My name is Tammy Lien and I'm in history 499. Today is October 27, 1984. I'm conducting an interview* with the World War I veteran Joeseph Ribinger.

*(I interviewed Mr. Ribinger once before, using the conventional answer/question format. To my disappointment, the tape did not result with an audible sound quality, so I arranged a second interview. Mr. Ribinger told me that he had been asked to give a speech to a group on Armistice Day, and asked me if I would record that in lieu of the process we had used prior. He had incorporated his answers to my questions into his speech. The following in that result.)

When Joe Eckelson asked me to talk to the group, a few days before Armistice Day, to tell my stories of World War I, I could not possibly have refused, that would have been unpatriotic to say the least. So here I am.

When I was a youngster way, way back, there were still a few Civil War veterans around. And of course there were many Spanish-American War veterans. When I was at school, in my Junior year, I roomed with a proctor of the University who was a veteran of the Indian Wars. A member of Custer's army who was not annihilated. Whenever these people told me stories of their experience I was very much interested. And since practically all of you were just a glint in the eyes of your parents at the time of World War I, I hope you will be interested in my story.

When the war broke out in 1917, President Wilson's fiery oratory just enthused the whole country in favor of the war. Practically every student in the Universities tried for the first officers training corp at Plattsburg, New York. I was among them. When I took my physical, despite the fact that I ate about six bananas, they found that I was about four pounds underweight, which ruled me out. Latter on these strict rules were relaxed and it was not as difficult to get into these camps. So I immediately volunteered for service in the Sanitary Corp with the idea of making use of my training in the army. I also at the
time accepted an assistancy in the botany department of the University of Michigan, where at the end of the year, I was given the master's degree. And I heard nothing about the army until the following May of 1918, when I received three sets of army induction papers. One for the draft—one for the medical corp, and one for the sanitary corp. I have these papers right here with you as proof. So I immediately went home. I had a couple of weeks before going into the army. And I presented first the draft papers to the draft board, and showed them the other papers which of course I preferred to use. But, the President of the draft board said "Look, the date of our papers preceded the date on the other papers by a few days, so we must first fill our quota." Little did I suspect that was his main objective. I followed his instructions, but what I should have done is just disregard them and used my papers as induction into the sanitary corp where I was ordered to go to Yale for a preliminary course and in three or four weeks, I would have received my commission. But I thought well, I better follow the draft boards instructions, it seemed logical if you considered the dates. According to the president of the board, as soon as I showed my other papers, they would shoot me right up to Yale. Well, I still have these papers in the archives, and I was never able to make them good.

I went down to Spartanburg, South Carolina and in four weeks after tropical sun in the month of July we were shipped back to the port of embarkation in New York, put on a transport ship and zig-zagged across the Atlantic Ocean. Zig-zagging to avoid enemy submarines. We landed at Brest in France. Then another week we were put on animal box cars and shipped eastward to the front. By that time the battle of Chateau Thiery had been fought. The point that was closest to Paris that the Germans got in the war. They were still cleaning up the debris of the Battle of
Chateau Thiery, and we landed in the midst of the Battle of the Argonne. Within a few days we were placed right between the first and second lines of the battle. Luckily, the Germans were retreating rapidly, and we were not in too much danger. But the living conditions were another story. We were in the Battle of the Argonne during the rainy season, and it drizzled and rained for months at a time. The mud was knee deep along the roads. No food was allowed to come to the front, the order being given that only ammunition trains were to proceed. So that one time during a 48 hour period, soldiers received just a dog biscuit and a little water in their canteens. And that was it. Were it not for a hot bowl of soup in a French kitchen, we might have died of starvation or caught pneumonia. Sleeping conditions were very bad. Remember, this was a trench war, and if you didn't sleep underground in the cots provided, you selected a shell hole so as to avoid the danger from the artillery if possible, because the artillery was shooting right over our heads, in our position.

We had in our outfit, a cranky army sergeant, who had been in the army for about 20-30 years, whom we all detested. One day while repairing roads at the front to make them passable--this army sergeant selected me to remove the water in a shell hole and throw this water over a six foot high embankment, with a flat shovel. And I protested, saying let me get an empty tin can and bail the water out. But no, he insisted I do it with a flat shovel, which was an impossible task. And I was irritated enough to tell him. I disobeyed his order, threw down my shovel, and said, I won't do it. Whereupon he threatened to turn me into the skipper, the captain of the company. I paid no attention to that. However, while we were eating lunch that day a special messenger came up from company headquarters, and he told me that the Captain wanted to see me right away. I almost sunk to the ground and I said
to myself, that S.O.B actually turned me in as he had promised to do. And I walked back to company headquarters, about a mile and a half, thinking I really had committed a serious crime. Because to disobey an officer at the front in a time of war, you could be shot at sunrise. When I did come to company headquarters, all of the officers jumped out of their seats shook my hand and congratulated me. And I was so dumbfounded with surprise that I couldn't say a word. It turned out that the Captain received a telegram from army headquarters, signed by General Pershing, ordering me to take an exam for a commission, at the city of Blois in the west of France.

Now let me go back a little, before reporting for service in the army, I must tell you about what happened. My sister had a job in the law division of customs, and her superior was Mulvaney, a classmate of Mr. Tumulty, secretary to President Wilson in the White House. When my sister told him my efforts to get in the special service, he was kind enough to write a letter to his classmate, asking him to do what he could for me to see that I entered the proper service. I went down to Washington and had an interview, and Mr. Tumulty promised to do what he could. I heard President Wilson talking to someone in the oval office, behind closed doors. And as a youngster of 21 years of age, that in itself was quite a thrill. However, I entered the army, knew nothing about it, found myself at the front, at the Battle of Argonne, and then this telegram arrived. I couldn't get out of the outfit fast enough. The major of our regiment took me by jeep to the railroad station and I boarded the train for Bar le Duc, a town in eastern France, where I was to catch the regular gauge railroad. I was not supposed to go to Paris as American Soldiers were always routed around Paris, they weren't allowed in the city itself during the war. But I was not going to
forego the first opportunity of seeing Paris. So I got my ticket for Paris. I arrived at Bar le Duc at about 11 o’clock at night and an American soldier befriended me. He asked me where I was going, took my bag for me, and gave me bread tickets which were very scarce at that time during war. And after a short walk I arrived at the train station to go to Paris. He said, put your pack and belongings down and get into line for your ticket, he said he’d take care of my bag. He said he’d help me in every way possible, so I did just that. But when I returned after buying my ticket, I found the American soldier gone, together with my bag of clothes. I just had the uniform on my back. However, I boarded the train for Paris as I was, then unbelievably I landed in Paris right smack on Armistice Day. From the Battle of the Argonne to the wonderful city of Paris. Well, that day was just indescribable. Pandemonium broke loose. Soldiers from all nations of the world marched down the Champ d’Elysee. Women were hugging the soldiers, it was a real sight to see. The celebration was tremendous. To give you an idea of how the French felt at the time, I went into a restaurant for lunch, and sat at a table with two Red Cross volunteer officers. And at the table next to us was a family of French people. The man had a goutee beard, looked as if he were a profiessor or a physician or something. He came over to me and said in french, "for what the Americans have done for France, I would consider it an honour to treat you to a bottle of champagne.” And sure enough, he ordered a bottle of champagne for us. And since the two redcoss officers didn’t drink, I had the whole bottle to myself. So that gives you an idea of how the French felt about us at that time.

My pass for Paris ordered me to take the train for Blois going west within six hours. But, I was not going to leave Paris on a great occasion like Armistice Day. So I thought I’d stay an extra day and the next
morning when I tried to get out of Paris, sure enough, one of these MP's crawled out of the woodwork and wanted to see my papers. He said "But you were supposed to leave here 24 hours ago," and he arrested me. Brought me to the desk of the officer in charge of the railroad station. And the officer asked, "how come soldier you didn't leave 24 hours ago?"

Now, when you're in the army, you live by your wits. Immediately the story of my stolen belongings came to mind, which happened in Bar le Duc 110 miles away. So I said to the officer, I was going to leave on time, and I told the story of how my stolen belongings, eaving out that it happened elsewhere, making believe that it happened in his Railroad station. So, the officer banged his fist and balled the sergent who arrested me out good and proper, telling him that it was the sixth case of that kind that happened in that railroad station, and that it must stop. And wrote out a pass for me to board the next train for Blois.

Little did I know that I barely escaped the clutches of "Hard Boil" Smith, who was in charge of American prisoners in Paris, who abused them terribly stealing their belongings and beating them up; who was latter indicted for his misdeeds after the war. I boarded the train for Blois and reported to the committee for examining soldiers for commissions. The chairman of the committee sent a telegraph to Pershing's headquarters in France, asking in view of the armistice, whether we should proceed with my examination. He was told to do so since I was already there. And I have the distinction of being the very last man in World War I to be examined for a commission. I hurried back to my outfit, I didn't want to be absent if my commission arrived there. I had passed the exam, but I heard nothing about my commission. Since it takes quite a long time to send an army of four million men back to the states, the army allowed soldiers who had at least two years training in a University
in the states to attend special courses at French and British universities. I took advantage of that, knowing that my outfit would probably be the last one to leave France. I thought I couldn't spend much time better than attending a French University. It happened, and it's a story in itself, that I actually attended two universities. The University of Toulouse and the University of Mont Pelier. And that is yet another distinction, I was probably the only soldier in the army to attend two universities. After this was over, I found out that records for commission were kept at Chartre in France. And since this was on the way to the place of embarkation, I decided to go and find out what happened to my commission. I was told that I had passed and that I was recommended for a commission in the reserves. When I got back to the states, I applied for this and was made a second Lieutenant, promoted to first Lieutenant a short time after. I was placed in charge of the water supply of the 77th. division. Then I met my wife Irene. When we were married she was adamant about going to camp for two weeks, which was required of all reserve officers, she did not want to do that. So I was forced to resign, and that was just too bad because I might have been a four star general by now. That, in a nutshell, is my story of my service in the army during World War I.