Transcription: Eric Pietras

Good morning. Today is Wednesday, July 6, 2011. My name is James Crabtree, and this morning I'll be interviewing Mr. Eric Pietras. This interview is being conducted by telephone. I'm at the General Land Office building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Pietras is at his home in Sugar Land, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking time to talk to us today. It's an honor for us.

Eric Pietras: Well, it's a pleasure. Glad I can participate.

Yes sir. Sir, I think I mentioned to you before, the first question I usually like to start off with is just tell us a little bit about your boyhood and your life before you went into the military.

Eric Pietras: Well, I grew up and was raised in Detroit, Michigan, and went through school. I was about a B student, and when I was in high school, I was on the track team. And I ended up winning the city championship in Detroit in the 220-yard dash which, that being a pretty good size city, had the buttons flying off my vest. I was so proud with it. And I started into college and then when the war had started, there was some big bucks to be made in the automobile plants in the City of Detroit which had converted to making all kinds of war implements, and there I was until I got the letter from the draft board inviting me.

I know at that time Detroit was known as the arsenal of democracy. You mentioned the huge buildups. What were you doing? What type of job were you working in?

Eric Pietras: Well, I was in what had been an automobile factory, Briggs Manufacturing. They used to make the bodies for Chrysler Motor. They also made some beautyware, that's appliances for the potty and the toilet. And at that time I worked in the tool crib where I dispensed tools and etcetera, and being young of age, there was quite a long period where I worked two shifts. In other words, I worked in one factory, they had eight factories in the City of Detroit. I worked in one plant and got on the station wagon, went and rode another plant. I knew that, I felt I'd be going in the Army so . . .

How old were you when the war had started? Were you still in high school when Pearl Harbor was bombed in '41?

Eric Pietras: Let's see '41, that would've made me 24, 17, I must have been in my last year of high school, yes.

But you always knew though, once the war started, there was a very good likelihood you'd be drafted?

Eric Pietras: Oh yes. In a city as large as Detroit, there was plenty of information through the newspapers, and I had an idea that once I got down there I would, I'd make it. So there was a moment of hesitation when my physical was read, and the doctor was going to give me a rejection stamp, and when I inquired as to his reasoning in this, he said, "Well, you have sort of a little heart murmur there." And he said, "Maybe you won't go now but we'll take you in about six months or so." So I talked him out of it. He says, "Well, maybe you're right. Good food,

regular hours, fresh air, this will put you in shape." Well, that was not quite the vacation I had been promised but . . . and it all worked out.

When you were drafted, did you have any brothers that had already gone in or any friends that had already gone in the service?

Eric Pietras: No, I only had one brother and my brother was 13 years younger than I was, so he was just a little shaver when I went in the Army.

How did your folks feel about you getting drafted?

Eric Pietras: Well, they . . . my folks came over from the old country and they weren't very thrilled that I had to go off to war but they understood and felt that it was an obligation that everybody was fulfilling for the country, and I would have to do my part.

Sure. Were your parents from Greece?

Eric Pietras: No, my parents were from Poland.

Poland, okay. I wasn't sure if it was a Polish name or a Greek name. And you said you lived actually in . . . did you actually live in Detroit or did you live in, I know Hamtramck is a big community of Poles?

Eric Pietras: Well, if you're familiar with that. We lived there for about two or three years but then my dad decided that was not the place, and he built a home in what was at that time the suburbs, and that's where I went to school and etcetera.

So when you got drafted, how long did you have before you had to go to boot camp?

Eric Pietras: I had, I don't remember down to, I remember I got the notice and I went down, passed the physical, got poked, pinched and prodded, and got a bunch of . . . Then we went up to Fort Custer which is outside of Kalamazoo, Michigan where most of the inductees from Detroit and that part of the country went. And I guess that was only a week or two, and I was on a train.

What were your thoughts at that time? Were you excited, nervous? Tell us kind of what you might have been thinking back then.

Eric Pietras: Well, I wasn't excited. I don't know that any of us really gave much thought to the potential that we were facing, the things that might take place because we hadn't experienced any of this and, of course, everything was new. So we were pretty much wrapped up in that, and following commands. Most of the guys fell in line quickly. There was always one or two that sort of resisted, but we formed an outfit pretty quickly.

What were your drill instructors like?

Eric Pietras: Well, I think most of the . . . when I got into, when I joined the 430th, we had a complete cadre. All the noncoms and the officers were there. And the one thing that I remember was when we got in on the train into camp, we had come down from Detroit on the train. It was a rough ride because just wooden benches to sit on, and cold food which was passed out without much thought. And when we got off the train finally at 2 o'clock in the morning and they gave us

hot chocolate and a cookie or some darn thing, we went into the barracks that we had been assigned to, and there was a couple of noncoms there, corporals or something, and they gave us instructions basically. And then in walks somebody with a fatigue suit that was almost white, and I later found out that that kind of a fatigue suit's been scrubbed so many times and it really shows seniority. And there were some stripes on his shoulder, on his arm, and I didn't realize or we didn't realize at that time but he was a staff sergeant. So he came in and all he said was the following. He said, "Men, we're gonna get along just fine if you remember one thing. When I say 'crap,' you stoop and grunt." And some of the guys were a little nervous. They were thinking maybe we got into something here over, we didn't know what we're getting into. But our noncoms were pretty reasonable. We had one or two that were, used to always take advantage of their chevrons, but all in all they were a good group.

So you did all this training outside of Kalamazoo?

Eric Pietras: Oh no, no, no. We just went to Kalamazoo where we got our shots, and we got our equipment, and then we got on a train and went down to Fort Davis, North Carolina.

North Carolina, okay. So you're at North Carolina at this point.

Eric Pietras: Right.

By that point, were you with guys that were from all over the country or was it still primarily a lot of guys from the Detroit area?

Eric Pietras: Mostly they were from the Midwest. There was quite a few from the Detroit area. There was quite a few from Chicago, and then some from the smaller areas but pretty much in that part of central USA.

Did you know at that point what your job was going to be in the Army?

Eric Pietras: No, we had . . . Of course we first went through a lot of basic training. Hut 2, 3, 4 and all that jazz. And we knew we were going to be on an antiaircraft gun but we had no inkling as to what each of us would be assigned to and etcetera.

But you knew it was an antiaircraft unit. You knew you weren't going to be with tanks or infantry or that sort of thing?

Eric Pietras: Yes, that's correct. At that time, of course, we didn't know where we're going, where we'd be assigned. And we figured if we were in the sands, training in the sands of North Carolina, it was pretty obvious that we'd probably go to Japan. Well, of course, as anybody that's been in the service knows, whatever you expect, the reverse usually happens.

How long was your training, your basic training?

Eric Pietras: I think it was three months.

Three months.

Eric Pietras: And by that time we were experts. We had one or two bayonet practices. We had one or two rifle practices. And in that time we left from Camp Davis and went to Fort Fisher,

which was still in North Carolina, more or less on the ocean, and that permitted us to practice fire at towed targets, and we spent probably a month in that facility.

After all that was done, where did you all head to?

Eric Pietras: Well, we got on a train and nobody knew where we were going, so we finally ended up in, let's see, we were headed to Boston to get on the ship to go across, take us across. We got on this ship and it took us nine days going across, and we were in what was supposedly one of the big convoys at that time. We rode in the coffin corner which we found out later is when you're on the corner more or less, that's where the U-boats used to come up. They didn't want to come up in the middle of the pack. They would pick off their targets from around the corner. But it was a small ship that we were on that used to run cruises from Florida to New York and wherever there was a storm, why they had to head toward the shore. And most of us had never been on the ocean and it was quite a deal. Then while I was on there, I had a job of pulling watch on a life raft. In other words, should we get torpedoed, why it was my job to release that, and I was on four hours and I was off four hours. So that was for the whole day, it kept you pretty well tied up.

I'll bet it did. When you were on that convoy, could you see many of the other ships in your convoy? Were there a lot visible?

Eric Pietras: We could see, we could probably see two or three ships, and I always remember there was an oil tanker in our line of sight, and all of a sudden he wasn't there any longer. And we inquired as to what might have happened and we were told that he was not able to keep up with the convoy unless I guess he revved his engines or whatever he did, and he would have a lot of smoke come out of his smokestack**.** And, of course, that's a giveaway for a submarine or somebody looking for him. And we'd see a Canadian corvette would come around almost on a schedule. They'd be patrolling the area. But we had no idea. Somebody said that there were 200 ships in this convoy, and anybody that's traveled by boat across the ocean would understand that that's possible because you could lose that many ships out of your sight without any trouble.

Sure. Once you finished that voyage, where did you disembark?

Eric Pietras: We landed in Cardiff, Wales. And we remember pulling into the dock and the kids were all on the dock, and they used to anticipate the arrival of ships 'cause we would toss them oranges and apples and I guess candy bars. And, of course, they had gone through the ravages of war and that was quite a delicacy for them.

You got off in Wales. How long were you in Wales and what was your . . . ?

Eric Pietras: I think we didn't stay in Wales. We got, I don't remember. I think we got on a train or something, and we went from there to England.

Did you know at that point where you were going or what you would be doing?

Eric Pietras: Well, we knew we were in Europe, and we knew we'd be in the Battle for Europe. Of course, we had no idea of . . . General Eisenhower didn't confide the plan to us. But we had an idea it was gonna happen. But while we were in England, we took more training. We even took some training from the British. We got time for a story about the British?

Oh yes sir, absolutely.

Eric Pietras: All right, well, the British, their version of a PX is called the NAFFI, or at least it was then. And we were moving from some part in northern England down into southern to an area called Land's End which is a God-forsaken place, and we were going to fire over the English Channel as practice. So as we drove down, it was, I guess, as I recall, it was quite a long haul, and so we stayed overnight. These NAFFIs also had some barracks of some kind. So we were sitting around a table in the NAFFI like a bunch of GIs would do, five, six of us. And I'd buy a round of beer and the next guy buys a round, and all of a sudden we looked over our shoulders and here was some British soldiers. And it was obvious, they weren't jealous but they were envious of what the troops had. So obviously we invited 'em in to sit down with us. They had a few beers and then they said, "What we'd like to do, we'd like to see the Garand rifle." And they were still using an old Springfield. When they traveled in their trucks, they could only go so many miles because the engines would overheat so they were envious of our equipment. So we said, "Well, come on over to the barracks and we'll show you a Garand." So they examined it and they were all excited, and by this time, you know, we'd had a few beers and, of course, we were now veterans. We'd been in about eight, nine months so that made us super-duper soldiers. So we said to one of these guys, "Where were you fellas?" Well he says, "I don't want to tell you. We were down fighting that fox, you know, that guy Rommel. Oh what a bastard he was. He made it tough on us." And then we realized, these guys were the, so to speak, professionals. And we had no idea, so one guy said, one British soldier said to the other, "Harry, have you got one of the photos of the boys?" He said, "Yeah, let me go and get it." So he comes back and he's got a photo of this British group, whatever it was. There must have been 125 soldiers in there, and he says, "Oh, here they are." And I says something to the effect, it looks like a nice bunch. "Oh," he says, "Most of these blokes got blown away." He says, you know, "This guy, this guy, that guy. We're still around but the rest are all gone." And all of a sudden we realized we were in for some training. And we took some training with them that they actually ran, some physical stuff, going down the side of a mountain, and they were very nice but they were very demanding. And they insisted, you know, that you do what you're assigned to do.

Sure. I imagine the seasoned veterans, especially in North Africa, they had seen quite a bit.

Eric Pietras: Yeah, you bet.

So what were some of the lessons that they were able to impart to you guys?

Eric Pietras: Well, I guess, they had certain physical deals where they had, as I remember, they'd have a board or boards that were fastened on to some rails that held these boards. But the board was about maybe six, eight inches off the ground. And what you had to do, and these boards hung on these rails with ropes, and you had to run across. So the idea was that if you hit the first board, put your foot on the second one and moved like hell, you'd be across and nothing happened. But if you, we had a couple guys that had short legs, so they ended up on their backside every time. They didn't tell us what but they said that they needed some help moving a piece of lumber or whatever it was. It was like a telephone pole. And they knew just how many guys it would take to lift this thing. So they'd count off six guys and say, "Would you give us a hand?" So we'd go over, and that damn thing was heavy. But later on, we also found that the barrels in our gun were pretty heavy if you were on the one end. So they were going down the

side of the cliff, you know. It's a real thrill but eventually when we went over for the invasion, we went down over the side of a ship so basically it's the same training.

So it definitely helped you to get ready?

Eric Pietras: It did.

So at that point, do you remember what month and year that might have been that you were there doing that training with them? Would it have been late '43 or '44?

Eric Pietras: Well, it had to be, let's see. It had to be, must have been, the invasion was what, in '44?

Yes sir. The Normandy invasion was June 6th.

Eric Pietras: Yeah, right. So this must have been, you know, March, April of that time.

And at that point, I know everything was kept secret and all, but did you have any idea that something big was coming? That something was building up for an invasion?

Eric Pietras: No. You know, you stop and figure most of us were 18, 19, 20. We had a couple of real old guys that were 25, 26. But we were involved in so much training and a lot of horseplay and fussing around. We knew something was coming but we really didn't understand that until we got ready to go on the invasion. Then all of a sudden you get the idea and the realization that, hey, this is for real. This is not play anymore. There's guys gonna get hurt and guys are gonna get killed so . . .

Yeah. How did you guys learn of that? Were you told that by one of our officers?

Eric Pietras: You mean, learn what?

That you guys were going to be taking part in the invasion.

Eric Pietras: No, we didn't. You don't find anything. We were, I guess, we rolled up to northern England or wherever we kicked off from, or southern, I can't recall now. And we had to wait for we didn't know what it was. And then one night we heard a tremendous amount of aircraft going over, and then we realized that this was, the invasion had started. And I guess this was a lot of bombers that were going over to soften up the front and stuff. And then we knew, this is it. So we loaded up on trucks and we were headed from the port of embarkation. It was very touching 'cause there were a lot of British citizens that were along the roads waving to us. They knew where we were going. And some of the women were crying and all, and you realized that this was the real thing, the big time was on.

What were your thoughts at that point? Do you remember?

Eric Pietras: Well, people ask me, you know, about things that I remember. One of the things that I remember very vividly, we had a two and a half ton truck that pulled our 40mm gun, and then we had about 10 guys in the back of the truck. But before that we had to load on ammunition, rations, duffel bags, everything was on there. So we were up pretty high, and I had a job. I was in a machine gun over the open-topped cab which would swivel 360 degrees in case

it was needed. And as I looked out, I could see all these roads coming into the port. It was like a spider web. And then I realized that everything I was seeing or 90% of what I was seeing was olive. Olive men in uniform, olive munitions, olive rations, olive, everything was olive. And it dawned, not dawned, it made us realize, and everything in those days had to go over by water. Everything was shipped over on boats. How great a country the United States was. All the people back in the States working night and day to provide us with what we needed, and it's something I've never forgotten.

Sure. Pretty much an awe-inspiring sight to see that much coming together for a common cause.

Eric Pietras: Right.

Then at that point, how much longer was it before you guys actually took off?

Eric Pietras: Well, we were supposed to go in earlier than we did. We went in on D3, and I don't know what the original schedule called. But after the invasion started, the German aircraft did not come in the quantities that they had anticipated. So they held us off for an extra day or something. We sat out on the channel, and it was cold, bitter out, terrible cold. And, of course, we had gone part way over, I guess it was a Liberty Ship, and then we went over the side on rope ladders, and we got on what I used to call about a hundred oil cans tied together with an engine on the back. And, of course, they used a winch to get the gun and ammunition and stuff like that out of the hull of this ship. And we had to load it on these landing craft or whatever kind it was. So we sat out there one night waiting our turn to go in, but we went in.

Describe for us, sir, what your memories are of that, what you saw and that sort of thing.

Eric Pietras: Well, since we were in on D3, the infantry had done most of the work, and you could see the devastation and the damage 'cause those things that had been destroyed and had been hit by artillery shells and whatever, were still there. And we, all you looked around, we had a curiosity, a frightened curiosity of what was coming on. But we had an easy landing 'cause our equipment had to have Cosmoline on it, our gun, which is like a heavy grease to protect it from salt water and stuff. But as it is, they hit the tide just right and we got nothing more than the tires on our guns wet. We rolled in and we went to our first position immediately which was a few miles inland, not a few miles, a short distance inland. And that's when we encountered the hedge rows that were so famous in Normandy, and we were set for action. And we got action. We set up in that first position and, of course, we were real eager beavers. We were carrying on and doing everything right to the last point, and all of a sudden there was a, we could see a German aircraft, and we were pretty good 'cause we had spent hours and hours on what we called airplane identification so hopefully you wouldn't shoot your own people down.

I was going to ask you about that. Did you use a lot of flashcards and things of that sort?

Eric Pietras: Yeah, they did that and, of course, they did it up on the screen, you know, all of this stuff. And anyway, we saw this plane up here, and my gun crew was on the gun. I saw this thing which looked like a bomb, was shaped like a bomb, and it was coming down. So I swore this is a bomb, and I ordered the guys to get up against the wall, the side wall where our gun was dug in, and waited for the blast, but the blast didn't come. So finally I got this unbelievable courage and I looked over the edge, and this thing was still drifting down. And what it was, it was a belly tank, and these airplanes, I guess in some cases, would have belly tanks with extra

fuel on 'em. And when he got into combat, which incidentally he was in a dogfight here with an American ship, they release these things so they're more maneuverable, and he had dumped it. So it wasn't any bomb, it was just a fuel tank so nobody got any Purple Hearts for that.

Tell us a little bit, sir, to back up a bit, about what your job was on the antiaircraft guns.

Eric Pietras: Well, an antiaircraft gun, there were two crews. First of all there was about 13 men. There was five men to a shift. In other words, we'd work for two hours and we'd be off two hours. I had one group. I was a corporal, and another corporal had the second group. And what we had, we had two trackers. One sat on the left side of the gun and one sat on the right side of the gun, and they made the horizontal and vertical movements. And I stood behind the tracker on the left side and I was on, there was a platform like, and I stood behind him and I worked on what was called a stiff key stick. When we first went into training, we had directors that were supposed to be used for setting direction but they were very heavy, they were unwieldy. And the British had come up with stiff key stick now. What I did, I stood up, he sat in a seat but I stood behind him on the left side, and I operated the stiff key stick. As I remember, I could squeeze on either one of these bars on either side, and what it would do, it would make the sights move ahead on the gun, and all the tracker had to do was to keep the sight on the enemy plane. Because when I set in the rate of anticipated speed, I did it by squeezing this handle and it made the sight move forward. So actually I was using the judgment. Now, you know, you swear when these guys are flying that they're going a million miles an hour but it's not true. You know, they were going 250, whatever those planes flew in those days. But it was much easier to handle. It was a pretty good bit of equipment. So what you had, you had two trackers and myself, that's three. Then you had one guy that stood up there on the top and he kept putting in the rounds. There were four rounds on a clip, and those dropped into a container that went automatically to the gun. And the fifth guy was on the ground passing ammunition to the guy feeding the gun. And nobody was supposed to look up. They were all supposed to concentrate on their own jobs. And then we had another crew, the other corporal had, identical to that. We had a sergeant in charge of the gun. We had a truck driver. And then we had a goof-off that we made, we made him the cook, but we were eating K and C rations which is probably what saved our life because we have probably died with his cooking. But we were 12, 13 guys, whatever it was. We lived by ourselves. We took care of ourselves. Now once every couple days, maybe a Jeep would come from the command post, and an officer would be in the Jeep, and he'd be checking out what was going on and issuing any kind of bulletins, orders, or whatever it was. But we'd be out, and there was eight guns in each battery, and there were four batteries, A, B,C, D. We happened to be the fifth gun in D battery. Of course, CP had the usual amount of officers and clerks and so forth. But we would get into a position, I can't recall now . . . We must have been somewhere between 500 and 1,000 yards difference between the guns. It all depended on what the strategy was for that location. But what we had to do, we had to lay a line, a phone line, by hand from one position to the other so we could stay in contact and have communication. You know, it was, based on what happens today, it was primitive but, you know, it worked out.

Did your unit, were you guys supposed to move around a lot or once you got in a stationary area and set up your guns, was the idea that you would stay there and man that area?

Eric Pietras: No, there was no idea. We had no idea how long we'd be in. Just to give you an idea, we went in at Normandy. Then we went through France. We had 14 positions in France.

Then we went into Belgium. We had five positions there. We were in Holland for one position, and then we had 24 positions in Germany. So we set up . . .

So they kept you guys moving a lot. It wasn't like you were at a firing base and were stagnant the whole time.

Eric Pietras: You could stay in a spot a week or 10 days. Other times you would be in there two days. I guess as the needs arose, they moved the outfits.

That makes sense.

Eric Pietras: We were out in the middle of nowhere but generally we were protecting bridges, pontoon bridges that the engineers had laid. We protected artillery. We never knew what we were . . .

Did many of the enemy aircraft fly at night or were they pretty much all flying in the daytime?

Eric Pietras: Oh, we couldn't, we weren't permitted to fly at night unless we could definitely identify a plane. And the enemy used a certain amount of it, of night flights. But we had search lights. But the search lights aren't too effective unless there's a bunch of 'em. If there's one light and he picks up an airplane, when that plane sees that light, he comes down at it because he knows obviously what's at the end there. So when there's one of 'em, I still can see these guys yelling, "Turn it off, turn it off." But on the other hand, when I've seen planes up there at night, when they get in crossbeams of about six, seven different search lights, and these guys are trying to get out, and man, they're sending everything out. 'Cause we were on a 40mm gun which was the equivalent of a hand grenade going off, and we didn't set any fuse or anything. But there was also a 90mm which took care of the high-flying, or attempted to take care of the high-flying bombers but that was another story. But, no, most of the flying was done during the daytime 'cause I guess they just didn't have the equipment that we have today.

Sure. The visibility I'm sure was not as good.

Eric Pietras: Yeah, and if, I don't know. I guess they can still get grounded on bad weather now but in those times you had to look up and . . . Of course, we used to sit there a lot of times and we'd see a formation of our planes, let's say, six planes, six fighter planes take off on a sortie to some place, and then we'd count 'em when they came back, and lots of times there was only five or four, and, you know, they had a tough job.

Absolutely. When you were over there, sir, were you able to get much mail or news from home?

Eric Pietras: Very little. Very little. There was always one or two guys that got 27 letters when the rest of us got one or two, but there wasn't much. In those days they had what they call V-mail, V as in Victor. And it was a small condensed, I guess what they used to do in the States would be to write a letter on a certain, maybe 8-1/2 by 11 . . .

They'd shrink it down.

Eric Pietras: And they would, yeah, photograph it down and they would send it. But that was something you looked forward to. Most of us would get a letter or two maybe every couple

weeks but you always felt sorry for the guys that didn't get anything 'cause there were a few of those too.

Sure. At a certain point did you get the feeling that we were going to win in Europe? Did it feel like the Germans were being pushed back continuously?

Eric Pietras: We never anticipated that we could lose. It's just part of being an American, I guess. We just assumed that we were gonna win without any question. However, the big question was when in the hell is it gonna end? When can we go home? But it never occurred to us, we were just gonna be the winners. That's it.

Do you remember where you were on V-E Day, and how you learned that the war was over in Europe?

Eric Pietras: Well, yeah, I think we were, see we went across those 44 positions that I mentioned, the last 24 being in Germany. And the last position, we were on the Magdeburg River in Germany, and the Russians had come up to the other side of the river, and that war was really coming down. And I think it was a short time after that that we sort of . . . First it was a rumor that President Roosevelt had died. And then we got the confirmation of this, and it was, you know, the boss had passed on. He'd been the guy, and the only other guy that was even more important was Eisenhower, at least to us.

So then at what point did you finally learn that you were going to be able to come home?

Eric Pietras: Well, they had a system.

A point system?

Eric Pietras: They had a point system where you got so many points for your longevity in the service. Then the guys that had a Purple Heart got, I think, an extra five points for that, and on and on and on. I was in Europe six months after V-E Day before we got on a ship, so V-E Day was, when was it, do you remember?

It was in, I want to say early '45. I forget the exact date.

Eric Pietras: Yeah, well, anyway, we didn't leave until I guess late, very late November, before our time came up.

What did they have you doing there once the Germans had surrendered? Were you helping in rebuilding?

Eric Pietras: No, they sort of broke us up into groups wherever we were needed for whatever we were needed. When I was a little boy, my mother and father, having come from Poland, they spoke some Polish around the house but they felt that it was important that I learn English, which I wish would happen today for all the folks that are coming over here. But I picked up enough so that when the war ended, I could understand some of these refugees. I didn't speak it or read it or anything fluently but I could get the gist of their question or get an answer across to 'em. And I went with an officer, and we had another fella that spoke German, and we went around and they had all kinds of problems. And we had problems with the displaced people that had been working in the factories for the Germans who were refugees from other countries. They had

problems with the German citizens who all of a sudden, you know, nobody was a Nazi, everybody was a good guy. So that lasted for a while. Then I can't remember the whole of this. But then I drove a two and a half ton truck delivering supplies and stuff to PXs for a while. We had two or three other little deals but then I got assigned, I was in charge of a group of men that we were supposed to guard the cooks and etcetera in this, these were all PWs, and we ran a big mess hall where we processed men going back. That was a real racket 'cause we took one of the prisoners and made him our personal valet. We always got top-notch food because we could tell the guys in the kitchen what we were gonna want, and that was all right. I don't know how long that lasted but we milked it for all it was worth.

Sure. So describe for us, sir, what it was like when you finally got home. I imagine it was quite a thrill to be back and see your family again.

Eric Pietras: Well, it was. I think we spent 19 days on the ocean coming back. You know, you wonder what the hell were you doing. There was no enemy. There was nothing. But we had some kind of engine problem so it was really a long haul. It was getting near Christmas and we wanted to get out. So we landed somewhere, I think in Baltimore, somewhere around there. And we went up to Camp Atterbury for our processing to get out. Of course, that's the thrill of a lifetime but I guess when the very first troops came home, there were bands and cheering. When we came home, like I've said before, we just had some big shot noncoms yelling, "Move it, move it, move it." You know, that was it and that was all right with us 'cause we wanted to get out. So then we went to, we got processed. The darndest thing happened. We got processed and, I forget. I guess they gave us enough money to buy tickets to get back to wherever your home was. There was, I guess, four of us, five of us, that were all from the Detroit area, and we were all going back to Detroit. So we went down, we bought the railroad ticket, and we went over to have a few beers or whatever. And we figured, well this is great, the train will come, we'll get on, we'll go home. Well, when we got there, when the train got there, the thing was packed, just packed. There was no room for anybody, and we turned over our tickets and it said, "Well, the ticket guarantees you a trip within the year, but that's it." So we were standing there trying to figure out how we were gonna get home, and a guy walks up to us and he said, an older man, and he said, "I can't but help and see you guys want to get back to Michigan, right?" We said, "Yeah, yeah." He said, "Well, I'll tell you what. I'm a cab driver but I can't take my cab outside the city limits," or whatever the restrictions were, "But I'm gonna go home and get my car, and if you guys will kick in 25 bucks each, I will drive you back."

Wow. Where was this from?

Eric Pietras: This was from Indianapolis. That was a pretty good buy even in those days. So we're waiting, standing around. We're wondering, debating whether we thought this guy was gonna came back or not, and sure enough, it wasn't too long and there he was with his car. Now some of the other guys had heard this, and they were offering him all kinds of money but he said no, he said he had a deal with us and that's what he was gonna do.

That's great.

Eric Pietras: So he got in the car and he said he was gonna run this car until he runs a wheel off, because he had a son or somebody who could run at the same time. So, as a matter of fact, we stopped somewhere to have some breakfast or something, I can't recall, and he picked up the

check. We really ran into a wonderful guy. And then when we got back to Detroit, the train that had our barracks bag had not got in yet, so we had to wait for that so we went around and we dug, we found this guy about four or five people, civilians, that wanted to go back and they had no transportation so he wheeled 'em back to Indianapolis. So he was running a freight service.

Well, it makes sense. It helped get you all where you needed to go.

Eric Pietras: That's right. It worked out fine. So, you know, of course, I got home and it was exciting. I had been away almost three years so . . .

Had Detroit changed much during that time?

Eric Pietras: Well, no, because it was booming. You know, there had been such a limited amount made for civilian use that there was a demand that had built up that was beyond belief. I had, you couldn't get a new car, a new automobile. They were making 'em but you had to know somebody or you had to go out with a dealer, take him to lunch, and then pass him a couple hundred dollars under the table, he'd move you up on the list. But my wife, she wasn't my wife at that time, she was executive secretary at Dodge Brothers, and her boss got me a car. So I got a brand new Plymouth which cost about, I think I gave him about twelve hundred and seventy-six dollars, and they had to give me a hundred dollars back because there was OPA which governed prices so there wouldn't be any scalping. So that car cost me not even twelve hundred dollars, and I only got four tires because they needed tires for each car they made so you didn't get a spare tire. But you know when I drove down the street, people looked at you, and they were very envious.

Was it a '46 Plymouth?

Eric Pietras: A '46 Plymouth, you're right.

That's quite something. Did you end up going back to work in Detroit? You got out of the Army at that point?

Eric Pietras: Yeah. My education didn't . . . yeah. Someplace along I had gone to college before and I guess I went to some college back, but I wanted to get married and I knew I needed some money, so I went back to work in the men's clothing store, a little neighborhood shop. And then one of the large downtown retailers was rebuilding and had a grand reopening sale, and they hired left and right and I went down there and got a job. Consequently it set the pattern and I did that for the rest of my life. I got into merchandising, was president of a group of stores, etcetera, etcetera.

So how did you end up eventually coming to Texas?

Eric Pietras: Well, I was with this outfit in Detroit for about eight years, and then I got an offer to go to Columbus. I was there, we were there about nine years. And then Hart Schaffner and Marx used to have a bunch of stores throughout the country and they were looking for somebody to run the store in Saint Louis. So I went there for a couple years but that didn't materialize. And from there we went to Jacksonville, Florida, and I was there for two years. And that was like living in sort of a sleepy little southern community. And then a fella that I knew that had been in Jacksonville had come to Houston. He called me one day and said, "Why don't you come down

here. They're looking for somebody, blah, blah, blah, blah." I said, well, I really didn't wanna move again, move the family again. He said, "Oh, come down." He says, "You know, I'll get tickets, we have this Astrodome, I'll take you to the Astrodome." So I figured as long as they were paying for it, what the heck, I could go. So I came down and they said, "We want you to come work for us." And I laid out a long list of requisites, and they met almost every single one of 'em so I ended up, and we've been here ever since.

Been in Texas ever since.

Eric Pietras: Ever since.

That's great. Do you have any ties back to Detroit still?

Eric Pietras: No. I have my brother ended up, he was in the service. He was in the ROTC at Michigan, and when he graduated he had to go and serve when the Berlin Wall was up. There was no war but the Berlin Wall was up. And then he came back and he became a doctor. So he and his family, they're up in Michigan. And my wife's sister and brother-in-law live up in Harbor Beach, Michigan, which is up at the top of the thumb. But we just don't get back there anymore. You know, time goes by.

Yeah. I know Detroit's had a lot of hard times too since probably the late '60s.

Eric Pietras: I wouldn't wanna be in Detroit now. It's a shame because, we went back there years ago and I went to see my old high school. And I almost had tears in my eyes. You know, boarded up windows and just terrible.

Yeah. I've seen some of the website's pictures of, you know, what used to be just grand homes and factories and other things that are now just abandoned and just almost like an urban wasteland, and it's really sad and amazing to see that happen to a city.

Eric Pietras: Yeah. It was a real giant but now it went down to its knees.

Yeah, that's true. Well, sir, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to us today. I think I mentioned to you the other day that we have archives here at the Land Office that go back to the 1600s, and we have Stephen F. Austin's original register that he kept in his own hand of original Texas settlers, and the land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo. And so our goal is for people to hear these interviews, even potentially hundreds of years from now, and be able to maybe learn a little something from them.

Eric Pietras: Well, let's hope so.

Yes sir. With that in mind, I was wondering if there was anything you would want to say to anybody potentially listening to this long after we're gone?

Eric Pietras: Well, I have always said that I wish there were some kind of a way . . . We seem to be willing to pass laws about everything and for everything, but I wish there was a law that said that every civilian has to go and view a, what am I trying to say? A cemetery where GIs are buried. If anybody has ever, and I think a lot of people have seen it in Washington or have seen it in other cities, it really gets to ya. And I think just by looking at this, you get the idea and you see what's . . . There's 131 cemeteries in this country, military cemeteries, and there's 24 overseas.

And you stop and look at those and you realize what some people did so that the rest of us can enjoy the fruits of this land.

Absolutely.

Eric Pietras: And when we have the bitterness that exists now, it's still by far the best country of all, and it always will be. But once in a while we ought to stop and catch our breath and realize how fortunate we are.

Yes sir, well said. Well, sir, again, thank you very, very much for this interview. As soon as we get copies made of this interview on CDs, we're going to be sending those to you along with a nice letter and certificate from Commissioner Patterson.

Eric Pietras: Well, I appreciate that, and I'm glad to have had a chance to go over this with you.

Yes sir. And then also, sir, if you have any pictures or anything you'd like us to make copies of to put in your file in our archives, let us know and we can get those from you or make copies of them and add them to our archives as well.

Eric Pietras: Okay, will do.

Yes sir. All right, sir, well, take care and we'll be in touch again soon.

Eric Pietras: Stay well. Bye bye.

Okay, sir, take care. Bye bye.