



The FBI Oral History Project

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INTERVIEW OF

Former Special Agent of the FBI

RALPH N. BUTLER

Years of FBI Service 1941 – 1977

Interviewed on July 11, 2008

By E. Avery Rollins

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**Interview of Former Special Agent of the FBI
Ralph N. Butler (1941 – 1977)
Interviewed by E. Avery Rollins
On July 11, 2008**

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E. Avery Rollins/

AR: Today is to record Ralph's memories and the oral history for the Oral History Foundation of the Society of the Former Special Agents of the FBI.

In regard to that, Ralph, you agree that the conversation we have here today you give the exclusive rights of the interview to the FBI Foundation for use by scholars for future research on the FBI; the purpose being to determine what it was like to be an FBI Agent during the term of your career.

Now while we were sitting here and I was getting set up, you were telling me about some work you did on the Communist Party-USA. Let's go ahead and go back over that story again. You said you were assigned to New York?

Ralph N. Butler/RB:

The New York Office and then it was kind of odd. The ASAC of the Criminal Division was former ASAC in Birmingham that I knew.

AR: What was his name?

RB: Alton Bryant.

AR: Okay.

RB: Called him Al Bryant. I think he retired and went to Tampa to work for the phone company down there.

But while I was in New York, they always put the new guys on the Applicant Squad and the SGE Squad so I had to work those for a while and then I went down and worked with Al on the Hijacking Squad. I had a supervisor by the name of Joe Gamble. Joe later became the SAC of the Birmingham Office when I was in Birmingham.

AR: Now what year would have this been?

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RB: This was in 1957 in New York. I stayed up there for about 6½ years and worked the airports. Kennedy Airport for a long time on cases there.

Then I got up in SUTECH and we were doing all these types of telephone taps and microphone installations. Of course, all approved before we would touch them. I would never go out on any project except to survey to see if we could do a job and what kind of problems we might expect or encounter.

AR: When you say SUTECH that was a separate squad in the New York Office?

RB: Separate squad. That's right. It was off limits to everybody except for the employees up there.

AR: The responsibility of those employees and agents assigned to SUTECH was what?

RB: Well, SUTECH, we had all the equipment up there for the monitoring of the telephone taps and the microphone installations. They would be interested in those so we would have all that monitoring, and we had to maintain the equipment to see that it was operating properly. Of course we repaired our own equipment. We didn't send it out for repairs or anything of the sort like that.

So while I was there we had to go in and out so much, like the Communist Party Headquarters there, because they used an old battery. The battery was, to give you some idea, was like a 3x5 box or 3x5 card and having to hide that thing. And then it didn't last but about a week so you had to go back and change it again.

This just increased the possibility of discovery or getting caught. So we wanted to get something smaller or a change. So I knew this fellow by the name of Walter Vianella. He was the radio technician and operator. He was in SUTECH with us because his radio part was in SUTECH.

I told Walter that I would like to have a device that we could take and make us a little box say 3x5 or 3x6, whatever is necessary. On one end you would have the AC current and on the other side you'd come out and you would have the 9-volt DC current. That was what we were using to operate this type of equipment.

Because our equipment used an old battery to operate the microphones. The audio was transmitted to the office where it was monitored. He said sure he could do that. So essentially what we designed and used follows the same principle you have now when you plug in your cell phone. You plug it in. It is much more miniaturized now.

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RB: I went out on Canal Street and bought the parts for it. Came back and we put it together. Then I hooked it up on an installation that I had and ran it for about four months I guess or thereabouts and never had any problem what so ever.

Then I wrote a letter to the Bureau, the Laboratory Section, and sent them a copy of my diagram. Roger Schwartz was one of the fellas in the Lab. He wrote a letter back and said it wouldn't work. The sine wave and this sort of stuff was not proper. But I thought he was way off base because I had been working it for four months. You can take and put your instruments on any kind of piece of equipment and come up with a variety of conclusions but you have to put it in use and get the results.

AR: What was Schwartz's first name?

RB: Roger?

AR: Roger.

RB: Roger Schwartz. But then I was talking to a fella back during the convention, regional convention that they had in Charleston, South Carolina. I've known him for many many years too. He knew Roger much better than I did because he worked with him. He said that was not an uncommon thing. The Bureau just could not stand somebody else coming up with something that they hadn't thought of.

So that is how that one went by the wayside. I've still got the original drawing somewhere in the house. It is just on a little 3x5 piece of paper.

AR: Do you remember approximately where that Communist Party-USA office was located?

RB: No, except it was just downtown.

AR: Downtown Manhattan?

RB: Right in Manhattan, yes.

AR: Well that was such a good story that I wanted to continue it. What we normally do when we do one of these interviews is get a little background about the person being interviewed.

Ralph, where were you born and what was your date of birth?

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RB: I was born in Boaz, Alabama. That's in Marshal County about 60 miles north or so of Birmingham. I was born on October 3, 1922.

AR: Tell us about your family. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

RB: I had two brothers, well I had three, but one passed away when he was quite small. I was too small to remember what caused his death. I had two sisters. One of them passed away of spinal meningitis and my other sister is a doctor's wife. He passed away right after my wife did in October of 2004.

She's still living in Huntsville, Alabama so I see them frequently. My mother, my dad and my two brothers that were living are all gone. I am the last one in the family, well my sister and I.

I left after I finished one year of college at Snead Junior College there in Boaz. I came to Birmingham and decided to get a job. I had applied as a clerk for the Bureau but I was waiting. As we know now all the agents haven't had to work the Applicant Squad but you apply and it takes sometimes several months before you ever hear anything. I was aware of that because my cousin was a secretary in the Birmingham Office. She would tell me that it is going to take a while.

The old fella that interviewed me was Henry Snow. Henry was quite a fella. He was one that got shot with bird shot when the Ma Barker gang was out in Kansas. Later we became the best of friends when I got back to Birmingham.

I was told, and I have no reason to doubt it, that Henry got transferred to Birmingham as a result of his injury. I think he was originally from Tuscaloosa. Mr. Hoover had put a note in his file that no disciplinary action, no action whatsoever, would ever befall Henry Snow unless he did it. It would have to be with his permission.

AR: That's interesting. I have never heard anything like that before.

RB: Mr. Hoover apparently was quite fond of Henry. Henry died a few years back, and he still had some of that bird shot in him.

AR: So did you take a job before going with the FBI?

RB: Yes. It was kind of an odd quirk too because I came to Birmingham and was staying with my aunt out in Woodlawn. Right across the street was a family, and they had a boy about my age and we kind of chummed around together.

RB: Anyway I went to every place I could think of. Looked in the paper and went places, even the service station, to get a job. There just weren't any jobs available.

So I went down one day to a place called Avondale Mills, and they had a big foundry and other types of operations there. They made gears and pulleys for, I guess, the military and all the other sources. So I went down there to get a job.

This fella would come out of his door facing the street every morning. He was from personnel and he would say "Any molders in the group?" Well, no, there weren't any molders in the group.

This went on for three or four days and all he was asking for was molders. I didn't know what a molder was, but I decided, my golly, if that rascal comes out one more time and asks for molders, I am going to be one. I worked with my Dad in his machine shop there in Boaz for many years, so I figured well I can pick it up pretty fast whatever it is.

Sure enough the next day I went and they come out and said, "Any molders?" Nobody said a thing and I said, "I'm a molder." The guy took me in, fingerprinted me and did all this sort of stuff and then he called the foreman over and he was the guy who lived right across the street from me. He said, "Ralph what did you tell them?"

I said, "Mr. Standard, I told them I was a molder."

He said, "Well do you know anything about it?"

I said, "No, sir, but if you show what you want me to do, I'll do it."

Well, I did, and I did quite well there until I got the letter from the Bureau. I think I have that original letter. Let me look here just a second. There are two places there where they reference this trial that we will get into later.

AR: Ralph is talking about a book entitled, "Until Justice Rolls Down" by Frank Sikora, the Birmingham Church Bombing Case.

RB: I stayed there at the Foundry and did quite well; never worked so hard in my life. We would make these molds and then we would have to pour them. They would come around with a huge ladle full of this white hot iron, and they poured it in your ladle, and then you would have to go pour the thing.

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RB: When you poured one of the molds, you had to do it real slow and real even. Because if you didn't the sand would get in there and you would have a blemish on it and you would have to throw it away. I did quite well though. I was bound and determined I was gonna do it.

AR: When was it that you got your appointment to the Bureau?

RB: I believe it was the first week of July of 1941. Then I went to the file section.

AR: So you were employed as a clerk, not as an agent?

RB: No, I was employed as a clerk.

AR: Was that in the Birmingham Office? Or was that at Headquarters?

RB: I was interviewed in Birmingham and then they notified me by telegram and then I went to Headquarters, Washington, D.C. That was the first time I had ever been away from home to amount to anything.

AR: So you were assigned and working in Washington, D.C. then, is that right?

RB: Yes. In the file section. A fella by the name of Patterson, and I had an interesting encounter with some of the folks there. We called him Pat Patterson. He was the agent in charge of the file section.

I worked the 3 to 11 shift. I had preference and the reason I did that was because we were only making \$1,260 per year and had to be quite thrifty to get by on that. I chose the 3 to 11 shift.

Then when the war broke out, then they called us all in and wanted us to put in a whole lot of overtime. Of course they didn't pay overtime back then. I had to put in a lot of overtime. That would be our contribution I guess to the war effort since we were not in the service at the time.

The two room mates I had worked the day shift. So when they asked about this, I just got up and went to work. I was working two shifts, day and night shifts. That went on for about three weeks. And I just got so wore out, I didn't get to work one morning until about 9:00. Then Mr. Patterson called me in and began to give me a speech about dedication to duty and loyalty to the government, coming in late. Why was I late?

I said, "I'm not late Mr. Patterson."

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RB: He said, "Well right here is the register that says you signed in at 9:00."

I said, "That's true but I am not late." "Why's that?"

I said, "I've been working two shifts. I'm working the evening shift. I don't work the day shift but I put in the day shift for overtime that you asked about."

"I don't believe it," he says. So finally he called his secretary and said, "Get me the registers." So she did. "See what shift this guy is assigned to." When he found out he couldn't apologize enough. He told me to go home and don't come back until 3:00.

AR: How long did you work there before you went into the service?

RB: I worked there from July '41 to November '42.

AR: What happened in November '42?

RB: Well there was a fellow by the name of Rufus Ward. Rufus was roommates with another guy in these John Paul Jones apartments. We were good friends there. Do you remember Glen Trusty, ever heard of him?

AR: Oh yeah.

RB: Glen and what was this other guy's name. He was in the Memphis Office, I think, when he retired. Anyway Rufus and I decided that we better resign and come back home and enlist because, if we didn't, we would get drafted and then all we would be is in the infantry.

He didn't care for that as he wanted to be in the air force as a pilot. So he came back and of course we both did. Then I hadn't heard from him in so many years and one day I called Columbus, Mississippi and got his number. He had been in the air force but he cracked up a plane in training so they put him on as a tail gunner.

Anyway I came on down and went to enlist and I couldn't find anything in the Army, Navy, Marines or anything that really interested me. At that time I was too young to get in the military without parent's permission. So I went to the Air Force, and I told them I knew the code but I didn't have a lot of speed.

I enlisted in the Air Force and never had the first day of basic training, never fired a gun until I was overseas, and then I fired a .50-caliber machine gun on the bow of a boat.

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RB: First I went to Smyrna, Tennessee and I was there about a month or six weeks and we would practice sending to each other there. That's about all it amounted to. Then I got transferred to New Orleans, and the airport had a building out there that we were in with the military.

AR: Let me back up just a little bit. Before we started the formal interview, you had told me that you learned telegraphy while working for the railroad, is that right?

RB: No.

AR: So that was the way that you were able to get into the Air Force, or I guess it was the Army Air Corps, actually is what we are talking about because of your skill using the telegraph.

So you learned your telegraphy skills with the railroad.

RB: Well, no. That was after I went into the service. I had just learned it as a kid because I used to make these little what they say cat's whiskers receivers and use ear phones for it. Then we would make our calls with different frequencies, different levels of frequency, and I would make my own calls so I would just have a multitude of stations I could get.

I fiddled with that radio and that sort of stuff and then I just got where I got into the code, learned the code, and then I could transcribe it. I know it when I transcribe it. I just didn't have that much practice with the key and sending.

AR: Let me ask you this. You said that you were transferred and assigned to a base in New Orleans and then where did you go after that?

RB: When I got there, I was a private. Hadn't been there, oh four months, until they came out with a directive, if you call Montgomery, which was our regional control office, they would send you the test over the radio network and you were supposed to copy it and then send it back to them. They graded it. If you passed they would make you Corporal; if you could send and receive 20 words a minute.

I was on duty when they sent that thing in so I just immediately called them back and said give me the test. I typed it out and didn't have any problem and sent it back.

The guy said, "Well, you passed." I made Corporal. I hadn't been in very long. I guess it was about 3 to 6 months later they came out and said if you could send and receive 25. So I called and got that. I was Sergeant within about seven months after I got in because of that.

RB: Then I got transferred to Asheville, North Carolina which was headquarters for Communications and Weather Wing. They were diversifying a lot of the agencies during the war. They took over the city building there. If you could type, send and receive the 25 words a minute, and type 55 words a minute then they would send you to that school. I didn't apply for it, they just up and sent me.

So I got there and went through that. I didn't have any problem with that. That's where I met my wife, future wife. I wasn't there but probably six weeks or two months at the most.

Then I got sent to Presque Isle, Maine. While stationed in Presque Isle, Maine, waiting to be shipped overseas, we were in transit but didn't know where we were going. All personnel was treated the same, regardless of rank.

I had KP duty with a Master Sergeant who had twenty-eight years service and was on his second tour of duty in Greenland. The barracks were across the street from the permanent mess hall. The food they served personnel in transit was terrible. Since we were confined to the base, we had to eat this food or do without. One of the cooks in our barracks shipped out and I got his bunk. I found his chef's hat under his pillow but didn't tell anyone. I devised a plan to go into the mess hall and get something good to eat. One night, I walked to the rear entrance of the mess hall wearing the chef's hat. A PFC was peeling potatoes, just inside the back door, and asked who I was? I told him I was one of the cooks and I was coming by to eat before going to bed. I cooked myself a steak and some potatoes. I had some milk and replaced what I drank with water. Having prepared a great meal and thoroughly enjoying it, I returned to the barracks for a good night's rest.

The next day I began to hear rumors that someone had gotten into the mess hall and eaten a steak and returned a watered down carton of milk to the refrigerator. Everyone was complaining about the milk.

I watched and waited for another chance to go to the mess hall and dine again on good food. I was lucky to have that opportunity several more times before I was shipped out. No one ever discovered the mystery cook.

That was to be the POE and later they shipped out to St. Johns, Newfoundland. From there we got a boat to Greenland. We didn't know where we were going until we got there.

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RB: That is where I first fired a shot when I was in the military. The Major that was on the boat in charge of our group and I didn't know him before we got on the boat. Anyway he called me and said, "I want you on the bow of the boat on the gun, this .50-caliber machine gun, because we're going up and they have German subs out in that area. I want you on that an hour before day light and you will be an hour or so before dark."

I said, "Major, I've never fired a gun with the military."

He said, "It doesn't make any difference. We'll show you how."

So we went up and I said, "What are we going to shot at?"

You could see a big ice berg before we got there, so he said, "Shoot that ice berg." I did that until we got up there. Wasn't long before we got transferred from the main base down to an island they called Semitak. The Semitak was the first sight of land as you are going up the North Atlantic to Greenland.

I asked the Major, "What in the world am I going to Semitak for? Maybe I don't want to go."

He said, "Son, you don't have any choice. I am ordering you to go."

I said, "Okay."

I went down there and I said, "What am I going to do then?"

He said, "You're acting First Sergeant."

So I went to Semitak. I was a Staff Sergeant then and Acting First Sergeant for the rest of the time I was down there. When I arrived, the First Lieutenant who was in charge of the twenty-six men we had down on the island was a guy by the name of Bill Spears. Bill left shortly after I got there because he had his time in. You only stay eighteen months in Greenland for health reasons.

Bill came back to the States, and I hadn't seen him since except when I got back to Birmingham in the late '40s. I think about 1949. Anyway I decided I would go out to the old Hayes Air Craft, which was out at the airport and enlist in the Air Force Reserve, because I needed the extra money. We weren't making a whole lot of money back then. Agents were only making \$5,500 per year.

So I go out there and asked the guy, I said, "Where is the Air Force Reserve office?"

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RB: He told me and I went in. This guy is kind of leaning over like this on his desk. He looked up and there was Bill Spears, the same guy I had in Greenland, the Lieutenant. Bill said, "Well what in the world are you doing Ralph?"

I said, "I'm looking to see if there are any spots or vacancies here. I thought I would enlist."

He said, "I've got a Master Sergeant spot. You can have it."

So I took that. I stayed there, I think it was five to six months, and he called me in and said, "Hey they are having interviews in a couple of weeks for field commissions. Why don't you go sign up for that?"

I said, "I don't want that thing. I wouldn't pass anyway."

He said, "Well, you've got nothing to lose. If you don't pass, you've still got your Master Sergeant. You haven't lost anything."

So I said, "Okay. I'll try it then." So I went to the test site and there must have been twenty or twenty-five men there. I think there were nine or ten that passed. I was one of the guys who got promoted to Second Lieutenant. I've just been blessed from the word go; seems like every time I turned around, I get a good boost.

AR: Well, let's talk about when you eventually entered the FBI as a Special Agent and what the events were that lead to that.

RB: Well, I had, back during that period of time, you had to have a law degree or accounting degree to get into the Bureau. We did not have any female agents back then at that time. So I got transferred to Birmingham after I came back from San Juan. Well now, that's another story.

AR: Let's back up. Let's get the San Juan story. Let's try to do it chronologically.

RB: You want to go back to San Juan?

AR: Yes. Did you go back into the Bureau as a clerk again?

RB: Yes. When I came back out of the service I was up in North Carolina so I went to the office there and applied again. They sent me to Mobile.

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RB: When I went to Mobile as a clerk, this was in 1947 I believe, they did not have the schooling that I was looking for because I wanted to finish my pre-law and go on to law school. I asked for a transfer to Knoxville because I could go to the University of Tennessee. I got the transfer and went to the Knoxville Office working there as a clerk. Back then you just locked the office at midnight. They would open the next morning at 8:00.

I was working that late shift where I had to lock up the office at night and that sort of thing. During the day time I would work from the time I got there I would start working in the chief clerk's office. Then there is a fella there by the name of Jack Bledsoe. I've got Jack's picture here some place. There's Jack. He is deceased now.

Jack was the radio technician operator there at the time. He was also the liaison courier between the office and Oak Ridge. So he was going back and forth out there quite often, well every day. He would fail to get back in time to make his daily contact in the afternoon with Headquarters in Washington.

When he didn't get back, I didn't say anything to anybody. I just got up and went in and closed the door to the radio room and I held the contact for him.

Well I did that for I guess two or three weeks or more and you know you get to where you can recognize the guy who it is by the way they send, the rhythm and that sort of stuff.

So one day the guy came back and gave me a QWI and that means, "Who are you?" So you give them your initials. The boss called me in and says, "What's this?" He gave me a letter from the Bureau which said tell Ralph Butler to stay off the air and send in his qualifications.

So by gosh I said, "Okay." Ray Abbatico was SAC and he wanted to know what I had been doing. I told him I had been holding Jack's contact there when he didn't make it back.

AR: What's Ray's last name?

RB: Abbatico. So anyway that went on and after they told me to stay off, it wasn't three weeks had past until he called me in again and handed me a letter. They were transferring me to San Juan, Puerto Rico as a radio operator.

I never had any training with the Bureau. No nothing. I walked into the office in San Juan and Al Slinker was the SAC and he carried me down and opened the door and said, "There's the radio room." I just went in and fired up the transmitter. I called the Bureau.

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RB: I did this over in Greenland when I was radio operator over there and later supervisor of the group I had there, as acting First Sergeant in Greenland. I knew what I was doing. That is how I got into that.

Then later on when I was in San Juan, I had a terrible pain in my right side. The doctor down there just couldn't figure out what it was. They starved me to death on a bland diet of mashed potatoes and stuff like that. Finally the doctor told me, "You are going to have to go back to the States and get treatment because I don't know what it is."

So we notified the Bureau and I went back to Washington. When I got back to Washington, I went to the doctor. The doctor said, "I believe you have got appendicitis." And says, "Are you a veteran?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

"Well go to the Veteran's Hospital. Don't waste your money paying me. Go to the Veteran's Hospital."

I go there and they didn't have any beds so they tell me to go to Bethesda Naval Hospital. I took off out there still just hurting like heck. Got out there and they asked me what's your problem. I said, "They told me I have appendicitis." Boy, they just jumped up and down. "Why didn't you say so?"

"Well I don't know what all these other guys in front of me got. They might have heart problems." Anyway they took me in, put that little old gown on me and next thing I know there are three or four doctors poking on me; first one thing and then the other. The nurse comes and says, "Now don't move. Stay right where you are. They are going to be down in 15 minutes and we are going to take you up and operate on you."

That thing was about to bust. They caught it just in time. Then after I got over that they transferred me to Birmingham as a radio operator. I did that and went to law school full time at night and fulfilled my obligation to the Air Force Reserve by going out there every other weekend or so.

AR: All right. Let me ask you this. Had you gotten married in the mean time?

RB: Oh yeah, when I came back from Greenland. I believe it was in May of '45. It was after Japan surrendered. I went to Asheville and got married in August.

AR: What was your wife's name?

RB: Edith Haroldine Blackwell.

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AR: And you were married to her for how long?

RB: Fifty-nine years before she passed away with cancer.

AR: In 2004, did you say?

RB: On October 20, 2004.

AR: Let's go back to you being in Birmingham and you completed law school.

RB: Completed law school and got my LLB back then. That was in '54 and then in March of '55, I went to the Bureau Training School.

AR: New Agents Training?

RB: New Agents Training School.

AR: How many agents were in your New Agents Training, do you remember?

RB: No. Don't remember the exact number. We had quite a few. In fact I had a photograph of all of them but I didn't have the list of who they were.

AR: I see, I see.

RB: They wouldn't put it in the thing without having the identity of who they were.

AR: What was New Agents Training like?

RB: Well it was quite interesting. I kind of had the upper hand on some of the guys that were there because I had been in the Bureau so long. And when I was in the Knoxville Office, I used to go out with Frank Alden. His brother, Scott, was the SAC there for a while.

AR: What was his name?

RB: Alden (ALDEN). Frank Alden was the Firearms instructor. So I used to go out to the range. Sometimes you would have to mow grass and all of this, that and the other. But I got to shoot the weapons out there. That was fascinating to me. I always wanted to be an agent though. That is why I said, "Doggone it, I was going to stay with it until I did."

RB: That's where I kind of got used to the weapons. Then when I got to the Birmingham Office and every cock eyed inspection that we would have, the boss would call me in and I would have to go clean every gun in that vault. Back then those old Thompson sub-machine guns, you would have to get a bucket of soapy water and run that rod up and down that thing until the barrel got hot to clean it.

I told the boss, he was from Mississippi, Julius Lopez, was the SAC. He was not a very big fella but he sure could get your attention. He would call me in and say, "You've got to clean this up now. We are having an inspection."

I would say, "Well boss, I am not an agent."

He'd said, "You don't have to tell me. I know that."

I said, "Well I thought the agents cleaned the guns, their own guns."

"Well that is beside the point. I am telling you to do it."

So by golly. Then he would come back and check it.

AR: That was in the Birmingham Office?

RB: Birmingham Office. That was during the time that you take, our recorders were like victrolas, these old crank record players they use to have, crank up type. That was what we recorded on back in those days. The needle would cut a little groove, we had a blank platter. You would cut a little groove in that and you had a paint brush. Very loose bristle and you would brush that stuff off. Now that's how far back I go.

AR: Let's get back to training school. Did all the agents complete training?

RB: No, not all of them.

One of them I remember very clearly. They made it very clear that you did not take your weapon or any ammunition above the basement, upstairs. You could go downstairs and a lot of us did it. You'd go down and they would have the red handled guns and the firing pins were supposedly broken off and you could stop there.

They had a huge mirror that must been about an 8'x8', huge mirror. You could stand there and practicing drawing and hip shooting and all this sort of stuff. You could kind of get an idea of what you may be doing.

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RB: This fella, well all of us had gone out on the range that day, and he came back and I think he had an extra round or two in his pocket so he didn't take it and clean it out. He goes down, he is going to practice drawing and loading.

He'd load so when he had just the brass no powder or lead on the end of the bullet. He would take and just reach in his pocket and load them up in his weapon. Well he loaded this live round in there. He didn't realize it.

Apparently there was enough of that firing pin on there that hit it and it went off. That old mirror just disintegrated. They heard it upstairs. I didn't know about it until the next morning, I asked about where's old so and so. Oh, he went home last night about midnight. They didn't waste any time. They packed his duds and told him goodbye.

AR: Do you remember his name?

RB: No, sir.

You know we had our own gun smith down there. First time I went out on the range and shot that PPC, I shot in the low to mid 80's and that didn't suit me at all. I knew I could shoot better than that.

So I went to the gun smith down there and I said, "Look, the grip on this gun (I had a Colt), the grip on this gun is just not comfortable. I can shoot better than that. How about putting me a different grip on this one?"

He said, "No. I can't do that. But I'll tell you to take this Smith. It's got a little different cut." The Colts got a little rounded part on it and the other one has little different cut on it with a grip adapter on it.

So I took it out and the first time I shot the Smith I shot in the upper 90's and then when I finally got back to the Birmingham Office, gosh, let's see in '64, I came back from New York, and I shot my possible. (*Perfect score on the range.*)

AR: Oh good.

RB: Let's see I had, there's my possible.

AR: Alright, when you completed training school, what was your first assignment as an agent?

RB: First assignment was St. Louis, Missouri. By the way that was kind of interesting because the same SAC I had in Birmingham when I left to go to training school was Ralph Milnes. He was SAC in St. Louis.

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RB: So I got there and was assigned to work with Robert Haney. His dad was a former SAC as I understand it. Anyway I was working with Bob. As you know they always take around the new agents, carry them round, and introduce them around to the police departments, sheriff's office and courts and that sort of stuff; a little of how to get around during the day.

I always had a suspicion that they were kind of grading us to see how we would work. Any how I worked with Bob, and we got along quite well. One evening he called me and said, "Ralph, we've got to work tonight."

I said, "Well what are we going to do?"

He said, "Just meet me at the office. I'll tell you about it then."

So I called the wife and told her I was going to be late. "I don't know what I doing but I'm going to be late tonight."

Well I got there, and Bob says, "I want you to go with me. We are going to this hotel to meet with the captain of the Mafia here. My informant is going to introduce us to him. We are going to be two hit men out of Cincinnati, Ohio." That's all he told me.

I said, "Okay."

So we go into the dining room and this big old fat fella, I guess he was Italian, was sitting there and this other body guard I suppose sitting beside him and the informant sitting on the other side. I was sitting across the table from him and Bob was sitting next to me.

So everything was going quite well until the old man says, "We should not be talking so freely. You guys could be FBI."

Me and Bob just cussed the FBI, got out of that you know. "We would like to put one of them in our sights you know." We being hit men.

So anyway a few minutes later the old guy said, "Hold up. Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Where's our manners?" He calls this girl over and, man, she has got all the curves and so forth in the right places, a very attractive gal.

He says, "Get these guys dates."

Man, I slide down in the chair and I thought "God, this isn't in my job description. I ain't going out with them folks." I didn't say anything.

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RB: So she took her little book and she stayed ten or fifteen minutes and said, "Everybody's got dates that's in my book."

He said, "Well try that other little book, you know you had that other little book, try that one."

So I'm sitting there, "Lord, how am I going to get out of this? I just can't do this."

So she goes out and she tries that second little book. Finally she comes back and says, "No, they've all got dates. But let me know the next time you are coming into town and we can set you up ahead of time."

I said, "Thank you, Lord."

AR: Was this in a restaurant where you were meeting?

RB: Yeah, in a dining room of this hotel.

AR: Do you remember the name of the capo that you were meeting, the Italian?

RB: No, no. That was Bob's informant. The capo that he had there, I just remember that fella. It may have been the guy that also had a place out in Greenwood Lake, New York.

This was one of the guys who had a house out there. So we go out there and I'm making a survey to see what kind of installation I could make. I always took just like this tablecloth here, I'd put my tools in it, so if something happened I could just fold it up and get the heck gone and don't leave any of my tools.

AR: Well let's go back, finish your time in St. Louis.

RB: Okay in St. Louis I use to go down to Rolla, Missouri. The agent down there seemed to be out of town at the most inopportune times. Anyway they would pick up a guy with a stolen car. The supervisor on the desk I was working, the squad I was working on, would call me on the radio and want you to go down to Rolla. This would usually be late in the afternoon. I had never been there and had never heard of it before.

I would have to get a map and then drive down there. It would be at night by the time I would get there. By gosh come to find out, this one time I went down there, there was a black boy. He was in his upper twenties or there about and he was in this jail. I swear this jail must have been the one Jesse James was in. I have never seen one like it before or after.

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RB: It had flat iron with brads in it instead of the rods. It had a pot bellied stove in the middle of the thing and then a couple of cells on one side or the other. The cord wood was stacked up by the pot bellied stove for the fire.

The old fella who was the jailer there - as I say this was at nine or ten o'clock at night that I am talking to this guy. So I tell the old jailer and he was every bit in his mid 70's, I'll go in there to interview him. I'm not going to bring him out here. They just had a little goose neck light. You had to go outside the building and bring him around to get him. I said, "No. If he gets a way, man I'll be gone."

So I said, "I'll just go in there."

He said, "You are not afraid?"

I said, "No sir."

So I just left my weapon in his office and I went in there talking to this fella and wasn't making too much head way except when I was sitting there here come a cock roach as long as your finger. I would stomp that cock roach. I did three or four like that. They were coming from that cord wood in there. So this fella says, "I'll make a deal with you."

I said, "Well, fella, I don't make deals because I don't have any authority to do that and I'm not going to lie to you and tell you I'm going to do this when I can't do it. What is it you want?"

He said, "If you'll get me out of here, them dang cock roaches were all over me last night. If you'll get me out of here, I'll tell you anything you want."

So I said, "Okay. I can do that. Now it won't be tonight because I've got to notify the marshal and he will come and get you tomorrow. What time I don't know but he'll get you tomorrow. I can arrange that part."

He said, "Okay." I got a signed statement from him and everything else. I thought I ought to bag me up some of those cock roaches because that was a good way to conduct an interview.

AR: How long were you in the St. Louis Office?

RB: Less than a year. I got transferred to New York.

AR: Where were you assigned?

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RB: When I first got to New York, I was assigned to the Applicant Squad and then the SGE Squad.

AR: What does SGE stand for?

RB: Security Government Employees Investigations. Then I went down to the Hijacking Squad. That's where they hijack trucks with loads of anything that they can get.

AR: About what year would that have been?

RB: 1957 or 1958. I was there from '57, I was there twice. The first time I went up there I could not find a place to live. I asked them about where should I look. I didn't know anything about New York and how to ride the subway or the bus. They said, "Get the *New York Times*." I said, "I've got that but I'll tell you it was just pitiful. I wouldn't put my family in those places I could find." I left. I resigned and came back.

AR: Resigned from the Bureau?

RB: Resigned from the Bureau. They wouldn't change it because normally you were in your first office a year and a half. Heck I hadn't recuperated from the first transfer until I got transferred up there.

Then I went back to North Carolina and worked as an insurance investigator. Then I decided this ain't for me. I'm going back to the Bureau. So I contacted Scott Alden who was SAC over in Knoxville and went over and talked to him and reapplied.

END OF DISC #1

AR: This is a letter to you and your wife congratulating you on the birth of your daughter, Mary Jane, dated November 10, 1954.

RB: She is approaching that age now.

AR: When we paused the interview, we were talking about the fact that you did not like working as an insurance investigator so you were going to go back in '57 and reapply.

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RB: Went back to New York. They would not change it to any other place so I went back to New York. Fortunately, I was more aggressive in finding a place because I asked one of the agents and they lived out in Queens in the Metropolitan Gardens, I believe they called it, that some insurance company owned. His wife worked in the office there.

So I went out to see her and she had a list of people who wanted to take these and we have to take them according to this. Well I kept on and I just begged her and said, "I've got to have a place." I had the two children then. I could afford that apartment and it was a good area. So she finally relented and that is how I got an apartment otherwise I'd have been up the creek again.

Stayed up there again until 1964 and moved out to Rockland County from Queens because that's where a lot of people were moving out of the city up to New City.

AR: When you left the Hijacking Squad?

RB: Went to SUTECH.

AR: Went to SUTECH. We talked a little bit about SUTECH.

RB: One thing they had about SUTECH that I thought I would mention. John Malone was the Assistant Director. He was the most unusual fella. I got an incentive award for a job, I don't remember what particular project I was on. Walter Vianella and I had developed this little instrument that we used on this particular job and it worked so well that we solved it and got some good intelligence information any way. And we got this incentive award.

So Malone called us down and we were standing there face to face and the letter said that it was a secret operation. Didn't expound on it any more and that they were worthy of award that usual wording there and I think we got \$300 a piece. Mr. Malone said, "Ralph, what was that secret project?"

I said, "I'm sorry Mr. Malone, I can't tell you. It's secret."

Well old Vianella was almost bent over laughing. He never asked me anymore.

Then he came down here when I was in Birmingham after the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. He had me and Bob Womack who was from Pearl, Mississippi, he retired down there.

AR: Are you talking about Vianella or Malone?

RB: No. I am talking about Bob Womack and me. Bob Womack was one of the old, old sound agents. He had given that up though but he was driving around showing Mr. Malone some potential projects that we were going to have where we would have to go in and make surveys.

While we were driving out to some of these places and I was sitting in the back seat, Malone says, "Let me tell you about one up in New York."

"This fella sure come up with a novel idea." Because people had gone out to the Communist Party. One of the buildings they had out in the boondocks in New York. I don't recall the specific area.

Anyway they had a building there and they had a pay phone. Well putting something in the pay phone, a telephone tap, would not be any monumental task. But you would have to have some place to monitor it. They couldn't find out; there were no buildings close by.

So they had sent two people out there from SUTech on a number of different occasions over the years and nobody could figure it out. Well, they called me in and said, "We want you to go on out there by yourself. Just go on out there and see what you can do."

Well I went out and I looked at it and I thought well if they can get in and get the tap on that phone there, there is no problem with a monitoring place because up the road was a field and a telephone pole where their line came through and it was far enough away that it was not really, you couldn't see it well enough.

All you have to do is get you a mobile home or a trailer and put right there on that lot. We could pose as students from one of the colleges or something up there since all the guys dressed up anyway.

I wrote that thing up and sent it in. Well they approved it and apparently did it because Malone was telling us about this. He says this guy came up with the novel idea of putting that mobile home or house trailer up out there and we put it up and it worked well. I said, "Mr. Malone, do you know who wrote that memo?" He said, "No." I said, "I did and I can quote it for you if you would like."

He said, "No, that is not necessary." He told the driver let's go back to Birmingham. I don't need to see anymore or hear anymore. This guy can handle it.

AR: You mention a term that people may not be familiar with, survey. What was a 'survey'?

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RB: Well, a survey is that you go out to the site or building that is the target so to speak and then you've got to look for depending on whether you are looking for the telephone or mike, you've got to look and see how are you going to get egress into the place and what your security problem may be. How populated it is and whether it is daylight hours or at night time, how well is it lit? What are your potential problems? Security was always the first consideration.

Then, if you can get in the place, that's fine. You can do the work. It's getting in. We had people there in SUTECH that could make access available.

Give you an example of one that was down right off of Park Avenue some place, I believe, any how they wanted into that building. You know Hoover was very concerned about our weight back then. So they got in, the three of them. They got in the building, no problem. This building had a guard and they were doing their work.

It wasn't from SUTECH. This was from the security squad. I don't know what they were looking for. Anyway one of the guys had a heart attack and he was the fat guy.

AR: This was an agent?

RB: This is an agent. One of the agents had a heart attack. The other two were just horrified. "How are we going to get out of here? How are we going to get him to the doctor and get past the guard?" They had to physically carry him out of there. They eventually got out. I thought that was a prime example of the weight standard. I never had any problem with the weight.

AR: Do you know if the agent survived?

RB: Oh, yeah. He survived, they got him out.

AR: You were on the SUTECH for how long would you say?

RB: Let's see, I'd say, about between two and three years.

AR: Right. Okay. You left New York about 1964?

RB: I left November 4, 1964 and I remember it quite well because it was my younger daughter's birthday and my wife has never forgiven me. I had to leave on the birthday.

AR: I suppose you transferred to Birmingham.

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RB: I was transferred to Birmingham to work on the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing case.

AR: Before we get to that. Let's back up a little bit. Was there anything else that happened in New York that was memorable? Anything that you can think of that might be interesting to future historians?

RB: I'm trying to think of something.

AR: Who was the supervisor of SUTECH at that time?

RB: Jim Hill.

Here is a photograph of the Hijacking Squad and Al Bryant. Al Bryant is here. There's Al Bryant. He is the ASAC. Over here on this side is Harvey Foster. He was the SAC and then round in there in the middle is Joe Gamble. He was the supervisor and later SAC here in Birmingham.

AR: Where are you in this photograph?

RB: That's me right there.

AR: There was the 16th Street bombing in Birmingham

RB: That was in September of '63.

AR: Tell us what the bombing actually was. What that was all about.

RB: They had been working on the case some time before I got here. As you know they transfer in a number of agents from various offices and have a special going during these major case type activities. They did not have what we call a sound man back then. They did not have one in the office that could handle the work.

AR: Okay. So a sound man is a technically trained agent that can handle microphone installations.

RB: Telephone.

AR: Telephone taps or anything having to do with collecting.

RB: Recording and collecting of evidence.

AR: Tell us what the 16th Street bombing was.

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RB: The Klan, they had already determined that there were four individuals probably responsible for it. One of them passed away of natural causes. They wanted to get the information or evidence, on the others, so they could prosecute them.

AR: This was the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church which was an African-American church in which four young black girls were killed.

RB: See there was no murder statute in the Federal laws and that kind of limited what the Bureau could do at that time. Then it was an atmosphere, as far as I could determine after I got here, that you could not really converse very much with local law enforcement because you didn't know which side they were on.

You could go about your duties and so forth and be polite and professional, but if you start asking too many questions then you are labeled. Word gets around.

After I got here. Well just a little side humor there. Charlie Corbett. A guy out of the Laboratory that I knew quite well. Charlie was down here and had been here for some time. He could not leave until he got a replacement. So he called me in New York and said, "Ralph, how would you like to come to Birmingham?"

Well I had known Charlie from going back and forth to the Lab a good bit and then Charlie came up there on specials so I said, "Charlie don't pull my leg. You know how I would feel about going back to Birmingham." He said, "I'm not kidding you." I said, "Okay. I'm ready."

Well, it wasn't just a matter of a very short time, about a week or so, that I got the transfer to Birmingham. So I got down here. Do you want to go on to the case itself?

AR: Yes.

RB: Got down here and we had Robert Blanton and his dad was Pop Blanton. Those two was father and son. The son was in his thirties. Then we had Robert Cherry and Dynamite Bob Chambliss and one other guy, but the other guy died. So we had those. But Chambliss was convicted in state court by prosecutor Bill Baxley. That left these two to deal with then.

They wanted to get a microphone or telephone tap in the Blanton place which was out on Princeton Avenue here in Birmingham. So luck would be with us and one day we were driving by out there and there was a sign in the front yard "Apartment for Rent."

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RB: We had to make sure. All these guys who had come in here and the agents that were working the case, they couldn't rent it because the old man used to come by the office with his pad. He had a like a steno pad and write down all kinds of descriptions of the cars and the tags and everything else. You had to be careful about your activities.

The radio tech which was John Colvin. We called him Slim. We went out and rented the place. I let John do most of that sort of thing because I wanted to play a low key and not cramp my style any more because the old man was down by the office. You never knew when you were driving down the alley going up to our parking deck, you would see him so much. I wanted to stay clear of those people.

Anyway we rented that place. Let's see I have the names written down here so I wouldn't forget them. Jim McBride. Both of us were named McBride. We were two brothers, we were truck drivers, from South Alabama. Colvin knew because he came from that part of the country down around Demopolis, that area. He knew enough to get us by.

We got in and we've got a big room like living-room-dining-room combination and then a bathroom and a small bedroom. The only thing that I could find that was a common wall with the Blanton's (Tommy Blanton's place) was a wall in a closet off of this big room.

I decided that I would have Slim go over and tell Tommy's wife because he left in the morning and where he went, I don't know. She'd be there but I told him to tell her that we were going to have to build some shelves in this closet to put our things on. We will be hammering and sawing and all that sort of stuff. She said that's alright don't worry.

So we started building the shelves. We got part of it done. We didn't do it all right away. But then I tried to figure out how am I going to get egress out of here to where the phone man won't find my wire. I had to go from one end of where the closet was all away across that big room to our telephone terminal. It was tongue and groove hardwood flooring. I said well fiddle sticks. I'll pull up some of that hardwood flooring and put it between that hardwood flooring and the sub-flooring.

Well I took up some of the tongue and groove and there was no sub-flooring. I said my golly. They had the telephone man out there every week or two checking the lines from the post all the way underneath the house and everywhere else so you had to be extremely careful.

RB: I told John I've got to think about this one over night. I go home and I go down in the basement. I bought a bunch of pieces that I had from New York in my personal box that I had and I found some little old wire about the size of a toothpick. Well, it was even smaller than that. Twisted a pair that I had on a case in New York one time. I had that left so I just put it in my box. I didn't throw stuff away.

I took the wire and put it in the groove and then put the tongue back in that and then ran it all the way across that room to the other side. I had to take up a good part of that tongue and groove but you had to be extremely carefully that you didn't tear up that tongue or groove where you could nail it back down because the nails were in on the tongue not on the top side.

Did all that and then every once in a while when I'd take that board up and you would hear that squeak I would say, "John, go over to that wall in the closet and start wham wham wham." So every once in a while I would have to stop and say "Okay John time to" and he would go over and wham on that thing.

It was funny because I had to testify and go through all that. The jurors just laughed like heck when I told them about banging on the walls for her benefit. Anyhow I got that thing in and it was right under their sink in the kitchen. You got some distortions from that but it was the best you could do because you didn't have anything else.

It worked well.

AR: That was the microphone.

RB: That was the microphone. As you can see from the news articles and so forth that these tapes were critical and they were possibly, well one reporter reports that that was what did him in.

AR: So this apartment was actually located in the Blanton home. It was just a portion of the home that they were renting out to whoever would rent the place.

RB: The old man Pop Blanton had a room, you would say two rooms, just an elongated room with a little partition on the back side of the house. It was almost like in an "L" shape with his little room projecting out there.

I guess it was Charlie Waldrup. Charlie must have put it in before but we had a plug, AC plug, like you plug into like the end of your plug that goes on your lamp or anything with a socket on it. This one had about this big around, a little bigger than a quarter I guess.

RB: We had a little transmitter in that and a mike. Charlie must have put that in Pop's apartment. We were supposed to get it out. So I got together with Slim and we concocted an idea.

We had an old 17" black and white TV and it had a loose connection. If you would bump it like that, it would work just fine. Every once in a while you would have to bump it. Well, we asked Pop if he wanted it. Oh yeah, you bet he wanted that thing.

Well, while you are over there explaining to him how to operate that thing, I'm going over to the corner and take the plug off and put it in my pocket. I did and he never knew the difference. That is how we got our plug back, our microphone, well it was our radio. If you were sitting on the street, well you would have to be that close. It wasn't all that effective.

AR: How long do you think it actually was that you worked on the 16th Street case before everyone was arrested and charged?

RB: That is kind of an unusual story because when I got here it was November 4 of 1964. The trial of Cherry and Blanton didn't take place until the year of 2000 or 2002, I forget which it was.

Anyway, I had to testify in both of those cases. It was quite interesting because the guy, the defense attorney, I thought was an unusual fella. He asked me, he says, "How many suspects did you have?"

I said, "Four."

He was asking me some other questions there and I said, "Do you want me to name those suspects?"

"Oh no, no, no." It almost shook me the way he said, no.

Anyway that was the only ones.

AR: How long did you actually, during the time that you were an active agent here in Birmingham, did you work on the case?

RB: On that case I would say, got here in November up until the later part. Well about a year on that and related cases.

AR: Just for the people who may not be totally familiar with the legal process of the case, were there state charges lodged against these men based on the evidence you all collected?

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RB: No. We tried them under the Civil Rights Act. That was passed and we tried them under that and got convictions in both cases. Cherry passed away not long after he went to prison. He was in ill health. Blanton is still in prison as far as I know. He got a life sentence.

AR: Robert Blanton.

RB: Bobby Blanton, they called him.

AR: Dynamite Bob Chambliss?

RB: Chambliss passed away in prison. He was convicted in state court.

AR: What was he convicted of?

RB: Bombing.

AR: Bombing, okay.

RB: That and I really don't know what Bob's was because I really didn't have any of that since the state handled it. I didn't have it.

By the way they had a Director of the Department of Public Safety by the name of Al Lingo. From what I gathered, Al Lingo had some sympathy with some of the Klan members or at least seemed to be friends with some of them. That and the State's Rights Party. There again you had to be extremely careful of what you say because you didn't know who you were talking to.

AR: So in the time that you were working that case as you said you had to be careful because you didn't know who in law enforcement ... Talking about people in local law enforcement, I'm sure that you found that there were members in local law enforcement that you could trust.

RB: Oh, yes.

AR: Did you continue to work here in Birmingham as a technical agent, a sound agent?

RB: Yes, I did that. And I made quite a few trips to Tampa, one to Knoxville and different places in Florida around Tampa.

AR: On special assignments, you are talking about?

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RB: Yes. Special assignments. Give you an example of one.

We had, I get this call, or the boss gets this call and then it is followed up with a teletype. They sent me down to Tampa. They had a case where there was about a million dollars in stolen securities. The agent who came out of the Seattle Office and he was a Chinese agent and had information that this guy that was there in Tampa had the stolen securities.

So they sent me down. I didn't know from straight up what I was going to do when I got there because I didn't know anything about the case. They sent the radio man to meet me at the airport. So I was going to use him as the gopher or my runner if I needed something because he knew where to go to get it.

I was going to be the body guard of the agent because my room was right next door to his room and where they were going to meet. I put a mike in the television. I pulled the tube out of the television so it wouldn't work so I wouldn't have any problem with that. Then I could hear what was going on over there in case things got out of hand I would be available.

Flew in there and got on the shuttle bus to go to the international hotel and I was sitting next to the window and the other guy was sitting in the aisle and right across from us was a stewardess and she leaned over and said, "Didn't you come in on the plane with me?"

I said, "Yes ma'am."

Then she got to talking to the guy next to me. I told him I said, "Look we are two guys who work on the Southern Railroad and we are from Asheville, North Carolina. I know enough about that so we can use that as a cover. So don't, if you get into something just say, "you'll have to ask my partner. I haven't been up there that long or something."

Anyway she started talking to him and she said, "Where are you from?"

He said, "Asheville, North Carolina."

She said, "Isn't that a coincidence, so am I."

I elbowed him and said, "Shh, I'll take over." So we had to talk a little. She'd ask questions and I answered every one of them. I'd ask her some and she didn't know them. Anyway that got by that.

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RB: We got to the International Hotel and I was signing in under an assumed name. The guy that was working the desk and then the manager was standing behind him. The manager was the manager of the hotel here in Birmingham that I knew quite well. He almost hollered out "What in the world is the FBI doing down here?" But he didn't when he looked at the register and saw that I signed in under an assumed name. He left me a note "See me before you leave."

AR: So your typical special assignments would be to go out of state to another FBI field office and do an installation or a survey or something like that.

RB: We did some gambling cases, interstate transportation of gaming.

AR: Were these cases mostly directed against Organized Crime, mafia families?

RB: They were associated with best, as I recall, with like Las Vegas somebody there would take the lay off. I really didn't get involved too much in any of the cases that I worked as to in- depth of what's going on.

AR: The details.

RB: The details. I concentrated on my particular thing. In fact Joe Santoiana was the SAC in Tampa and when I went down. I didn't have anything. I got the equipment set up and it's running and it was in the office.

On the weekend I didn't have anything to do. Of course I couldn't spend any money down there because we only got \$25 for that and that didn't even pay for your motel room. So I would go to the office and I could use the phone to call the wife on that line.

Joe found out about it and he called me in and said, "Do you want to transfer to Tampa?"

I said, "Well what would I be doing down here?"

He said, "Sound work."

I said, "You've got that much?"

He said, "No, if you don't have any sound work, you won't have nothing to do."

I said, "I better talk to my wife about that." Because I transferred so darn much. Not on my own accord but I just got transferred. By gosh she said, "No. The children are in school and I don't want to uproot them again." I called and told him no.

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AR: You retired out of the Birmingham Office, is that right?

RB: I had the only hijacking out of the Birmingham Office because I worked the airports. And a possible hijacking but that was all. The hijacking was about in '72. Three black males hijacked a Southern Airways, which later became part of Delta. They flew up to New York dang near to Canada and then back down to Knoxville or Chattanooga or in that area. I was at the office all that time keeping up with that and the Director of the Aviation at the airport as to where they were.

They got back towards Knoxville and they wanted to land and get supplies, fuel and their alcohol and that sort of stuff. They were also demanding, I think, 100,000 to 200,000 dollars. They said if they didn't meet their demands they were just going to crash that doggone thing into Oak Ridge.

I didn't have anything to do with all that because I am just listening to all this, since it was aircraft and I had the airports. But anyway they told them what they wanted to drink, their supplies, we want gas, we want the money. One of the blacks wanted a bottle of Scotch. The other one wanted a bottle of Jack Daniels and the other wanted a six pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon. I'll never forget that one, I thought that rather odd.

But that's what they wanted. They left there and finally wound up in Cuba. When they got to Cuba, Castro and his bunch took their money, put them in the pokey and beat the devil out of them.

Finally they came back to the States about the time I retired, the end of '77, and the marshals were sitting there waiting on them, so I presume they are still in jail, still in prison.

AR: So they were picked up when they came back into the U.S. and prosecuted for hijacking. You basically were the case agent on the case as far as Birmingham was concerned.

RB: At the time then we didn't have the big terminal. We just had the open area where you park adjacent to the terminal out there. There weren't many cars out there. I found this old car right off the bat because I had been out there so much I knew pretty well the area and how it worked. I had them identified within a couple of hours after they took off.

AR: And that was Southern Airways?

RB: Yes, Southern Airways.

AR: What other cases of interest did you?

RB: Well, let's see. This one is quite interesting. It's kind of a long story.

I got a call from a fella that had a trailer park in Alabaster, Alabama. He was telling me about three fellas who had rented this trailer in his park. He said, "Something just tells me I shouldn't have them here. I believe they are crooks."

Their demeanor, first one thing and then the other. Their coming and going was a little different from other people there. So he was telling me about them. I told him, you know I don't have enough evidence to, that you don't have enough evidence to show that they have committed any crime or something I could follow through, but I'll be down to see you tomorrow.

So I went down and talked to him. I didn't see these guys and so forth. Anyway nothing happened. A little later on they had a bank robbery over in Georgia just across the river from Opelika, somewhere in there.

It turned out that these three guys were the ones who robbed the bank over there. Well they went back and forth on this two lane highway and they were shooting with the police and the police shooting at them. Everybody shot the wind shields, back of the windows out of there. Nobody got hit except for with flying glass and that didn't hurt much.

Well they caught a couple of them over there. One of them got away and we got information, I guess the agents out of Atlanta picked it up from one of the guys they caught. They said this guy was from Birmingham and he swam the river to the Alabama side and his wife picked him up in a Volkswagen.

So I knew who he was because I checked on him. He was out at that time in '72 on parole until the year 2003 for burglary. He was built like Atlas. I mean he was strong as an ox. He'd take a strap and put it on his shoulders and a small safe he would just hook it up like a mover would and pick it up and walk over and sit it on the back off a pick up and then take it off and blow it.

Anyway we had an informant that told us and she was one of the Klan informants. She was not, she was one of the gals, her boyfriend was the Klan and he was the informant. These guys had stayed out at the airport hotel out there, motel, and they told us about something what happened there so that's when I knew when they robbed the bank, well these are the same guys as there.

Anyhow these characters. Down in Alabaster there was a soldier that had teamed up with them. He was AWOL, I believe, from some where in Ohio. Nice looking young man. He must have been in his early twenties or mid-twenties. He wanted out. He didn't want to go on that bank robbery and all that sort of stuff. He's going go back and contact his girl friend.

RB: Well they didn't like that so they killed him and buried him down there. This came out of course after the robbery. So one of them was telling them just bits and pieces about what was going on and he told them about what happened to this boy. I had a photograph of him because I was going to have a deserter case on him.

So I go down. They had rented a house and it had a pond out from the house and around that pond was some place over there, rather vague, where supposedly they just made a surface grave and buried him.

I went around that pond. Kicking this and kicking that I just couldn't come up with nothing so I called him back and said, "Hey get more specifics." Gave them sort of the guidelines of what I am looking at here.

They came back and told me. I went out there again and looked around, kicking around and I kicked a belt buckle. That was the guy's belt buckle. I just left it like it was when I saw that. That was him. They had to exhume the body later. I don't know what they did on that case. That would have been the murder for the state to take care of.

That was a rather interesting case. One other sidelight of that activity. When this guy swam the river and his wife picked him up and brought him back to an area they call East Thomas out here. They had a house and it was one of these that you could see all the way through it from the front door.

Well I found out that he was out there. I got his wife who he hadn't been married to too long. She worked over near Brookwood Hospital. I went over there to talk to her. She wouldn't tell me nothing.

So I told her now look we don't want to hurt him. He's got into gun fights up there so if we get in one it ain't going to be pleasant so we don't want it to go that far and we don't want to have to shoot him. So tell me where. No, no, no, I don't know anything about what you are talking about.

I said, "Look, tell you what I am going to do. You're sitting right here by the phone. I'm going to pick up the phone and call the Assistant United States Attorney I know up there, Macy Taylor. Macy and I work quite well together so I am going to call him. I'm going to get authority to put you in jail for harboring a fugitive."

So she listened and he finally relented and says, "Okay, Ralph. I know you well enough. Generally we won't do this but I am going to let you do it."

RB: I did and I asked her about it so she still wouldn't do anything. So I said, "Come on, let's go."

She said, "Where are we going?"

I said, "We are going to jail." By the time we got to the door she broke down and told me where he was.

I had the guy that was with me to keep her so that she couldn't call him. Then I called the office and got another guy and told him to bring one of the Remington Model A-12 gauge shot guns. The only thing I had was my pistol.

So we go out there and I tell him. The agent by the name of Pete Botkin. Pete was a quiet sort of a fella but a good guy. He is now deceased.

AR: This is an agent you are talking about.

RB: Yes. Now deceased. Died last year. I told Pete, I said, "Now Pete I want you to go around the back and come in the back door. I am going through the front but I am going to give you about 20 or 25 seconds because it is not that far around there before I go through the front door."

I sort of counted off there before I went through the front door and the door was opened. It had a screen and the screen wasn't locked so I just walked on in. When I got in the middle of the big room there off to the left was a bedroom and he come out of the bedroom. Only thing he had on was his pants.

I already had my pistol out. I told him who I was, get up against the wall. The wall I was going to have him against was like right there and off to the right was the corner of the wall and there was a rifle sitting there. He kept looking at it. I said, "Don't even think about it. By the time, I know dang well I can get six of these things off before you can get to that."

So he didn't. Now he is the guy who got into the fire fight with the police over in Georgia, got away. About that time Pete came through the back door. You know we don't carry a live round in the chamber when we do that. He racked that thing back and it makes a terrible noise, very, if you know anything about weapons that is a recognizable sound. Well, it scared this guy so bad that he literally peed in his pants.

This guy says, "Well, can I change pants?"

I said, "Nope, I take 'em just like I got 'em." So I took him to jail just like he was. That had a lot of interesting sidelights on that.

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BREAK

AR: Let's talk about other things that happened in Birmingham. I want to mention that you remembered the name of the supervisor of SUTECH in the New York Office and that was?

RB: Jim Hill.

AR: Jim, Hill. Okay.

RB: Then Robert Soloman was the Assistant.

AR: Right.

RB: There is one thing I wanted to mention although we haven't gotten to it yet but the other case. This is the Viola Liuzzo case. I did not have, I was not the case agent on this one but I had one of the individuals say the Klan was involved in this and the individual that I knew lived in Bessemer.

AR: Okay. Let's back up a little bit. The Viola Liuzzo case was where the Klan was driving along the road.

RB: I've got a news article on that too that will explain a lot of that.

AR: Right. If I remember correctly and you correct me, she was a Civil Rights worker, an activist, and she was riding in the car with someone. The car with these subjects in it came by and fired into the car she was riding in and killed her. Is that right? What year would that have been?

RB: Oh golly. It is on that thing that I am going to give you that's got all the things here on it. It will be in here somewhere.

AR: So tell us about it.

RB: Well now this one says, I believe his name was Robinson. I am going from memory now. He owned the Chevrolet car and had a pistol. He and the informant, I don't know who else was in the car, but I only had Robinson. Because it was quite interesting in that you know back when Hoover was alive all press releases came from the SAC or through the SAC or from Headquarters. Agents didn't give press releases like they do now.

Anyway on this one, this was back during the time that the Civil Rights Act had been, President Johnson wanted to get it passed. He was very positive about whatever it took, he was going to get it passed.

RB: So there was four of these people, one died shortly after this happened. But anyway, Miss Liuzzo was going from Selma back to Montgomery and back and forth and they were transporting people to register to vote and this sort of thing. They were quite active in that activity.

RB: So the car with these Klansmen drove right beside, caught up with her and drove beside, and fired into the car. They killed her but the other guy got away. Later on we went out, I went out to Bessemer to arrest this guy. But we had to go out and sit on the house until Johnson called Hoover and Hoover called the offices to go now. So everybody could be arrested at the same time and then he could give that and then you've got to call him back and say that you've got them all. He'll give the press release.

So that's what happened there. So I went out there and sit on this guy. I had one guy with me. So I sit on his house and he came out, got in the car to leave. I radioed the office and said, "What do you want me to do?"

"Just follow him. Don't do nothing because we can't do it until we get the word."

So I followed him and he went downtown to a restaurant, and he went in. And I waited and finally we get the go, so I go in and arrest him. Then I got out and look at the car and found a .22 live round on that little welting that is by the glass on the door.

So I took this guy and I told the agents with me, I said, "Look when we get in the car and we are transporting him from Bessemer to the office. I believe at that time we were in the 2121 Building. Now don't say a word. He'll ask us questions but just completely ignore him like you didn't hear him. I don't want to say a word of nothing until I get to the office."

I found that that drives them crazy. Sure enough the guy got in. "Well what do you guys want to talk about? Don't you want to hear my side of the story?" He just asked all kinds of questions and we just completely ignored him.

When we got to the office and sit down, there were three of us in on the interview. I was the prime guy, the lead guy, and so as you know making the 302 we have to read and initial that it is true and correct. All three of us did that.

RB: Time went on and I had retired from the Bureau. Liuzzo had sued in Federal Court for monetary damages in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I was working for AmSouth Bank as Director of Security at the time. So when I got that subpoena, I called the U.S. Attorney's Office and talked to the guy who issued the subpoena and I said, "Fella, I just retired from the bank and that's been quite a number of years ago. Why don't you get one of the other guys? There are two others on there."

He said, "I can't."

I said, "You can't locate them?"

He said, "Locating them is not the problem, they are both dead. You are the only one of them that is alive." So I had to go testify in that case and of course we won it. I thought that was most unusual. When I got that guy to the office though he couldn't wait to tell us everything. He told us the whole story.

AR: Do you remember the man's name?

RB: That was Robinson I believe. It may be in that article there.

AR: Do you remember ... and I suppose that Johnson made the press release?

RB: Oh yes, Johnson made the press release.

AR: Just as a side, I remember that there was some criticism of Johnson later on that he prejudiced the case by making such a big deal out of the fact that the FBI had done its work so well. It sounded like it was a good job.

RB: The only other thing I've got here to give you an idea of my activities. These were daily or weekly type things. I was Relief on the SAC's desk. I was the sound man or technical coordinator. Back then, do you remember when they had that break-in in the office in Pennsylvania?

AR: Media, Pennsylvania.

RB: Well Slim and I, Colvin, went to a class with the Bureau to put in that where you literally tape the walls of all the office sides. That was quite an undertaking to do that, rather crude type thing. That's what they wanted, that's what we did.

RB: We taped all of our offices, our RAs. It worked quite well. In fact up in Florence, we had a big fella out there and had it to where, if it went off, it notified him at home. It went off, what it was was that during the day it gets hot as heck and during the night it cools off and that heat contraction had separated the tape where you had to slice it. Nothing you could do about it. It went off.

He jumps up with just his pajamas on and puts his bath robe on and puts his weapon on the outside of his bath robe and he shows up at the office.

We had some interesting cases like that but nothing every happened.

AR: Yeah, I remember that.

RB: Like I say I had relief on that, a technical coordinator, police coordinator and instructor, sound man, informant coordinator, taught two semesters at the University of Alabama as adjunct professor in the Criminal Justice Program and was a firearms instructor. And then worked cases.

AR: So you were busy.

RB: Oh yeah, well Roy Kirkpatrick was the SAC here when I retired. Roy was an agent in the St. Louis Office, one of my first offices. I knew him but didn't know him well because I was always out of the office so darn much with cases I was working.

I got in my last year of the Bureau. I got an outstanding on my efficiency report. After that he was the Director of Security for UAB over there. He called me and said, "Let's have lunch. Let's go out to Bessemer and play a round of golf." I said, "Okay."

So when we were playing golf he said, "You know I want to tell you something." I thought what in the bug eyed world does he have in mind now. He said, "You know when you left the office, I had no idea of how much work you had and what kinds of work you had but when you left, I had to assign what you had been working to three different guys. I couldn't assign it all to one. I thought you would like to know that."

I said, "Well by golly that is interesting."

AR: How long were you actually accredited for being an FBI agent? I see you retired December 31, 1977. How long were you agent? How many years did you have as an agent?

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RB: Let's see. Went in in '54, '55. 1955 to 1977, that's 22 years there. With the Bureau I had about 10 years.

AR: And you get credit for your military time.

RB: Three years, so I had a good bit.

AR: What did you do after you retired?

RB: I went with AmSouth Bank for 10 years and then every officer had to retire at 65 so had to retire there. Then I didn't go for three. I figured I might strike out.

AR: What was your position with AmSouth?

RB: I was Director of Security.

AR: Covering what area?

RB: Well all the area they had. Now when I first went there, they were limited to Alabama and then they had interstate banking and we bought banks all over the darn place; Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana. We had all of those.

AR: So you have been retired now for

RB: Let's see I retired from there in '88.

AR: What did you do after that?

RB: Nothing.

AR: You were telling me that after your wife passed away that you moved here into your present home. Your daughter lives a couple of houses down. So I guess all in all life is good?

RB: Oh yes. I've been blessed so much it is just amazing. I know I didn't deserve it but that is the way it turned out.

Well when I went to Asheville, it was just a week or so that I met her. It was just like flipping a light bulb when I saw her. I thought that is the girl. I didn't know her from Adam. I asked her later if I could call on her and she said, "Yes."

RB: So I went out to her house, she lived next door to a church. So I had to catch the bus and go out there. I was in the service. I would go out there and when I got off I would walk by that church and look up and there was a big sign up "Horney Heights Baptist Church." That was actually up there. I thought "What have I done?" There was just a driveway that separated her from the church. I thought is her dad a preacher?

Well I got this far so I'll just go on. No relation what so ever. I never did mention that church. I thought that was kind of funny.

END OF FORMAL INTERVIEW

AR: We've discovered one other thing that Ralph needs to talk about. So we will continue the interview.

RB: In 1950 when I was in the Birmingham Office, I had to deal with. I was an SE at that time,

AR: Special employee?

RB: Special employee. Had to deal with taking the photographs or getting photographs made to a commercial outfit here in Birmingham for the agents. I thought that was a little bit odd for the chain of evidence to have to do that when we could make them ourselves in the office.

I got into how to make photographs, develop them, print them, and enlarge them and that sort of thing. I decided that I could do that without any problem so I talked to the boss about it and the boss wrote the Bureau. The Bureau came back with a letter and said that I could do that sort of thing. The Bureau liked the suggestion.

So that is what I did. I put in a photo lab there and did the work. I went out with a couple of the agents one time to Bessemer to find this fella. I had made photographs for them so I just made one for my self and put it in my coat pocket.

So when I got out there they went into this business to do whatever they were going to do, I don't recall what they were going to do there. I sat in the car. They were gone quite a while and this fella came walking down the street and went into this restaurant right in front of where I was sitting in the car.

I thought he looked familiar. I thought what the heck so I looked at my photograph in my pocket and that's the guy they was looking for. I kept wondering if they were going to come out because I couldn't go in and do anything with him as a special employee.

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RB: So I sat there and sure enough they came out shortly thereafter, and I told them where he was and they went in and got him. So that paid off for my photographic work.

AR: Sure it did. Good, good.

RB: Then I went to the police department and the sheriff's office, they didn't have it. So I got both of those started doing their own photographic work.

AR: Good, good. Let's look at some of the photographs that you have here.

RB: This one speaks for itself. We'd had the sheriff's office out there. Their article was in the paper. (*See Addendum A, Photo 1.*)

RB: This photograph is one where we had the firearms. I was down on the hijacking squad at the time. There is Charlie Robinson. Charlie was the Firearms instructor there. (*Addendum A, Photo 2.*)

AR: Okay this is photo number 3 (*Addendum A*) and Robinson is on the far left and Malone is on the right and you are the agent next to him.

RB: Yes, and on my squad I shot the highest score.

This is one of the in-services I went to. Remember Jim he was down at Quantico.

AR: That's you there.

RB: That's me.

AR: Ralph in photograph #4 (*Addendum A*) is the sixth person from the left.

RB: That photograph of the Birmingham Police Department Officers we had out there when we were giving a demonstration of the Model 870, shotgun. (*Addendum A, Photo 1.*) They carried those in the cars and the reason we were given this thing [was] because most of these guys here were the supervisors of some sort. Anyway, the Birmingham Police Department, would have two guys riding together.

They would alternate. One day one would drive and the next day the other one would drive. These guys would get in the car, they would have their shotgun in that mount between the two guys and the driver would say, "Did you check to see that the safety is on?"

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RB: The guy would reach over and pull the trigger and blow a hole in the top of the roof. They did that two or three times. So this I think we were going out and demonstrating the use of that gun and the safety of that gun and how to use it.

* * *

Mr. Butler added two more stories to further enrich his interview:

After Pearl Harbor, Mr. Lou Nichols, who was in the highest echelons of the Bureau, came to the file section and told me he was putting me on one of the entrances to the file section. And, no one was to be admitted in the file section unless I saw their identification badge for employees of the file section and badge or credentials for Agents. He stressed that there were no exceptions.

Then he turned to go into the file section. I stopped him and asked for his identification. He said, "You know me and its ok." I said, "No, I have to see your badge." He said, "OK." He added that, if I let him in without seeing his badge, he would have fired me. After that, we got along real good.

Later, Mr. Nichols came to me and wanted me to be in a film clip that Movietone News was making on the Bureau. I did not have a speaking part but had to go get a file for one of the Agents.

In December 1941, I came to Birmingham and took a girl to the Alabama Theater. During intermissions, this file clip came up and my date jumped up and hollered, "That's you." I had to talk loud and say 'sit down'. I did not want to call attention to us.

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ADDENDUM A

Photo 1 – Article from the *Anniston Star*,
“Marksmanship Course Means Sore Fingers”

Photo 2 – Firearms training

Photo 3 – Firearms with SAC Malone

Photo 4 – In-service Training Class

ADDENDUM B

PERSONAL MEMORABILIA

Photo of Mr. Butler with portrait of his late wife

Photo of Mr. Butler in his Memorabilia Corner in his home

Amateur Radio Operator License

Documents for assumed identity – used in New York

And a military access card for Butler, the radio operator

Retirement Plaque

Commendation Letter from J. Edgar Hoover















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Federal Bureau of Investigation
United States Department of Justice
Washington 25, D. C.

March 23, 1950

Mr. Ralph N. Butler
Federal Bureau of Investigation
U. S. Department of Justice
300 American Life Building
Birmingham 3, Alabama

Dear Mr. Butler:

The Bureau has carefully considered the suggestion recently made by you to your Special Agent in Charge to the effect that you could handle certain of the photographic work of the Birmingham Division, which is presently being handled on a commercial contract basis.

I want to advise you that the Bureau has favorably acted upon your suggestion and I want to take this opportunity to express to you my sincere appreciation for your continued interest in the work of the Bureau, which is evidenced by this suggestion made by you.

I do hope that you will not hesitate to advise the Bureau concerning other suggestions of yours in the future.

Sincerely,

J. Edgar Hoover

