

**Robert Cackener  
Veteran**

**Elizabeth McCauley  
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on January 7, 2010  
Hudson Falls, New York**

**Q:** When were you born?

**RC:** March 20, 1924

**Q:** Do you have any brothers or sisters?

**RC:** I have one brother who's 22 years younger than I am. He's 66.

**Q:** What did your parents do for a living?

**RC:** My mother and father both worked for the Union [unclear] Company and my dad worked of the machines. His job was finishing and rewinding. What they did was cut big rolls of paper and run most of the machine and make bags. My mother was one of the machine bag recipients. She would get a bunch and tie them up with a string. It was pretty common labor.

**Q:** Do you remember what it was like growing up in the Great Depression?

**RC:** Yes, we lived from paycheck to paycheck. It was certainly not very well to do. You couldn't spend your money very foolishly because you didn't make that much. I can remember when my dad was getting something in the [unclear] vicinity of 46 cents an hour and it was kind of thin. [unclear]. We had a lot of spaghetti

**Q:** Did you ration a lot of stuff? Only taking a little bit of everything and not have much of food?

**RC:** We always had enough of food to eat. [unclear] We didn't have dessert.

**Q:** How did you feel when you heard about Hitler rising?

**RC:** Well, being young, I didn't really worry about it too much. Although, I was on the debate team in school and one of our debates in Hudson Falls. [unclear] The Monroe Doctrine, any benefit to the South American Nations. [unclear] We were the German Delegation. It was interesting because we were representing people that everybody was mad at. So, I really wasn't too upset.

I did try to enlist in the army but they wouldn't take me, I couldn't see then. But they said, "don't worry, when you're drafted, we'll take you." I was eventually drafted but still didn't pass the physicals. [unclear] There was a row of tacks in the floor and when I had the first [unclear] see what I can list or not. I realized

that you had to get closer to the screen. [unclear] I got down there and made my face all screwed up and looked at the chart. As I think the top letter is an E, and it was of course I already looked at it with my glasses on so they let me pass that.

An interesting thing happened because [unclear] I was burned 3 days old by a nurse in the hospital. She put a hot water bottle in a towel and put it in the bed with me and it slid down with the towel and got [unclear] between my knees and I had burns on both knees. The right knee [unclear] and she took the hot water bottle off, put the [unclear] pinning blanket over me, and then took it off early in the morning so she could take me in my mother [unclear] once see if I still [unclear]. Three days old, I wasn't my best. She took the pinning blanket off, everything came [unclear] off right down to the bone on my right knee. Now I [unclear] couldn't remember when I could feel the scab on my leg. Two and a half years old, I remember everything that had happened and I remembered there was a scab on my leg and I've still got the scars. It's a bad one and it's not very good.

So, [unclear] in the army [unclear] and they told me if [unclear]. I can get down but I can't get up. So abruptly I flopped over on the floor [unclear] and finally said, "Well I guess we can't take you in the army Mr. Cackener. You'll be more help to the government in a defense job." So being young and stupid, I got the American Flag on and waved it and said, "Well I didn't come down to get a job in the defense plant, and I came down to get in the Army. [unclear] "Well if you feel that way, you can come in on what they call [unclear] service. I've been sitting about a month and they abolish the [unclear] service and I was already in. [unclear] There wasn't so much I could do about it that I already knew I made a mistake. I was not sympathetic to what the army was doing. I didn't like the discipline, I didn't like [unclear] that people were inferior to me in many ways.

Our first Sargent was 62-63 years old and he had rheumatism in his legs. And there is a test that you take when you go in called the AGCT. That's the Army Ground Force Classification Test. It's pretty close to your IQ. And his score on the AGCT was 68. You can imagine how I enjoyed every conversation with him. One of the kindest things he ever said to me, "[unclear] Cackener, you're the most no colored soldier I ever did see." He was from Arkansas. But I stuck with it, I'm oversees on the first hospital ship the army ever had, called [unclear] Katie.

**Q:** How old were you when you joined the war?

**RC:** 18

**Q:** [unclear] How was being in the native sections of Algiers?

**RC:** Algiers is pretty much a native city. It's big, heavily populated of Arabs, of course because it's in North Africa. It was interesting there, I did a number of

stupid things. I ate in a native bazaar several times. [unclear] I did some other things that I'd rather not say if you don't mind.

**Q:** [unclear] How [unclear] got his Purple Heart?

**RC:** [unclear] We went into Tunis. We had a short pass off [unclear]. We went into Tunis and there was an air raid. Lou jumped into a [unclear] cellar. He had a bottle of wine stuck to the top of his pants and it broke. He had a cut on the side of his stomach and he had been wounded [unclear] under an act of war and they thought everybody on the ship was a joke. [unclear] Everybody on the ship, net daughters [unclear] a big room and they gave him the Purple Heart. [unclear] Lewis was quite a guy. I had an opportunity to go to his house in a little town in northern New Jersey. [unclear] Escaped me now, he had a real Hungarian [unclear] rulai (?), licked by a Hungarian woman. It is different [unclear] rulai through the year. Here it's more like converting immense tomato sauce and spaghetti sort of thing with hamburgers. [unclear] But she made it completely different, it's kind a chunky [unclear]. It's a bit little spicy but good.

**Q:** What can you tell about the [unclear] U.S HB Akemia (?) ?

**RC:** It was the first hospital ship that went up in the United States. The ship was ran by Merchant Marine and the medical detachment had nothing to do with the merchant marine life. [unclear] The first trip out we went to Algiers. First trip up [unclear] we went to [unclear] old ran in there and we picked up a bunch of wounded people and brought them back to the United States and [unclear] go to Staten Island, New York. I was paid for 10 days and we went back out again. This time, we went to Algiers and picked up a whole bunch of wounded men and brought them back to [unclear] the big terminal hospital there. We tweedled around for about a couple of weeks then we brought them back to Staten Island. [unclear] In the meantime, I had been seasick.

I was hit in the head with a ball back when I was a kid and it did something to my middle [unclear] ear, so I get dizzy and I was seasick quite a bit. In the army, [unclear] you take the lousiest man to make company and give them to the chaplain. So, I was the chaplain's assistant.

**Q:** What did you do as the chaplain's assistant?

**RC:** [unclear] We go around to the sick people and get the Catholics crucifixes where the Protestants could give them a little cross and the Jewish people, we give them a Star of David. After, we talk to them and see if they wanted anything like pencils, pens, [unclear] just needs somebody to talk to. [unclear] This man's been under heavy, heavy, heavy, battle in North Africa. In fact, North Africa's [unclear] campaign was just about over but finally made her last trip [unclear] Melchior to Iran. We went back to Iran, in the meantime, we had been into Tunis. [unclear] The propeller on the ship [unclear] when we had to come back

to [unclear] have it fixed. We had three weeks there. We left there and went to Sicily, [unclear] Palermo Dock and we're getting rid of the beach there. [unclear] There were shot pretty bad and a lot of our patients died [unclear]. That was exciting because Truman was able to drop a bomb right down the [unclear] smoke stack of an English ship [unclear]. It was big bang.

**Q:** Did you learn a lot on the ship?

**RC:** Yes, A lot of stuff I learned can not be put down in writing. Yeah, I learned a lot. [unclear] I can sew you up if you get cut, I did a lot of that. When we were bringing guys on to our ship [unclear] off the beach, typical, patch him up, go back to a general hospital like Algiers or [unclear] Moran. [unclear] He would be in [unclear] bed later until he got some pulse back. Then from there, we made one trip to Palermo, Sicily and went back to North Africa [unclear], then we went back to [unclear] beaches in Salerno. We'd do what any hospital would do, [unclear] patch them up, try to make them comfortable until they can get up to a place where they can get back to the states to the general hospital here.

**Q:** [unclear] Were you an early participant in early use of [unclear] sulfa drugs, like penicillin and blood plasma or did you just do the patching up?

**RC:** No, when we were bringing people right off the beach to the hospital ship, quite frequently, we'd give them either plasma or plasma [unclear] will do that. We were giving penicillin and everybody worked that. There were a limited number of men and medical detachments who made an annual package of plasma mixed with [unclear] cave come dry then you mix it with a fluid [unclear]. [unclear] It was [unclear] interesting to take the blood off of him. We helped them [unclear] shot and that's good. Good work and no resting, when we were getting patients in with no resting you kept going.

**Q:** Although it was wartime, did you have any happy memories like friends or anything?

**RC:** Oh yes, [unclear] Louie, Nicky and I used to go to shore together. I had a friend in the army before I had gone over seas. I was asleep in my bunk and a man came in, in the middle of the night, and crawled up into the top bunk over me. He says, "This anybody's bunk?" and I said, "No [unclear] get in bed and shut up [unclear]. I gotta get some sleep." In the morning, I had to [unclear] move to the side of the bed and looked at me and said, "What time it is?" It was like looking into a mirror, you've never seen two people look so much alike. His name was Bob Harper, he was from West Virginia, and you couldn't tell us apart. Both of us are named Bob so somebody comes by and says, "Hello Bob," and he says, "Hello." If it was somebody who looked like they wanted to go do something, they'd say, "I'm the travels assistant," or [unclear], "I'm the [unclear] dental assistant." When they are looking for [unclear], "Sorry, the guy who worked for the dentist." Bob's a good fella.

I spent a lot of time with him and [unclear] Nicky, and a fella with the name of, [unclear] I forgot the name to. [unclear] The bunks were 3I, because he slept head to head with me. He was polish, [unclear]. He spit out in the squad room because he didn't wash, he smelled. And here I am sleeping head to head with him. Two people would sleep head to head and then there would be two people going foot to foot, your feet towards each other, and [unclear] Stikowski stunk. Stikowski [unclear] anymore, he was something like that.

I had a lot of friends on the ship. [unclear] We had one who weighed about 290 and his nickname was Tiny, Tiny Landers. He was [unclear] big and strong.

**Q:** What did you think about Truman's decision to use atomic force against Japan, the atomic bomb?

**RC:** Well, I had mixed feelings. I was glad that the war was getting over. [unclear] There wasn't much fight in the Japanese when they dropped the two bombs. Hiroshima, then the next ended up in Nagasaki. I've seen pictures, pictures were taken at the scene and it's unbelievable. You can imagine what kind of devastation it was.

**Q:** Do you think, overall, it saved some lives?

**RC:** Well, it probably saved some lives, if they didn't have to fight [unclear] on the Japanese in one big bang or really two big bangs. We knew that there was some secret stuff going on but we weren't privy to that information. They dropped the bomb. Well actually, when they had the bomb test of the desert. [unclear]

**Q:** When you came home, was life a lot different than before the war?

**RC:** Well, I was older, I was more mature [unclear]. I went back to work then, I was [unclear] only gone for two weeks and went back to work at the old imperial. [unclear] I needed the money and I decided that I had to better go to college.

**Q:** Did you use the G.I. Bill?

**RC:** Yes, when I went back to high school mornings and took the whole math and science, they had available and [unclear]. I had taken a very general course when I went to high school. [unclear] It was no [unclear] whole better than going to college then, so I took the easiest way out, and didn't have a major to get in school, in college. I went to school in the mornings and worked full time in the afternoon and evening. [unclear]

**Q:** What did you go to college for?

**RC:** You know, my advisor asked me that. He wasn't so interested in why I was there. I told him, I went to college because I didn't want to work with my hands the rest of my life. He looked kind of [unclear] at me. It makes sense. If you shoveled dirt for a while, all day long, you get tired with that kind of job.

**Q:** What would you like students today, to know about World War Two's generation?

**RC:** Sure, during the Civil Wars, the war was hell, and it is. I think I might have been a little pacifistic. Anxious to see the fighting stop, I've lost a lot of friends in the war. I think the kids should understand that war is not the answer. However, the Second World War, was really a justifiable war. We had been attacked! Hell, they should know that war is not the answer. Everybody loses when they have a war. You lose some of the prime [unclear] for losing some of our best young people right now, in Iraq and Afghanistan. My first facility will never get out of Afghanistan. They have problems in there for centuries and it's not going to end. I don't see how [unclear] we can get out, [unclear] take over the country or something.

Maybe something good will happen. We've been in Iraq for seven or eight years and last month was the first month there that no Americans were killed, they said on the TV. Every night on the news, they got the pictures and the information, they read off the names of people that have been killed. Then the last minute the night before they read off nine more names and all were from Afghanistan. We lost a few kids from around here.