation, it’s a whole country that did that. And it’s nothing since then like that.

T: That’s right. Not on this scale.

C: Not on any scale.

T: One could argue that the Vietnam conflict got people involved--committed to take a stance on it. Certainly far fewer people involved on the ground. The Afghanistan thing now [after 2001] has really disappeared from people’s screens [now in December 2002].

C: Well, we don’t have a draft. And I heard the Secretary of Defense the other day, he was saying, “We have a professional Army. We don’t have to fool around with getting people in and out.” But so many men and women, not many women relatively speaking, sixteen million people went through this experience of my generation. And you know, in Minnesota, it occurred to me when you called, and then I started thinking about the “Greatest Generation,” right? I thought, in Minnesota, let’s go with [radio show host Garrison] Keillor—it’s the “pretty good” generation. I think people respond to the crisis and the needs, maybe; my generation certainly did. To romanticize that and sentimentalize it, though...

T: Which is done.

C: I think we were a “pretty good” generation. I thought, boy, if I were doing this project and writing a book, I’d call it The Pretty Good Generation.

T: I like that. I like that title. It has a ring to it.

C: That’s only because I’ve got a mean sense of humor (laughs).

(2, B, 576)

T: Clarke, last question for you. What do you think is the most important way that the war changed your life?

C: I was going to be an historian. I knew that at age twelve. I didn’t know what it was, but I knew that’s what I was going to do. I think to be a good historian, one has to be open. Obviously we don’t know how those folks lived in the past. That’s a
hard assignment. One has to be open to variety, to different systems, to different values, and when I use the word democratizing, that’s really evident. It’s a bigger world. And because I was exposed to that bigger world at age twenty-one to twenty-four, it made me an entirely different historian. I became a social historian. I became a social historian of those people in America who never amounted to much—widows, orphans, recent immigrants, the mentally ill, the physically handicapped, and so on and so forth. And how a society takes care of the least and the aged.

T: You think that picture, your picture of the whole society and its multitude of parts, was changed or was formed by your experience during the war?

C: I think it very important. I think I was on my way, but certainly [my experience during the war] accelerated it. And it was an epic experience. And if you’re going to be an historian, that’s a pretty neat piece. Or if you’re going to be a novelist, or a poet, or a lawyer, or whatever. I think that immersion, deep immersion… and it’s an immersion in experiences and situations that you cannot control.

T: That’s right.

C: It’s chance. And you know, you work a few things too.

T: There’s an element of chance, though, isn’t there?

C: The element of being out of control, and I’m not sure this says anything here, but with disabilities here now and I can’t control them. I can serve them. I meet them on a daily basis and I’m damned tired. I’m eighty-two years old, right? And it’s hard work. My dreams now are being in situations that I can’t control. You see, I was lucky again. If you’re a professor, things always happen to you. All right? And there’s chance of this and that, but I think that professors have more control over the way they behave, the way they live, values they live by. You can make choices.

T: Yes.

C: The war, I went along. This was going to be where I’m going to go, that’s fine. You know, you went along with it, and I think the same thing with being old. You lose control of lots of things. They just get beyond you.

T: That’s very interesting. Because you have to deal with what’s put in front of you every day.

C: Yes.

T: As opposed to selecting from a menu.

C: You bet.
T: Clarke, let me thank you very much for the interview. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW