James G. Kirk, Jr was born on 19 June 1920 in Portland, Oregon. His family moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, when James was thirteen, and it was here that he completed his education, graduating from Central High School in 1937. After two years of college (1937-39) he worked three years (1939-42) as a waiter on Northern Pacific Railroad dining cars, operating out of St. Paul. James then worked as a laborer in war-related industries, for International Harvester (1942-43) and at the Twin Cities Arsenal in suburban New Brighton (1943-44). Married since 1941, and with two children, in April 1944 James was nevertheless drafted into the US Army.

James completed Basic Training at Camp Wheeler, Georgia, and had additional training at Camp Hood, Texas, before being assigned to the 679th Tank Destroyer Battalion. James was a rifleman, part of the crew of a self-propelled vehicle. The 679th was shipped to Europe, and saw action in Italy in 1945. James was rotated back to the US in August 1945, and was preparing for duty in the Pacific, when the war ended. By December he was discharged, with the rank of private first class.

Again a civilian, James returned to St. Paul, re-married (1946, wife Emma), and worked for the Chicago Northwestern Railroad as a dining car waiter. When dining car service was ended in 1962, James spent a number of years in community service work before retiring in 1982. At the time of this interview (May 2003) James Kirk lived in St. Paul.

James provides details on working during wartime, including at a war products plant (Twin Cities Arsenal). He also gives the perspective of an African American soldier serving in a segregated US Army during the war.
Interview Key:
T = Thomas Saylor
J = James Kirk
[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation
(***) = words or phrase unclear
NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is the 21st of May 2003 and this is our interview with James G. Kirk Jr.
First, Mr. Kirk, on the record, thanks very much for speaking with me today.

J: You're welcome.

T: Now we're at your house here on St. Anthony Avenue in St. Paul. We've talked for
a little while here. You were born in Portland, Oregon, the 19th of June 1920, one of
three children. And your dad worked on the railway.

J: We lived in Montana when I was a kid, before we came to St. Paul, and we got
along well. My dad worked on the railroad, and the railroad went from... the main
train went to Butte, Montana. They had to have a train to go to Helena, Montana,
which is the capital. So at a small town named Logan, Montana, they had a stub train
that went from Logan to Helena. My dad worked on there as a waiter in charge, and
the porter. We lived in this town of Logan, Montana. Five hundred people. Got
along well. I was on the track team. I would go to Boseman, Montana, with the guys
of the track team. I remember high jumping with clodhoppers on. They didn't have
track shoes.

T: Now this is before you moved to St. Paul.

J: Before we moved to St. Paul in the 1930s. Got along well. My brother was born in
Helena.

T: How long did you live in Portland? You were born there in 1921.

J: We didn't live in Portland too long, and then we moved to Seattle. That's where
the Northern Pacific started, where their main terminal was. From Seattle to St.
Paul, or from St. Paul to Seattle. So most of our time was spent in Seattle. We spent
very little time in Portland.

T: Then St. Paul, Minnesota. Did your dad stay in St. Paul, then?

J: No. When he retired they moved back to Seattle. My mother was born in Seattle;
her father was a longshoreman. Irish, from Dublin, Ireland. Married a black woman.
T: So St. Paul was just a stop for them in a sense. And happened to be where you finished high school and you stayed yourself.

J: Yes.

T: Your family moved to St. Paul 1933. So you were junior high school age?

J: Yes.

T: You went to Central High School here in St. Paul and graduated 1937, and then attended college for a couple of years. One year at the University of Minnesota at Minneapolis and one year at Morris Brown College, Atlanta, Georgia. That year at Morris Brown College, was that your first experience with the South?

J: Yes, it was. I can remember vividly moving from St. Paul. On the first ship going down there we had a layover in Cincinnati, Ohio, and for several hours. We decided to go to a theater and they ushered us right to the balcony. I felt like turning around and coming right back home then.

T: How is it you came to pick Morris Brown College? It is an all-black college, but Georgia is far away from Minnesota.

J: There was a young man who lived above us with a family, in a duplex. It was his aunt and uncle. He was up here from Cedartown, Georgia, and his aunt and uncle separated and so he moved in with us. We called him our foster brother. He lived with us until he got married. He was from Atlanta, Georgia. Three of us decided that we could get a scholarship down there, athletic scholarship, so we all took athletic scholarships and went to Morris Brown. Two of the fellows that left returned and finished their college education, but my foster brother and I we did not. We stayed here, came back to the Twin Cities and went to work.

T: What can you say about living in Atlanta for a year? That is the South.

J: It was very strange. Something I hadn’t been used to. I guess you sort of get used to it, because everything that you need is in the area that you’re living in, so you have no reason to venture out. If you wanted to get some clothing or things of that nature you may have to go to town, but that’s probably about the only time you left and went into the other areas.

T: In Atlanta in the 1930s, was there a distinctly black and distinctly white area of town?

J: Very definitely. Very definitely. They lived in separate areas.
T: So it sounds like the way you describe it that segregation within the black community wasn’t something that one might notice, because the people around you were black as well.

J: Right. That’s correct.

T: Now the college, were the majority of students there black as well?

J: All black. They were all black.

T: In what ways do you think, when you think back on it now, in what ways was that year at Morris Brown College in Atlanta a good experience for you?

(1, A, 72)

J: It was a good experience for me because I was able to see how blacks lived in other areas of the United States. Blacks had their own businesses. There were a lot of professionals. It was very much different than it was in the Twin Cities, where most of the blacks had menial jobs and very few professional people. It was just an altogether different state of, a different climate altogether. It was an experience.

T: Were you happy to come back to the Twin Cities at the end of that year in 1939, or would you have preferred to stay there?

J: I can’t remember whether or not... I enjoyed it very much, but I definitely wanted to come home.

T: When you got back to the Twin Cities you had two years of college under your belt. What kind of jobs were available to you at that time as a nineteen year old African-American?

J: It was still the same situation as when I left. Post Office, packinghouse, or the railroad were the main jobs. So that’s what you took.

T: Within those kinds of options, you ended up working for the railway. How did you make a decision like that?

J: My father had been on the railroad for so many years. I just felt that I would feel more comfortable doing the same thing that he had been doing all his life, or most of his life.

T: It was the Northern Pacific, right?

J: Yes.

T: Talk about the kind of work that you did there.
J: I started out as a waiter. I had probably been working there about a year when they promoted me to waiter in charge, which meant that I had what is known as a café car. It wasn't as large as a regular dining car. It would seat about nineteen people. Nineteen or twenty people. I was in charge, the waiter in charge, and I had a chef and a third cook who washed the dishes, and an extra waiter. I did that until I left the railroad in 1942.

T: In 1942 you moved to a different job.

J: Yes.

T: The people you worked with, your coworkers on the railway, mix of blacks and whites or blacks mostly?

J: All blacks. All the waiters were black. The cooks in practically all instances were white. And the dining car stewards were white.

T: So there was a real delineation of certain jobs for whites and certain jobs for blacks.

J: Correct.

T: How about the pay? Did you consider yourself to be pretty well paid?

J: At that particular time the wages were seventy-five cents per hour, but tips were good. That's where you made most of your money, was tips.

T: Now were you living at home at this time with your folks?

J: Let's see. For a short while, yes, I lived at home with my folks. Then I got married and I moved into an apartment. Moved into several houses.

T: You were married, I think you said, in 1941.

J: That's correct.

T: So you were twenty-one years old.

J: Yes.

T: In December 1941, of course, the US becomes involved in the Second World War, which had been going on for a couple of years by that time in Asia and Europe. Let me ask you about the 7th of December 1941, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. I'm wondering if you remember, Mr. Kirk, what you were doing when you first heard that news about Pearl Harbor.
J: I can’t really remember what I was doing, no. We have a friend who has a birthday on December 7, but I don’t really remember what I was doing.

T: Let me ask you this: as the news came over the radio and hit the papers the next couple of days and the US got involved in the war, what was your reaction to the United States becoming involved in the war?

J: I guess really I didn’t pay too much attention to it. I’m not saying that I wasn’t patriotic, but I don’t think it phased me that much.

T: Are you the kind of person who considered going out to enlist in the service at that time?

J: No. No.

T: Were you, on the other hand, concerned that you might be drafted into the service?

J: I knew that I would be drafted. I can remember several of my friends, who before taking the examination would eat soap to make their blood pressure go up. So they wouldn’t be considered a fit soldier.

T: Eating soap makes your blood pressure go up?

J: Right.

T: I learn something new every day (both laugh). Now in 1942 you left the railroad and moved to International Harvester, which was now in war production. What were you doing there?

J: A janitor. That was in St. Paul. In the Midway area, near the city limits.

T: What kind of war production was International Harvester involved in?

J: They were making machine guns, I believe.

T: Did you move from that job as a janitor to any kind of production work there?

J: No. No.

T: How long did you stay there, do you remember?

J: Let’s see. About a year, I imagine.
T: About International Harvester. First, the pay. Were you, when you think of how you earned as a waiter, tips and wages included, were you earning about the same, less, or more here at International Harvester?

J: About the same. That included my tips. It was about the same as what I was making working on the railroad.

T: The way you talked about the railroad it wasn’t unpleasant work. What prompted you to leave to go to this other position?

J: The main reason was to avoid the draft. At International Harvester I was included in the work force of something that was war production.

(1, A, 180)

T: So working for International Harvester would be a way to avoid the draft.

J: Right.

T: Was that the case? Were you able to avoid the draft by working there?

J: I was able to avoid the draft for a few years, but finally I guess they needed men so badly that they started reaching back to those who had dependents.

T: Now you stayed at International Harvester for a little while, but you also worked at the Twin Cities Arsenal up in New Brighton.

J: Yes.

T: That was longer than a year, the way you described it. Can you talk about the kind of work that you did there?

J: I was a laborer. And not a good laborer at that (laughs). Not having been a physical man at any time in my life it was kind of hard for me to do the laboring work. I dropped a bucket of hot tar one cold winter night and it bounced up in my face and closed my eyes with the hot tar. I had to have the nurse put cocoa butter on it to open my eyes. Another time I was picking the ground with a pick and tore a muscle in my back. So I guess laboring wasn’t for me.

T: But were you aware of the fact that working at the Arsenal would extend your deferment?

J: Yes.

T: In April ’44 that deferment ended and you were drafted into military service.
J: Yes.

T: Before we get to that, let me ask you about the pay at Twin Cities Arsenal. When you think about the wages there, were those better than International Harvester, or were you still about the same?

J: Pay was better than International Harvester. Laborers usually get paid more.

T: Was there overtime there or forty hours a week?

J: Forty hours a week. We worked nights.

T: How did you get up there? Was there a streetcar or bus up there?

J: No. We always rode with someone who had a car that worked there.

T: So you had to be able to get a lift that way.

J: Yes.

T: When you looked at the work force, the people you were working with, once the war started—this would be the jobs at International Harvester or the Twin Cities Arsenal, ‘42, ‘43, and ‘44, until you went into the service—thinking about the people you worked with, was it mostly men, mostly women, or a mix?

J: Mostly men. There were a few women, but not very many.

T: How about the racial breakdown? Were there blacks, Mexican Americans, whites?

J: Mostly whites. There was a smattering of minorities.

T: Did the number of women that you saw working around you, or the number of minorities, did that change during the two and a half years that you worked at International Harvester or the Twin Cities Arsenal?

J: No. No, it was about the same.

(1, A, 222)

T: Let’s talk about being at home. You were married in 1941, so before the war began. I imagine by the time you went to the service you had been married almost three years.

J: Right.
T: And I think you mentioned that you were living in a couple places, here in St. Paul. Let me ask about finding an apartment or a house. Was it hard during the war to find affordable rental property?

J: It wasn't for me, because I was pretty well known in St. Paul and I knew most of the people that owned property. The first apartment I had I moved in with some people who were friends of my father, who had an apartment. Then the next place I moved to, he was a friend of ours whose father was an undertaker. He had a business establishment in St. Paul; they had an apartment upstairs and I moved into that. And then the third place that I lived was a rental property that I had lived in as a child, at 902 Rondo. So I had no problems with being able to find rental space.

T: You had two children by the time you were in the service. Let me ask about things like rationing and shortages of certain goods or foodstuffs. How did rationing impact your family life before you were in the service?

J: I can't remember whether it did or not, but I don't think it did.

T: Who did the shopping for food and things like that at your house?


T: Do you remember taking any kind of stamps or coupons with you to the markets?

J: Yes. Yes, I remember that.

T: I think I hear you saying that, as far as you remember, those stamps were able to buy you enough of what you needed. You didn't perceive a shortage of things.

J: Yes.

T: How about things like gardening or canning of vegetables or fruits and things. Is that something that you or your wife did during that time?

J: No. No, neither one of us.

T: Let me ask about the St. Paul community. From your perspective, you were almost two and a half years in St. Paul before you went to the service, what did you notice about St. Paul? How did the community seem to be changing as a result of the war?

J: As I did, people were changing jobs in order to stay out of service. There were friends of mine who were doing the same thing, trying to stay one step ahead of the draft. Other than that there wasn't much change.
T: You shifted jobs two times. I suspect that people knew what kind of jobs would qualify for deferments and what kind of jobs would not.

J: That is also correct.

T: So the job at Twin Cities Arsenal, you knew that would be a place you could stay.

J: Yes.

T: It sounds like you knew you were keeping the service at arm's length for a while. When you talked about it with your wife, what kind of discussions did you have about the impact that might have on your family?

(1, A, 264)

J: I really don't remember even talking about it. We weren't getting along too well anyway.

T: Now you and your wife were divorced. Was that after the war was over?

J: Yes.

T: In April 1944, you did finally receive a draft notice. How did you react to getting the notice that it was time to go into the military?

J: I guess I knew that this was it and that I wouldn't be able to get any more deferments, so I just accepted it. Try to make the best of it.

T: Were your folks both alive at that time?

J: Yes.

T: What kind of responses do you remember from your wife or your parents?

J: I guess... more than likely they felt that it was inevitable that I was going to have to go. So they just thought like I did myself—accept it.

T: So it was no great surprise to anyone.

J: No. No.

T: Did you report to Fort Snelling for an induction physical or tests?

J: Yes. Yes.
T: What do you remember about that induction physical or the tests you had to take?

J: It was very rigid. I came through with flying colors.

T: At that time it was pretty easy to get 1-A, wasn’t it?

J: Oh, yes (both laugh).

T: You went to Basic Training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. You had had some experience in the South, so in a sense that was not completely new.

J: Right.

T: When you think of the Basic Training experience, what was that really all about?

J: It was the regimentation. Knowing that you had to get up at a certain time, you had certain duties to do, you make your bed in a certain way. Doing everything on time. Everything had to be just according to Army rules. Marching. Everything was so regimented at that time. It was strange for me, but as you continue you get used to it.

T: I was going to ask you how you personally adjusted to the Army way of life?

J: I just sort of knew that I had to... it had to be done. No sense in me trying to avoid it. So I just got on the bandwagon.

T: At that time the military was still segregated.

J: Yes.

T: Was your Basic Training company all black?

J: All black, with all white officers. The noncommissioned officers were black.

T: So the guys putting you through boots were black.

J: Yes.

T: Other blacks that you met in Basic Training came from all over the country?

J: Yes.

(1, A, 300)
T: Did you notice differences between blacks from the North and blacks from the South?

J: Yes. Strangely enough, most of the blacks that I met, the majority of the blacks that I met, were not so well educated. In fact I used to have to write letters for some of them to their families. They couldn’t read nor write.

T: So the education you received in Minnesota was noticeably superior.

J: My education was superior, yes. Superior to what they had been used to.

T: They couldn’t even read and write you said, some of them.

J: Some of them, yes.

T: Mr. Kirk, did you get a chance to get off-base at all when you were at Fort Bragg or at Camp Hood, which is in Texas?

J: I didn’t go to town very many times. I know one of my friends, a fellow who I became a friend of, when he would get ready to go to town, he always went to town on leave and I would always stay in the camp. He would buy me a case of beer and say, “You should be able to drink it up by the time I get back.” I didn’t go to town very much.

T: Why was that?

J: I don’t know. I just didn’t... I was afraid of the situation.

T: So you were aware of segregation, the kind of racism you might encounter?

J: Yes.

T: Had you heard stories from other people at Fort Bragg or Camp Hood about what you might expect?

J: No. No, I just... it was just a generalization that I picked up myself.

T: When you stayed back in camp were there other fellows kind of doing the same thing?

J: Yes. Yes. Then too, I had a family and most of the money that I received as pay went home as an allotment. So I had very little money to be going to town.

T: What kind of training did you have at Camp Hood, Texas, after Basic Training?
J: Camp Hood, Texas, I had very little training. I was in the reconnaissance platoon in the Headquarters Company. The ones that did all the book work and everything for the post. I had very little training.

T: Having a high school education and two years of college, how did that prove beneficial to you in the Army?

J: Guys looked to me to do certain things that they weren’t able to do themselves, with the exception of when I got into headquarters platoon. Most of those, or several of the guys in there, were college students. Much younger than me. I was an old man. I was the old man in the outfit.

T: You were almost twenty-four when you went in.

J: Yes. But we did have some of the line noncoms who had not attended college. That did finish high school.

T: How did you experience the segregation that was the US military at that time?

(1, A, 340)

J: I guess I didn’t pay that much attention to it, but I remember one case that was vivid in my mind. When we were overseas in France where one fellow, one of the soldiers had done something and the officer... we were in a lineup and the officer, white officer, told us you ain’t no damn Frenchman. You come free. I said attention. You ain't no damn Frenchman. I remember that.

T: Did you feel that you got from white officers, did you feel that you got fair and equal treatment?

J: In most cases yes. I would say yes.

T: How do you feel that being black may have been a limiting factor in the service?

J: I don’t know. When I was overseas one of the football players here at the University of Minnesota, Dwight Reed, he was an All-American at the University of Minnesota and black, tried to get me to stay over there and go into officer’s training school. I said no, no, I’m going back home. I had been offered it.

T: This was in 1945, after the war was over.

J: Yes.

T: So there was an opportunity for you as a black man to do something that would have been certainly a step up in the military.
J: Right.

T: For the record, you were in Europe from January 1945 until August 1945 and according to your discharge papers had service in Italy. You were with the 679th Tank Destroyer Battalion, which according to Army records was an all-black unit. Can you talk about the weapon that you were on and exactly what you did?

J: The weapon was known as an M-8. It was an armored eight-wheel vehicle, a rubber tired vehicle which had a 37mm gun on it and a .50 caliber machine gun. We were in a reconnaissance platoon, which meant we spent most of our time ahead of the forces, directing shell fire. So many times I could hear the German shells coming over our heads going back towards where the main company was stationed.

T: Because you were so close to the front.

J: Yes.

T: When you arrived over in Europe, how did you react to being overseas and being close to a front line situation?

J: That again didn’t phase me. I often said to myself, I’m going to make it back. I said that many times. I’m going to make sure that I get back home. But it didn’t bother me that much.

T: It sounds like you sort of took life as it came.

J: Yes. Yes.

T: Now on this self-propelled vehicle, how large was the crew of this gun?

J: There were three of us in there. The machine gunner, the driver and the rifleman. I was the rifleman; I carried a rifle. I knew how to fire the 37mm gun, but that wasn’t my main job. The driver took care of the machine gun.

T: Now the people that were part of the vehicle crew, were they all black?

J: Yes. Everyone was black in the 679th Tank Destroyer Battalion.

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 380.

T: How soon after you arrived there did you get into what we might call a front line situation?

J: Within two months.
T: Can you talk about that, about moving from training and shipping over to being in combat there in Italy?

J: In most cases when we went into France and also Italy we were stationed in a large dispersing area for maybe a month or so before we moved to certain sections of the country. Probably a month after we were there, each unit or line company went to their particular stations and we moved as the recon section to the front lines, toward the front lines.

T: Can you remember the first time that you actually fired the gun in a combat situation?

J: Actually we never had to fire our gun at any time. The only time were practice rounds. That was all. I remember one young fellow who was the driver, he was cleaning the .50 caliber machine gun and he was standing in front of it and moving the gun around. The sergeant who was in charge got in the vehicle and stepped on a pedal, and there was still one round in the chamber of the .50 caliber machine gun and it caught him right in the head. Splattered his head everywhere.

T: So accidents and casualties did occur.

J: Yes. And another instance. I shouldn’t laugh, but we had one very studious soldier in our group that was blown up in the library. They had ammunition stored in the library and they accidentally blew it up, and he was blown up in the library of all places.

T: The time you were in France and Italy, how did you spend your time in these kind of depots? What were days like?

J: Especially during the time we were in outpost, I would take off any time… We didn’t have any officers with us, just the three of us. One noncommissioned officer and two privates. So whenever I got ready I would take off. We were stationed right around Viareggio, Italy, which is right around in the middle. I went to Milan. There was always somebody going by. You could get in a Jeep and take off. I would just take off and go on and stay maybe two or three days.

T: Was this before the war ended or after?

J: That was during the time of the war.

T: The war was still on?

J: Yes.

T: You had contact with the countryside. Describe the Italian countryside from your perspective.
J: Most beautiful I've ever seen in my life. Everything over there is... most of these structures are made of marble. It's just beautiful. I remember once we were guarding a tunnel. It was right on the Aegean Sea, and every morning I would get up and go out swimming in the ocean. I know I was bitten by a jellyfish one day. My leg was swollen. But the place was so beautiful. All over Italy.

T: How about the people? Did you have much contact with people?

J: Yes. Yes. People were very nice. Always. They welcomed the black soldiers. Got along well with them. Made friends with a lot of the people. Ate meals with some of them. Where we were stationed, we were right in a building that had been bombed, but people were still living in it and a lot of times I would stay in the same building with them. So the people were very nice.

T: How did you communicate with people, with the Italians?

J: I learned to speak the language fairly well. Enough to get the things that I wanted, or make them understand what I was talking about.

T: From your experience, both before the war ended and after, did you observe any what we call Black Market activities or things that were of questionable legality?

J: Yes. Yes. I didn't have access to it because I had no rank, but I imagine the supply sergeant... We had one incident where one of them had buried a whole Jeep. He was going to sell it. I don't know if they ever sold it or not. But he buried it so he could sell it later. But that was going on all over I know. A lot of fellows I talked to were sending money home like it was... You'd only send a hundred dollars at a time, but they were sending every week.

T: That's a lot of money in those days.

J: A lot of money, yes.

T: What kind of things were the Italians interesting in having?

J: Anything that you would sell. Anything that you had, they would buy. Food, cigarettes.

T: Jeeps apparently.

J: Jeeps. (both laugh)

T: I imagine it was pretty tempting, because the stuff was there.
J: Yes. If you had access to it, it was a good possibility you’d be selling it.

T: What about something like prostitution? Was that evident from your perspective?

J: Yes. Yes. I know they often say that many, some soldiers got their Purple Heart in a mine field, where the prostitute was in the mine field selling her wares. And that happened all the time. You could always see prostitutes around the place. In the areas where they stationed a lot of soldiers in tents. They would come into the tents.

T: Come right in the tents?


(1, B, 502)

T: What did you make of that? I mean as a fellow from St. Paul, suddenly you’re in a different culture and situation. How do you deal with something like that?

J: Just went along with the flow. Just join the crowd. Just get in line too (laughs).

T: Now the Army must have known about this.

J: Oh, yes.

T: Were there talks about venereal disease, and handing out of condoms, this sort of stuff?

J: Yes. Yes, but no one paid any attention to it.

T: Was venereal disease a problem then?

J: No. No, I can’t remember any cases of venereal disease in our outfit anyway.

T: When you got there it was clear you were going to be part of the war effort against the Germans, the German troops in Italy there. What had the Army done to create in your mind an image of the Germans as the enemy?

J: I really don’t know. I just knew that they were the enemy, that’s all. I can’t remember having any real fear. It was just that they were the enemy, that’s all.

T: Do you remember watching any kind of films or having any kind of speakers talk about the Germans, or about the Japanese for that matter?
J: We had films on the types of ammunition and guns that they had. They had a, I believe it was called an 88. It was a long range rifle, long range gun that everyone feared. You could hear them, the shells, whistling over our heads all the time going back to the area where the main command was.

T: So your positions were often close to the front line.

J: Yes.

T: But the shells were going over your head.

J: Over our heads, yes.

T: Did that make you nervous at all?

J: Yes. A lot of times you couldn’t sleep. Going over your head all night long.

T: From your own description you never engaged the enemy.

J: No.

T: I guess they were pulling back or staying back.

J: By 1945 the Germans were on their way out.

T: You were in Italy when the war in Europe ended in May of 1945. V-E Day. 

(1, B, 540)

J: Right.

T: What do you remember about V-E Day? How did you experience that?

J: I guess we were just joyful that it was all over, and we would be going home.

T: Did you stay stationed at the same place in Italy once the war had ended too?

J: We went to another staging area for probably three weeks before we loaded up to come back to the States.

T: In the staging area, was your life pretty much the same? You still had contact with the local population. Were you able to travel a little bit?

J: Yes. Yes, I had a chance to go to the Tower of Pisa, which was very interesting.

T: You really did travel. You mentioned Milan a little bit ago.
J: Yes. I went to Milano, and I was in Florence. In Florence I was sitting on the poolside one day and a guy came up to me and asked me where I was from. I looked at him real good. It was [the singer] Frank Sinatra. We sat there and talked for the longest time. He asked me where I was from.

T: What was that like to suddenly see someone that was a well-known face?

J: It was a real thrill to me, to be able to talk to a celebrity.

T: When you traveled places like Florence, Pisa, Milano, did you travel with others or mostly by yourself?

J: By myself. I very seldom went with anyone. Because of our situation where we only had four guys, all of us couldn’t leave. It took more than one.

T: Somebody had to operate the gun if it was needed.

J: Yes.

T: When you traveled, did you get a Jeep or a truck or did you go on the trains or what?

J: No. I just hitched a ride with the military. It was just transportation. You just do like this *(sticks out thumb, like hitchhiking)* and hop in.

T: With a military truck or something or a Jeep?

J: Yes.

T: They didn’t care where you were going?

J: The way they're going, you just go right there.

T: Were you at all nervous about traveling in a foreign country by yourself?

J: No. In Milano I hooked up with a family. I met an Italian fellow in a bar, and he took me to his house. He could speak some English, and we got to talking about the States. We were talking about horses. He said, “I have horses. I'll take you out to my place.” He took me to the place, and he had jumping horses. We had ridden horses around town here. On weekends we’d rent horses here in the Twin Cities. So he put me on one of those jumpers and the first short jump I fell off the damn thing. I said, “That’s enough.”

T: So is it more difficult than it looks?
J: Oh, yes.

T: So you actually had a number of occasions where you had pretty friendly contacts with the local people.

J: Yes. Yes.

T: When the war ended in Europe, do you remember any kind of a ceremony or celebration where you were stationed?

J: No. No, none whatsoever. When did President Roosevelt die?


J: We heard about that. It was sad news to everyone.

T: How did people react around you? Was there talk about that much?

J: Yes. They thought that he was a person who would try to end the war, and with him being gone our chances were slim of the war being ended very soon.

T: With Harry Truman you thought that it might last longer?

J: Yes.

T: When the war ended in Europe, of course the war against Japan was not over. Was there a concern on your part or were there plans to send you to the Pacific?

J: Yes. From what I understand we were on station to go to the States for a short leave and then take off to go to Japan. But with the two children that I had, I had enough points in order to be discharged.

T: Was there a time when you thought that you personally might end up over in the Pacific?

J: Yes. Yes, we all did.

T: Now when you thought about that or when you talked about that with others around you, how did those conversations go?

J: Nothing we can do about it but just hope for the best.

T: Do you recall people talking about the war in Japan? Was that something that you personally feared or would be more concerned about than fighting the Germans over there in Europe?
J: No. No.

T: For you the opponents of the situations were about the same?

J: Similar. Yes.

T: The war against Japan ended rather suddenly in the middle of August 1945, and the invasion of Japan of course never took place. One reason was because of the use of atomic weapons by the US government, on August 6 and August 9. What did you hear, what did you know at that time about these weapons?

J: I guess we didn’t think much about it. But we knew that would be the end of the war. It would hurry it along anyways.

(1, B, 620)

T: After the war, and of course since then we’ve learned more and more about atomic weapons and the impact they have, have your feelings changed on the use of atomic weapons in the years since 1945?

J: Yes. Very definitely. I can see the loss, the huge loss of life with atomic weapons. It worries me now.

T: You were scheduled to go to Japan but you were going to go through the States. So you came through the States. The war against Japan ended and by December 1945 you had been discharged, separated from the military.

J: Yes. We came to Boston and we were shipped to an Army post near Cheyenne, Wyoming. The same thing happened in Cheyenne as happened in Cincinnati when I was going to school. Went to a movie, and they ushered us up into the balcony. In Wyoming, in 1945.

T: You’re a war veteran. How did you respond to that in that situation?

J: Just took it with a grain of salt, and went up in the balcony.

T: Was there a feeling that you wanted to rebel, or do something?

J: Yes. But I knew there wasn’t a chance of winning, so you just go along with the flow.

T: I’m kind of surprised to hear that something like that happened in Wyoming, but I wonder how many blacks did they see in Cheyenne, Wyoming?

J: Very few.
T: Out of the service in December 1945. What was your initial reaction to being out of the military, Mr. Kirk?

J: I know that I was glad to be out of the service. I laid around the house for so long drawing that 52-20 [unemployment benefit for servicemen], my mother finally said, “Son, you’re going to have to get out of here and get yourself a job!” I knew some friends of mine said they were hiring on the Chicago Northwestern [railway], so I went over there and got a job.

T: So you were content to take a break from life after you got out of the service.

J: Yes. That’s what I intended to do. I was in the process of going through a divorce. My first wife had moved out of town; she moved to New York. With the kids.

T: So when you got back you went to live with your folks?

J: Yes.

T: Did your kids stay in New York then?

J: Stayed in New York. They would come to visit me in the summers. When I re-married they’d come almost every summer and visit. Stay with me for maybe two or three weeks during the summer months. But they spent most of their time with their mother.

T: You were remarried to your current wife, Emma, is that right?

J: Yes. Emma.

T: What year were you married?

J: 1946.

T: You were around the house for a while with your folks. Then when you got married to Emma did you move into your own place?

J: Yes.

T: How hard was it after the war to find a place, a decent place?

J: There was a man that worked at Northern Pacific Railway. He worked in the commissary at the Northern Pacific Railway, and he had a place. He had a home on West Jessamine, which is out Rice Street. They had a small apartment upstairs. Three rooms. We rented that. We stayed there for about three years. Then over
here on Carroll, Tilson Brothers were building some apartments. They got a whole block of apartments. They were two bedrooms and four rooms. So we bought one of those. Then we sold that and moved over here to St. Anthony in the 1970s.

T: So from the way you describe it, finding that first place was...

J: No problem.

T: That first place was not difficult, but you knew somebody, didn’t you?

J: Yes.

(1, B, 693)

T: If you can recall, did you feel the rent you were paying was too expensive, about right, or a good deal?

J: About right.

T: Now when you went back to work you went back to the railway. You went to the Chicago Northwest Railway, and worked in the dining car from 1945 to 1962. How hard was it to find a decent job once you started looking?

J: The first job that I got was the first one I was looking for.

T: Now did you know somebody here?

J: Yes. I knew somebody that worked on that, in that same job.

T: How much did personal contacts help make a difference in getting a job when you started looking?

J: Personal contacts helped me get the job.

T: So by 1946 you were remarried, had found a place to live, and were working in a job that you kept until 1962. How would you describe your readjustment to civilian life?

J: I’d say it was easy. I didn’t have any problems at all.

T: You mentioned housing, job and a new wife. When you thought about your war service, and you were in the service for a year and a half or more, what did the war mean for you personally at that time? What was that war all about?

J: I guess it really didn’t mean much. I don’t know whether it solved anything or not. I guess it must have, because it was in favor of the United States.
T: Your own participation in it, what did it mean for you, in a personal sense?

J: I shouldn’t say this, but one thing, it afforded me some experience that I never would have had otherwise to see some foreign countries.

T: So in that sense it was a benefit for you.

J: A plus. Yes, it was a plus.

T: Did you learn anything in the service? Either a skill or just lessons of life that helped you later on?

J: None. None. When we got ready to come back to the States they disbanded the Tank Destroyer outfit and put us in a service outfit, quartermaster outfit. That’s when I became PFC.

T: Did that bother you?

J: No. No.

T: So had you gone to Japan, you’d have been some kind of quartermaster.

J: Yes.

T: When you think about the war and your war experience, the eighteen months you were in the service, what do you think is the most important way that the war changed your life?

J: One thing, it taught me respect for persons. The training itself was built on respect for the officers and your fellow comrades. It taught me... I’m the best bed-maker in town. Because when you made your bed you had to bounce a quarter off the top of the blankets or they’d tell you to make it over.

T: So it’s really true, you had to bounce a quarter?

J: Yes.

T: So you still make the beds around here?

J: I make the beds (laughs).

T: I see something came out of that military service (laughs). It sounds like from skills that you might have learned, actually being part of a Tank Destroyer Battalion isn’t a skill that’s any help in civilian life.
J: No *(laughs)*.

T: Were you a person then who was tempted to stay in the service?

J: No. I wanted to get out as soon as I could.

T: So eighteen months was enough. When you talk about the ways it changed your life, it made you a more regimented person, with respect for authority I hear you saying too. But other than that you were happy to put it behind you.

J: That’s true.

T: After the war, did you get involved with veteran’s organizations right away?

J: No, not right away. It wasn’t until 1962, when I retired. I retired when the railroad was finished. We decided to form a veteran’s group. Veterans of Foreign Wars. I became active with that.

T: Is that Post 8854 here in St. Paul that you are involved with now?

J: Yes. We formed it in 1962. Then in 1964 we moved into a building which we rented, which eventually we bought.

T: That’s the one right over here on Rondo, or Concordia Avenue.

J: Yes.

T: What is it that led you to do that in the 1960s, after almost twenty years?

J: There was a group ahead of us that had formed this group, and it had gone defunct. Some representatives from the state VFW talked to some of the guys about forming a post, so we followed through on it.

T: You’ve been involved for forty years almost, haven’t you?

J: Yes. Then we formed an auxiliary. My wife became the first president of the auxiliary. I was the third commander, the third year that we established the post.

T: How many members have you got now?

J: Right now I think we have about a 120. But I think the top that we had at one time was 135.

T: So pretty steady membership.

J: Yes. All over the country. Some of those that have left town still pay their dues.
T: That was the last question I had, Mr. Kirk, and on the record let me thank you very much for speaking with me today.

J: No problem.

END OF INTERVIEW