

Transcription: Robert Tobin

Today is Friday, October 9th, 2009. My name is James Crabtree and I'm interviewing Mr. Robert Tobin, is that correct?

Robert Tobin: Yes sir.

Mr. Tobin. And this interview is taking place at the William Courtney Veterans Home in Temple, Texas, and it is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time to talk to us today.

Robert Tobin: You're welcome.

And usually the first question I always start off with is just tell us a little bit about what your life was like before you went in the military, where you are from and what your childhood was like and that sort of thing.

Robert Tobin: I was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois in 1932, February 10, 1932. I was the son of a police officer and a homemaker. I went to public grammar school and then Catholic high school, and as I mentioned, my parents couldn't send me to college. We didn't have the money. My mother was very sick. And I enlisted in the Army in June of 1948, and I was very fortunate. I went to Clark Typer School at Fort Knox, Kentucky, and from there I went to the Pentagon building in Washington DC, stationed at South Post Fort Meyer. From the Pentagon building I went to general headquarters, Tokyo, Japan, in General MacArthur's headquarters, which was also very good duty. Five days a week and no guard duty, no KP. As I often say, the service will catch up to you eventually, and the Korean War broke out. They didn't particularly care what your MOS was. I wound up in Able Company, the 9th Infantry Regiment, Second Infantry Division. But I was fortunate because there was a lot of World War II guys and they kind of took me under their wing, and I got through Korea without a scratch.

So you went from being a clerk typist to being a regular infantryman?

Robert Tobin: Right.

Wow.

Robert Tobin: I often tell the story, Sergeant someone, get on that truck over there, kid, and I could hear artillery going off. I thought what the hell is going on here? Get on that truck over there, kid. And I says I started out with I'm an 85-word-a-minute typist. I type 105 words a minute. My MOS is 4405. Yeah kid, here's a BAR. But I was very fortunate. I was with a lot of WWII guys and then Sergeant Joe Tuckaroni kind of took me under his wing. He had seven purple hearts – four in WWII and three in Korea. He took a liking to me and he kind of watched out for me. I was blessed. I never got wounded and got through it OK.

Where was your unit in Korea?

Robert Tobin: I joined 'em at Enjeon, which was about 9 miles south of the 38th parallel. I often make the example there, oh, what a travesty of lost lives. When I rotated home we were about 6 miles south of the 38th parallel. A lot of young men dead. It was an awful shame. It

kind of messed me up. I think I was even a religious young man. I had thought about entering the priesthood when I was young, and it didn't set too well with me. I don't know, I'm not that knowledgeable. I think that had a lot to do with my drinking.

Were you there when the lines got pushed back to the Pusson perimeter? Were you there when the retreat - ?

Robert Tobin: No, that was, when I joined them like I say an Enjeen in 1951, we were in stable positions. And we went into attack on Bloody Ridge, and that was July of 1951, and Arkbrick, I was in there. And then I rotated home I think in March of '52 and I got out of there. I was very fortunate. They flew me home, a bunch of us guys. We stopped at Honolulu at Tripler General Hospital.

OK, yeah, I know where that is.

Robert Tobin: And I think they just observed us there. I'm not knowledgeable but it had a bad setting with me. I don't know if I ever killed one of the enemy, not to my knowledge. But it upset me and some close friends, that didn't set too well with me.

Did you have much contact with your family back home while you were there? Were you able to get letters and packages?

Robert Tobin: Oh yeah, my dad and my brother Jim and my brother John. My brother John is deceased now, but my brother Jim is in Phoenix. He's retired from Armor & Co. I often tell the story he had 40 years with Armor & Co. and he says to me, he says I remember one year when you had 40 jobs, Bob. I says that's not nice to talk like that. But I come back. I was going to Northwestern University, starting in accounting because my uncle was an accountant.

Were you using the GI Bill at that point, too?

Robert Tobin: I think I was, yeah. I'm pretty sure I was. And I ran into an old friend of mine who was valedictorian of my graduating class of St. Leo. He says hey Bob, why don't you come down to the Conrad Hilton Hotel. He says they're looking for bell hops. I said what? You're a bell hop? This kid was smart, you know. Anyway I went down and I got the job, went to work that next day, and I've been in the hotel business ever since and I love it. It was something different every day. Besides, financially it was good.

So you got out of Northwestern then?

Robert Tobin: Yeah.

That's a good university. It was pretty hard to get into, wasn't it?

Robert Tobin: It was, but there was a lot of returning veterans there like myself. Northwestern is a good school.

Oh absolutely, a real good school.

Robert Tobin: But I got in the hotel business and I liked it, I really did. It was something different every day, and some days you'd make five dollars and some days you'd make 50.

You worked at the Conrad Hilton?

Robert Tobin: In Chicago.

Yeah, which at that time was one of the biggest.

Robert Tobin: It was the biggest. It was 3,000 rooms. We had 25 bell men. That's hard to imagine, but it was a good break. I was with the Hilton for almost 17 years, but I never had trouble getting a job. My wife passed away. Well my marriage went on the rocks and my wife died later. But I went to California and I went to the union hall and I told the steward, I'll never forget her, her name was Patricia Foley, she says you're Hilton trained? I said yes ma'am. I went to work the next day.

Where did you go to work in California?

Robert Tobin: I went to work at the old Plaza of San Francisco. That survived the earthquake of 1906. And of course they finally tore the old Plaza down. Hyatt Corporation bought it, and I went to Del Webb's townhouse. I stayed at Del Webb's townhouse until I injured my back and I come back to Chicago.

And Del Webb's the one that built all these retirement communities and owned the Yankees at that time.

Robert Tobin: Yeah, a little anecdote, I saw this guy. He had an old saw hat on, and old cowboy boots and he looked like he just come in off the skid row, and I mentioned it to the captain. I says what's that guy doing here, sitting in the lobby? He says that guy is Del Webb.

That's pretty funny. Are there other famous people or celebrities you saw through the years?

Robert Tobin: Well I was a frustrated entertainer. I used to impersonate Jimmy Cagney all the time. I did a lot of Jimmy Cagney and I'd go to see the movies and I'd come home to the dinner table and say "pass the potatoes, ma," and they said aw, he saw Cagney again. And I finally met Mr. Cagney.

Oh really when was that?

Robert Tobin: At the Conrad Hilton Hotel. I saw all the bell hops standing around and they said hey Tobe, give us a little Cagney. And I went into the routine from Yankee Doodle Dandy, "my mother thanks you, my father thanks you," I get a tap on the shoulder. "Not bad, kid, not bad," and it was Jimmy Cagney. He and Pat O'Brien and Msgr. Fulton J. Sheen, Mayor Richard J. Daley, they were all around, and I waited on them all night. They left me a \$100 tip.

That's a pretty cool story.

Robert Tobin: That's the highlight of my life I think was meeting Cagney.

Yeah, especially if he was an idol of yours.

Robert Tobin: Yeah, and I can recall, too, my dad says to me, come on, I'm gonna take you to the movies to see Jimmy Cagney singing and dancing. I says no, pa, he's a crook. He's a gangster. And he took me to see Yankee Doodle Dandy. I saw it 12 times.

What was Chicago like when you were growing up?

Robert Tobin: Very nice. Like I say, my dad was a policeman. I think it was starting to change for the worse.

What part of Chicago?

Robert Tobin: South Side.

South Side Chicago, yeah.

Robert Tobin: It was all the Irish Catholic and Polish and German.

You are Irish ancestry, is Tobin Irish?

Robert Tobin: Yeah, my grandmother came from Ireland. As I said, my dad was a policeman. My mother was a homemaker. My maw died when she was young. She was only 44 years old – of heart disease, and now I have heart trouble. But I went to St. Leo High School. It was a Catholic high school on the south side of Chicago. I got a good education. Irish Christian Brothers taught there, and I got a good education. Like I say, my dad couldn't send me to college, so I went in the service.

What made you choose the Army of all the branches?

Robert Tobin: I'll tell you, the Army was the only one that took me. I have light perception only in my right eye. My brother and I, my mom did, had gone to mass on Christmas Eve and we found a dart game. My brother was trying to skin me, and he skinned me all right, he hit me right in the right eye.

With a dart?

Robert Tobin: With a dart. And we didn't want to tell our parents and I woke up about 3 in the morning screaming with pain, and my dad called a squad car and got me to the hospital, and they saved my eye, but I've been blind in it ever since.

You were how old at the time, 8?

Robert Tobin: No, I was 12 I think.

Geez.

Robert Tobin: Yeah. I snuck in the service. I told the recruit sergeant, I got a bad right eye, sarge. And of course back in them days they got commissions, you know.

Oh, it still is that way, yeah.

Robert Tobin: He says don't worry about it, kid, I'll take care of it. Passed me right through.

Wow. And you were able to get through basic training and everything?

Robert Tobin: Yeah, I had difficulty because I'm left handed, and I couldn't see, but I had to see out of my left eye.

Yeah, to shoot.

Robert Tobin: But I overcame it OK.

Wow. That's just amazing you were able to go into the service.

Robert Tobin: Yeah, and after that like I say, I had good duty. I excelled in the clerk typist school and went to the Pentagon.

What was the Pentagon like at that time? It was a pretty new building wasn't it?

Robert Tobin: Oh yeah, and if there was something wrong with you, you couldn't find a girlfriend. There was about 10 or 15 girls to one guy. It was good duty, like I say, 5 days a week. I worked in adjutant general sections. We were screening officer's 201 files. I never got cleared for top secret. I got cleared for secret. I don't know why I didn't get cleared for top secret.

Where did you live when you were at the Pentagon?

Robert Tobin: I lived on post. That was good duty. And I wasn't too keen on going overseas. I was very happy there, but I come up on the manifest, but I wound up in GHQ in Tokyo.

How long did you end up spending in Tokyo?

Robert Tobin: Maybe about 18 months I guess.

What was Tokyo like at that point because I know the war had taken its toll on Japan?

Robert Tobin: It was good duty. A lot of the guys mixed with the Japanese women. I didn't. I'd go shopping or stay pretty much – they cautioned you about going out without a couple of other guys at least, so I was kind of careful. As I mentioned, I was still kind of a religious kid and that stuff didn't appeal to me really. I got sick, I got a skin disease and they sent me to Honolulu to Tripler, and then I went back to Korea. I joined the second division in '52, and then rotated home in '53.

And that's when you got out then and went back to work.

Robert Tobin: I extended a year. Harry Truman gave us a year in the Army and I was kind of ambitious and I took the warrant officer junior grade exam and I didn't prepare myself and I failed it, so I took my discharge.

So that's when you got out.

Robert Tobin: Yeah.

How did you end up in Texas?

Robert Tobin: My younger brother married a girl from Texas and my marriage kind of went on the rocks, and I come down on a visit regularly. And I fell in love with Texas.

When was that? Do you remember kind of the year or time that was?

Robert Tobin: I'm trying to remember. I think I came down around '80 or '81, and I liked San Antonio. My brother knew a bell hop at the Tropicana Hotel and I went there and I got a job. The boss, the superintendent of service, went to the Menger.

Oh yeah, that's a great hotel.

Robert Tobin: And he took me with him.

Oh really.

Robert Tobin: I went to the Menger. I made more money at the Menger Hotel than I ever made at the Hilton.

How long did you work at the Menger for?

Robert Tobin: I'm trying to think, about 8 or 9 years.

Yeah, that's a neat place. I've stayed there before. I know it's got the historic bar, where Teddy Roosevelt recruited the Rough Riders.

Robert Tobin: It's a class hotel, it really is. As I said, I made good money there.

Yeah, that's a great spot. Anytime I've gone to San Antonio, I always try to make a point of going to that bar there and seeing that lobby, and all the famous people that have stayed there through the years, and then it's right across the street from The Alamo, and just really a neat place.

Robert Tobin: It's a great old hotel, it really is, and it's got a history behind it.

Yeah, there's a lot of places that don't and that one does. So that's how you got to Texas. That's great.

Robert Tobin: I was drinking a lot. Booze caused me a lot of problems. I always worked. I never was a bum on the street, I always worked. I think I'm paying for it now. I'm not in the best of health. But what are you to do? I'm close to 80 years old, so no complaints. The good Lord has been good to me.

That's a pretty good long time, yeah. Going back to Chicago a little bit, I know it's off topic from the military, but what was it like for your dad to be a cop in a big city like that?

Robert Tobin: Well he was a good one. He never made sergeant. The only reason he wanted to make sergeant because my mother was so sick. But he could handle anything in the street, but he couldn't put it down on paper. He couldn't convey. He was a good policeman. He told us a lot of stories about the old days.

I've read all the stories of the mob and Al Capone –

Robert Tobin: Yeah, and this is a true story. My mother says to my brother and I, now stay in the kitchen, your father's got company. And we saw this guy in a straw hat and spats, all dolled up. He really was decked out. And he was talking to my father in the front room. Then we heard my father take him to the front door and say, good night Spike, take care now. Minutes later there was a burst of machine gun fire, and my dad says, aw geez, I think they got Spike. And Spike O'Donnell was a gangster. He was in the O'Donnell gang. They didn't kill him. They wounded him, but he left the country. He went back to Ireland. But it's the standing joke, don't go visit Tobin. My dad died in the veterans hospital. He had either just retired or was going to retire when he got sick, and he was only 59.

And he was a veteran as well?

Robert Tobin: Yeah, World War I. He was a Marine.

Really, wow.

Robert Tobin: He was at the Yard Iron and Double____. I tried to get in the Marines but the Marines turned me down on account of my eye.

That's something else though. And he was born and raised in Chicago, or born in Ireland?

Robert Tobin: In Chicago.

And it was your grandmother that was from Ireland.

Robert Tobin: Yeah, she was from the old country.

When was the last time you went back to Chicago?

Robert Tobin: I haven't been back. Well I went back once I think and I can't remember when. In the 70s I guess. But I was doing good. I was making money, I was feeling good. You never think that you are going to get sick.

That's probably right, yeah.

Robert Tobin: I was drinking too much, curse of the Irish.

I've heard that before. I'll tell you sir, well I really appreciate you taking the time to sit down and talk with me today and record your story. What we'll do is we'll make a copy of this interview onto CD's for you and I'll mail those to you once we get those made, and that way you can give those to friends or family or keep it, or whomever. A lot of times folks like having those, especially we get calls from kids and grandkids who are always like oh, I'd like another copy of that. So we'll send one of those to you.

Robert Tobin: That'd be nice.

And if you have any pictures or anything that you'd want us to put on our web site or anything like that, just get with Ms. Huffman and she can scan those and email those to us, yes sir.

Robert Tobin: I don't know if my son's got any pictures left. He may have them in Chicago.

Yeah, we'd love to get those, and before we end here, I'll take a shot of you with my digital camera here today, but the goal of this program is that we record these interviews that will hopefully be around a hundred years from now, two hundred years from now. We've got documents at the Land Office that go back to David Crockett and Stephen F. Austin. We've got Stephen F. Austin's original Registro, which is the register that he wrote in long hand. We've got the Land Grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at The Alamo. So we have all these things and our goal is these interviews will be part of that archives and maybe a hundred or two hundred years from now, people will use them as well.

Robert Tobin: That's wonderful.

So is there anything, any last comment or thought that you would want to add or pass on to anyone that might listen to this years from now?

Robert Tobin: Well, like I say, Paulette Goddard, I don't know if you remember her, she was a movie star, and we got called up to the security department and a couple of us bell men up there, imperial suite. She was throwing whiskey bottles out the window. They took her away. She never harmed her, removed, she continued on. But there was a lot of, I met a lot of good people and I met a lot of goofs. But I loved it. I loved every minute of it because it was so interesting.

Well sir, I tell you, I appreciate too, your service to our country, your time in the military. Jerry Patterson who is our Land Commissioner at the Land Office is a veteran and I'm a vet and a lot of people where we work are veterans, but even those that aren't really do appreciate your service to our country.

Robert Tobin: That's very nice of you. I appreciate you coming to see me.

Yes sir, absolutely. Well thank you very much, that will conclude our interview.

[End of recording]