

Interviewer

Today is September 9, 2013. Weâ€™re here in the studio for the Center for Oral History at West Point with Father William De Biaseâ€”sir, thank you very much for being with us today.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh, itâ€™s nice to be here.

Interviewer

Well sir, if you could spell your name please, first and last, for the transcriber.

Fr. W. De Biase:

William, which is the basic William, okay? And then last name is two words, D-E, and the B-I-A-S-E.

Interviewer Interviewer

Okay.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Both the D and the B are capitalized.

Interviewer

And I see youâ€™re dressed for your occupation.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeahâ€”Iâ€™m a Roman Catholic priest, Franciscan Order, if you are familiar with the Catholic denomination. We became â€” the order started in Assisi in Italy, and has continued for 800 years.

Interviewer

Long lineage.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Long lineage.

Interviewer

Yes sir.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Weâ€™ve been around for a long time.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm. Well sir, where are you originally from?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Iâ€™m originally from New York Cityâ€”Queens. A section in Queens called Middle Village. Middle Village, that little section of Queens, 90% of that area were either firemen, policemen, or some sort of civil service people. It was just the emerging population at that time.

Interviewer

Probably a fairly diverse population there, so that would

Fr. W. De Biase:

Pardon me?

Interviewer

I said a diverse population, different â€”

Fr. W. De Biase:

It was.

Interviewer

Ethnic groups and nationalities?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yes. On my street, the street that I grew up in, we had German â€” and these were all second generation people.

Interviewer

So this is probably still a lot of the old languages being thrown around, too.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah, you could hear a lot of the old.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

You could hear a lot of German, a lot of Irish. At that time, Italian extraction, like myself, we were a minority. But the Irish, German, and then there was one section that was very heavily Jewish. We used to have a little snide little saying, I guessâ€”in Middle Village you were either Catholic or Jewish.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm, yeah.

Fr. W. De Biase:

And the particular â€” the families were all solid, middle class, as you might expect with civil service people, you know, cops and firemen, postmen, and things like thatâ€”very solid, very family-orientated. As a matter of fact, I still keep up with one or two of my little boyhood friends, you know? You know, Christmas cards and things like that.

Interviewer

And I would imagine, again, with that many different groups of people all pushed together, were there turf issues? Were there â€”

Fr. W. De Biase:

Never.

Interviewer

different areas that went to different groups? Really.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Never. We all â€” my recollection is that we all â€” in that particular area, in that block and area, and even in school, we all melded together very nicely. There was never â€” there were turf wars, but they were in a different section of Queens. We were sort of isolated. Looking back now, it was sort of a highly almost unreal, I guess. We were safe. You know, we could walk the streets and that. We didnâ€™t have to worry about turf wars, or gangs. Other sections of Queens and Brooklyn had that problem.

Interviewer

Did you have your own little sort of hangout, your own place to go?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh, every kid in Queens had their corner.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Thatâ€™s the way we used to identify ourselves, you know? If you met somebody â€” oh yeah, if you met a new person, the way we would identify would be what corner do you hang out on, right? Or what candy shop, things like that. It was never your home address. There was never things like that. In the Catholic environment also, in that particular time â€” and Iâ€™m going back to the â€™40s, maybe, the â€™50s â€” you would identify yourselves with what parish you came from. And it was very strange, because Jewish kids would say, â€œWell, the Catholic parish is Saint Margaretâ€™s,â€”right? So we had all the â€” oh yeah, that was part of the culture, the corner, the candy shop, and the parish, you know. Thatâ€™s identification. And well, it was a different time. Things were a little bit different then, quite obviously, than they are now, and itâ€™s good. The way things are now are good.

Interviewer

What did your parents do?

Fr. W. De Biase:

My father was a New York City detective. He retired from the police force, and then went into real estate, and a real success story, because when he started in real estate, he had to make his own desk. He didnâ€™t have enough money to make his own desk, and he conned somebody into giving him a little office space. But over a few years, he built that

little thing up to quite a successful little business. So much so that it got to a stage where he needed â€“ he shouldâ€™ve gotten more office space. But he absolutely refused to move from that little office until he was assured that the owner had a new tenant, because he felt obligation to him, to this man, because he gave him a break. Now itâ€™s payback time.

Interviewer

Sure.

Fr. W. De Biase:

So anyway, he was â€“ thatâ€™s what my father. My mother was I guess you would classification now is a stay-at-home mom, right? She had a couple of little jobs. She worked in a hospital for a while, when my brother and my sister started in their high school. She got this little job in a hospital, and that was nice.

Interviewer

How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Fr. W. De Biase:

I have an older brother and a younger sister. My older brother is 84. Heâ€™s at home. He stays at home watching his grandchildren and great-grandchildren grow. My sister has diedâ€”she died two years ago. She was the youngest, and the first to go, and Iâ€™m still around, quite obviously.

Interviewer

Yes sir.

Fr. W. De Biase:

So my brother, I see my brother. He still lives in New York City, and I get up to see him maybe once every â€“ once a month, once every six or seven weeks. Thatâ€™s nice.

Interviewer

It really is.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

Well, did you have any military background in your family?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Well, my brother was in the Army during the last part of â€“

Interviewer

World War II?

Fr. W. De Biase:

World War IIâ€”but thatâ€™s â€“ there was no military tradition, as such. You know, at that particular time, everybody someplace along the line was in the service, or they had a brother in the service, you know. At the late â€™40s, that was the thing to do. As a matter of fact, most of the â€“ I canâ€™t say most â€“ a lot. A lot of the high school students, they sort of planned on going into the military even before the Korean War started. And one of the big reasons, of course, was the G.I. Bill of Rights. The idea of going to college was enticing to a lot of young guys.

Interviewer

What do you remember most thinking back about it, â€™cause you were I guess a teenager during World War II â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

And what do you rememberâ€”what kind of sticks out in your memory?

Fr. W. De Biase:

The World War II?

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh gee, that's a tough one.

Interviewer

For example, as a history teacher I try to get students to understand we know how the war turned out "

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

When we study it, we're just trying to see how we got from point A to point B. Those who lived through the war, you don't know how it's going to turn out sometimes.

Fr. W. De Biase:

That's right.

Interviewer

Their experience is very different.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

And so that's why I'm asking.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Well, once again, I guess people my age, we grew up during the war, so that was, you know, that was part of our maturation process in one way or another, different degrees. \*

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Interviewer

Sure.

Fr. W. De Biase:

But it was there. It was conversation. I've had " I have many memories of that, but I think General Patton always intrigues me. I used to " that was sort of my hobby. I'd always follow the Third Army and find out what Patton was doing, and I don't know why, but.

Interviewer

Well, he generated a lot of headlines.

Fr. W. De Biase:

There it was " huh?

Interviewer

He generated a lot of headlines with some moves.

Fr. W. De Biase:

The impact "

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

The impact of the war, and what war meant, didn't sink into me. I wasn't " you know, it was all glory. We're winning, you know. By the time I got, we were, the Allies were well on their way to victory. You know, they were marching through Europe and the Pacific, and I thought " what war meant, it wasn't a part of my psyche until years later.

Interviewer

Well, certainly, though, for the government, for the news media, the images and the coverage they were providing was supposed to be inspirational, right?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

So you're really only getting that part of the story. The reality "

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh, it was altogether "

Interviewer

Exactly.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yeah. Yeah, you know.

Interviewer

And you found that out later, though.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. For example, we were up at the â€“ I remember some of the photos that came out of the Battle of the Bulge, of the Infantrymen walking in the snow and cold. Well, this is a before and after. When I was a kid and saw those pictures, I would say, â€œGee, itâ€™s tough, but boy, you know, what great guys they are.â€ When I got to Korea, I know what it meant to be cold.

Interviewer

Without relief â€“ just cold.

Fr. W. De Biase:

And I â€“ just cold.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase: I got cold in October of 1952, and I didnâ€™t warm up again until sometime in August of â€™53. Laughs

Interviewer

Laughs Oh man. Yeah.

Fr. W. De Biase:

So does that sort â€“

Interviewer

Oh, yes sirâ€“thatâ€™s great.

Fr. W. De Biase:

So that experience, you know. I often reflect on what President Eisenhower â€“ well, when he was General Eisenhower â€“ said in a speech. He said, â€œThere is no glory in war that can possibly, possibly make up for the bloodshed that it costs.â€

Interviewer

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Fr. W. De Biase:

And that has always stayed with me. Sometimes it was â€“ well, letâ€™s continue, Iâ€™m sorry.

Interviewer

You experienced this firsthand, so yeah, you understood exactly what he meant.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh, I know what he meant. Thereâ€™s no two ways about it. No two ways.

Interviewer

So you graduated from high school.

Fr. W. De Biase:

I mean just the crass almost inhumanity of war.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm. Now, you graduated from high school in 1950.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Pardon?

Interviewer

You graduated from high school in 1950?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah, high schoolâ€“matter of fact, it was the day the Korean War started.

Interviewer

Well, thatâ€™s what Iâ€™m asking you, is â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

It was the exact day.

Interviewer

So â€

Fr. W. De Biase:

I didnâ€™t know it until Monday morning. I picked up the papers and I said, â€œOh my God, Iâ€™m not going to get a job.â€ Laughs

Interviewer

You knew you probably had something else to do now, right?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yes.

Interviewer

Yeah. Well, so then â€ and of course, the way the Korean War started, it was so sudden, you know. It wasnâ€™t like the buildup to World War II, where there were lots of things occurring â€

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. Sure.

Interviewer

So this was just for the lightning strike.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Right.

Interviewer

But you immediately knew this was going to affect you.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yeahâ€”someplace down the line. 0:14:00 And I could get it when I started to apply for jobs. 18-year-old boys werenâ€™t really the target audience that companies were looking for, you know, because of the obligations entailed in the G.I. Billâ€”which I understood, you know, so. And so I did get a little job, but then I looked down the road, and I said to myself, â€œWell, someday Iâ€™m going to get a letter from Uncle Sam, and Iâ€™d rather call my own shot as far as when than have somebody else tell me when.â€ So I enlisted.

Interviewer

Good.

Fr. W. De Biase:

For three years.

Interviewer

And that was in â€

Fr. W. De Biase:

I never regretted it. That was March of 1951 â€

Interviewer

â€™51.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Scott.

Yeah.

Interviewer

Okay.

Fr. W. De Biase:

March of 1951.

Interviewer

So whatâ€™s interesting about that, of course, is the timing of the Korean War. Youâ€™ve already had the initial push. Youâ€™ve had the breakout from Pusan. Youâ€™ve had Inchon. Youâ€™ve had the Chinese counterattack. Thatâ€™s when you sign up.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

Wow. Laughs

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

Interesting.

Fr. W. De Biase:

And â€“

Interviewer

And you volunteered for Infantry, is that correct?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Well, my military history was a little convoluted. Now, you have to remember, I was an 18-year-old flaky kid.

Interviewer

Laughs

Fr. W. De Biase:

So I signed up originally for the Signal Corps, okay, and I got stationed at â€“ I donâ€™t know if itâ€™s still â€“ Fort Monmouth used to be the home of the Signal Corps.

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

I guess thatâ€™s history now, but anyway, I was sent to Fort Monmouth. I liked it because it was an hour and a half from home, and I could get home on the weekends. But to be honest with you, although fixing radios, some guys just enjoyed it, fixing radios and all this mechanical stuff that had to do with the Signal Corps way back when. It wasnâ€™t my cup of tea. So I had this angst inside of me, and the opportunity opened to go to OCS down in Fort Benning. So I said, â€œWell, why donâ€™t I try that?â€ So I was accepted. And once again, I knew from day one that I was not Officer â€“ I was not an Officer, and the expectations and things, it just wasnâ€™t in my â€“ as you experienced, you know, going through the Academy here. And I was an enlisted man, and I knew that, so. Anyway, I didnâ€™t do too well in OCS, so after successfully being asked to â€œwhy donâ€™t you think about something elseâ€ sort of routine, you know, I was stationed with the Ranger Battalion down at Benning. I was sent there as a Communication Cadre, and I picked up some of the training, so that was nice. Yeah. Then one day we were told that there was â€“ we used to call them â€œdrops.â€ There used to be Battalion drops, which meant that from a certain Company, the one man had to go to Europe, and one man had to go to Europe, for example. Thatâ€™s what we called them, a drop, so. The Company Commander called us out, and he said, â€œThereâ€™s five guys here eligible for foreign duty. Iâ€™m putting names in the box with the first man we pulled out is going to Europe, the second man is going to the Far East, and the other three stay where you are.â€ So the first man went to Europe, and the second man, here I am, you know. Laughs So I was looking forward to it. You know, when youâ€™re that age, I never â€“ well, I canâ€™t say everybody was the same, but when I was told I was going to Korea, it was almost an excitement in my life. I donâ€™t â€“ that certainly doesnâ€™t make sense where Iâ€™m standing now, but you know, when youâ€™re that â€“ it was â€œhere I go,â€ you know?

Interviewer

Well, on one hand, itâ€™s adventure â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

And itâ€™s doing â€“ and also, of course, youâ€™re coming out of World War II. There was the pride and all that, so yeah, actually in a number of interviews weâ€™ve had that â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

Where people have said they found themselves somewhat surprisingly enthusiastic about what was ahead of them.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Sort of looking forward to that adventure, you know?

Interviewer

Yes sir, absolutely.

Fr. W. De Biase:

So anyway, off I went, and I joined my outfit, the 32nd Regiment or the 7th Infantry, on December 1, 1952. They were in â€“ well, what we called then â€“ I donâ€™t know, designations change â€“ Strategic Reserve. Maybe that terminology is still around. That means if the Chinese attack, you just go up to the front lines, but we were in Strategic Reserve, but getting ready to move up on the front lines. So anyway, on December the 30 or 31, we moved up to the front linesâ€”a little hill that I think is still in military history, a hill called Old Baldy.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

You may have run across that, Scott.

Interviewer

Oh yeah, mm-hmm, sure.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. And thatâ€™s where dreams, imagination, and reality collided â€“ whew â€“ big crash, you know.

Interviewer

Well sir, before we get to that â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

To Baldy, what was your first impression of Korea when you arrived?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Well, thatâ€™s a tough question. As I sit here, my memory is things happened so quickly, Scott, that I really didnâ€™t realize I was in Korea until I got up to my outfit, the reason being is I got off the boat. I was shuttled off to a replacement camp, right, all G.I.s, and I stayed there, so I really, in a sense, like I wasnâ€™t in Korea.

Interviewer

Couldâ€™ve been a base anywhere.

Fr. W. De Biase: Right.

I couldâ€™ve been in Camp Kilmer.

Interviewer

Interesting.

Fr. W. De Biase:

We didnâ€™t have passes, so we couldnâ€™t go out in the population. So yeah, Iâ€™d have to answer that question that way. I really didnâ€™t have an impression of â€“

Interviewer

A bit of a whirlwindâ€”just a lot of things, then?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah, so I went from the Replacement to my outfit.

Interviewer

To forward, okay.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Thatâ€™s all.

Interviewer



All right, so then weâ€™re getting to Old Baldy now.

Fr. W. De Biase:

If I looked out â€” if I had an impression, when I looked out the window of the train, saying, â€œBoy, there are a lot of hills in this country.â€ Laughs

Interviewer

Laughs Thatâ€™s right. And you ended up seeing more hills than you wanted to see.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Well, I found out what those hills meant. So anyway, I got up to my outfit, and of course, the new face on the block, I got stuck with a couple of interesting jobs, I recall, like cleaning the BARs. It was an Infantry Rifle Company, so we just got a couple of BARs, what, I donâ€™t even â€” Browning Automatic Rifles â€”

Interviewer \*{:.text}Yes sir.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Does that make â€”

Interviewer

Oh, yes sir.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Okay. And so everybody looked at me, and said, â€œGuess what?â€ So I got stuck with cleaning. I remember that very clearly. I remember the cold, of trying to get used to the cold. And I remember looking at some of these men that I was living with, who had just finished a battle called the Iron Triangle, which I â€” does that â€”

Interviewer

Yes sir.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Hill 1062, Papasan, you know, places like that, and they had just come, oh, a month, I guess, a month before. I looked at them and I knew what that battle was like, and you know, my recollection is that they never talked about it. They just said they were there, but thatâ€™s where the conversation started and stopped.

Interviewer

Which speaks volumes.

Fr. W. De Biase:

The other thing I picked up immediately is that no one called anybody else by their first name. Very seldom would you â€” very, very, very seldom would you hear a first name. And that struck me strange until I was in the outfit seven months, and then I realized that I would never call anyone by their first name, because that was an intimacyâ€”for some reason, that was an intimacy you didnâ€™t want. You wanted that no matter how close. There were a few guys that you knew you were close to, that you had shared experiences. You didnâ€™t even have to talk, but you could communicate, huh? But it took a long time to build that up, and I remember that very clearly. As a matter of fact, some of the men that I was with for seven or eight months, I didnâ€™t know their first names. I didnâ€™t.

Interviewer

I think there was the expectation of â€”

Fr. W. De Biase:

There was â€”

Interviewer

A significant number that were not going to make it, and it makes it harder.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Exactly, right. So there was a protective thing â€”

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Almost, huh?

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

It was a little bit “ but it was mutual, too, so it wasn’t being cold. It was just “ maybe I could say it was part of the culture. This was the way. And there were one or two guys that maybe would break down, but you neither expected it, or I never expected to be called by my first name.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

It sounds strange, but that’s part of the way things were.

Interviewer

Well, and that was certainly “ and we’ve interviewed a lot of Vietnam War veterans, and they very often felt that way, that you didn’t want to get to know the new guy when he showed up, “cause you didn’t think he was going to make it.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah, and it’s only after a while “

Interviewer

It’s a defense mechanism “ it really is.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. So anyway, then we moved up to Old Baldy, and that’s where, like I said, reality and imagination came together.

Interviewer

This is your first combat experience, then.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yeah. And I’ll never forget the first night the Chinese bombarded us with artillery.

Interviewer

Where were you “ where were you situated? Were you in a improvised fortification, or just “

Fr. W. De Biase:

We were up on a hill, and living in dugouts, dug into the dirt like little mice, you know. That was our life. We had plenty of rats and mice to keep us company “ oh. That’s a different story. I don’t want to tell that part of the story on video, but.

Interviewer

Well, we have an interview with a World War I veteran, and he said that’s one of the main things he remembered about the trenches was the rats, “cause they were everywhere.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. Well, it’s not the main thing. But a matter of fact, now that “

Interviewer

Hold on a second, we’ll take a quick break. Break in audio All right, we’re back.

Sir, you were saying, about the dugouts?

Fr. W. De Biase:

These thoughts that are coming back to my mind now after all of these years, but I remember rats, as ironic as it may sound, became my friends. Because on those cold, miserable nights when I was standing behind my machine gun on guard duty, the rats jumping over the machine gun and walking in front of me are what kept me awake. I would count them. And I thought I was going a little bit strange until I found out that everybody else did the same thing. So we had a contest going, who had the most rats tonight? And this is just one of the anomalies of what happens to you inside of this environment. Where else would normal people look at a rat as somebody to help them stay awake? It just doesn’t “ it just doesn’t happen, right?

Interviewer

It’s that adaptability.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

Youâ€™re in that situation.

Fr. W. De Biase:

But the cold was always there. Now, the first â€œ is this okay, Scott?

Interviewer

Oh, itâ€™s great, yes sir.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah?

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

I remembered the first night that the Chinese bombarded us with artillery, and everybody else in my dugout had gone through it. I was the new kid. And they looked at me, and they said, â€œAre you scared?â€ And I said, â€œI think so.â€ And one of the Sergeants said â€œ excuse me for the language. He said, â€œWell, you better damn well be scared, because this outfit doesnâ€™t have room for people who arenâ€™t scared.â€ And that didnâ€™t make sense to me, either. And then I started to reflect, you know, after some experience, and then I knew what he meant.

If you werenâ€™t afraid, you would do stupid things. You wouldnâ€™t have the energy to do what you were supposed to do. And you look at fear not as a negative in your life, but as a motivating thing. I found out that fear could bring you to do things that you never thought you could do. That sounds strange, but I â€œ we have this idea of heroes not feeling fear. I personally, after what that Sergeant told me and my own experience, I think that the difference between a hero and a coward is they both have fear. The coward is afraid of his fear. The hero uses his fear.

Interviewer

Well, certainly â€œ

Fr. W. De Biase:

And that was a life lesson that Iâ€™ve never forgotten.

Interviewer

Certainly in a unit, if you have a guy who doesnâ€™t have any fear, his reckless actions not only put him at risk, they put everybody at risk.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yeah, sure.

Interviewer

Wow.

Fr. W. De Biase:

So fear can be a positive thing, you know. I found that out very strongly. But anyway, that first night was â€œ God â€œ thatâ€™s when reality, right? Thatâ€™s when those photos of the Battle of the Bulge with these guys walking in the snow, now I know, you know? Laughs

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Now I know.

Interviewer

How long did the bombardment last, do you remember?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Every â€œ well, we got, we used the expression â€œhit,â€ just about every night.

Interviewer

But that first night, how long did it seem to go on for?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Laughs

Interviewer

I mean besides hours, days â€“ right â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

It seemed an eternity. But I guess in reality maybe a couple of hours.

Interviewer

Any casualties from it?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah, a few. Not many, because weâ€™d be hunkered down in our bunkers, and they wouldnâ€™t â€“ we would have patrols out in the valley that would keep an eye on whether there was going to be an attack or not.

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s what I was going to ask, because it seems â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

But usually it was just artillery.

Interviewer

Right, â€™cause you would assume sometimes â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

That an artillery was preparatory to an attack.

Fr. W. De Biase:

There were times like that.

Interviewer

Okay.

Fr. W. De Biase:

There were times like that when we got the command, â€œGet out of the bunkers.

Youâ€™re in the trenches,â€ right?

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

â€œWe may be attacked.â€ There were times like that, but most of the time it was artillery, which was enough. That was enough, huh? The other things that I recall in that particular thing with the patrols, there was a valley. Our line was here. The Chinese were maybe 2,000 yards away, and a valley in between. So the Chinese and our soldiers were always playing cat and mouse in that valley, you know? We knew they were there. They knew we were there. We used to call them â€œrecon patrols,â€ but they were go out and weâ€™re talking about frigid cold now, and lying still for a couple of hours. The cold, what cold can do to you, physicallyâ€”just staying awake was a major, major undertaking. They were difficult, those patrols, and occasionally we would get hit and guys would get wounded.

Interviewer

Now, for these patrols, were you setting up ambushes, or just probing, or?

Fr. W. De Biase:

There were various types of patrols. There were recon patrols, where we were expected to just go out there and sitâ€”â€™try to avoid contact, but let us know whatâ€™s happening.â€ There were other types of patrols. â€œIf you see somebody, attack,â€ okay? Probing patrols, the classical definition of probing patrols were not operative there because we had separated by 2,000 yards, and the lines were so stabilized â€“

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

That, you know, the classical probing, of going behind the lines and stuff like that, is pretty â€“

Interviewer

A pretty well-defined battle space that youâ€™re working in, then.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer

Okay.

Fr. W. De Biase:

So that â€“ but â€“

Interviewer

How often did you go out on these patrols?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Too often. I would say sometimes thereâ€™d be stretches where weâ€™d to out every night, and sleep, being deprived of sleep was another big factor. That sleep became a priorityâ€”you take any opportunity at all to â€“ whatever you call it, sleep dep â€“

Interviewer

Deprivation.

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Fr. W. De Biase:

Deprivation, right, was a living reality there.

Interviewer

You have three sort of mutually compounding issues there. Youâ€™ve got the stress of imminent combat. Youâ€™ve got the unrelenting cold. And on top of that, youâ€™re not getting nearly enough rest.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

And that just kind of builds on each other, really.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh, yeah â€“ yeah. And you could feel it, and sometimes the cold was a bigger enemy than the Chinese. Sometimes.

Interviewer

What did you try to do to stay warm?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Anything.

Interviewer

What could you do?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Anything possible. Occasionally weâ€™d get charcoal, and we had these little stoves in our bunkers, but they didnâ€™t amount to too much. Basically, Scott, like I said almost jokingly before, but in reality, I got cold in November of 1952, and I didnâ€™t get warm again until July or August of â€™53.

Interviewer

Now, how long were you â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

I can remember pulling skin off my hands because of the cold. You know, it just â€“ and you see, that, to me, was where reality and romanticism came together, you know. Inhumanâ€”the degradation that â€“ I didnâ€™t look at it that way. But people are not supposed to pull skin off their fingers. People are not supposed to go 36 hours without sleep. People are not supposed to lie in a valley that nobody knows for hours and almost freeze to death. Young kids are not supposed to be in bunkers, with somebody else shooting at them. Thatâ€™s, you know, thatâ€™s part of life. When I say itâ€™s not supposed â€“ itâ€™s an anomaly. Itâ€™s â€“ and â€“

Interviewer

Well, I think certainly, you know, you mentioned romantic, or the image that you had of war, you expect there to be shooting. You expect there to be explosions. But then youâ€™ve got the almost unending monotony of the cold, and the deprivation â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

And the fear.

Interviewer

That you probably didn't anticipate when you were thinking about going over -

Fr. W. De Biase:

And the fear.

Interviewer

That's right. There's always that.

Fr. W. De Biase:

They're always there. My recollection is that they were always there, and yeah, it's "I keep using the word, almost degradation. But looking back now, all those ideals that I had of going to Korea, like Eisenhower said, you know, they pale in the reality.

Interviewer

Well, there's also been much written about the peeling away of the veneer of civilization. When you put people in a difficult persistent state like that, the things that we identify that make us civilized start to fade away sometimes.

Fr. W. De Biase:

They do, very simple things, Scott, very. And as I said, it's all part of reality, but the way we used to eat. Well, we did get hot food, and it was very good. I have to admit that people tried to do the right thing. There was just the nature, by the time the hot food got up to us, it was cold.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Fr. W. De Biase:

I mean it was just "and not because anybody was dropping the ball, or people didn't care. It was just who opened the window, huh? Laughs

Interviewer

Right. Laughs So how long were you then forward this first time? You were up by Old Baldy how long were you there?

Fr. W. De Biase:

We were there from January, February. Beginning of March we were taken off the hill and put into blocking position, which is just as dangerous, because "and then the Chinese attacked Old Baldy, and we had to go back and take it back. And by that time, the outfit's complexion had changed, and we had a lot of the guys that were at the Iron Triangle and those had already rotated back. So by the time Baldy came, we just weren't seasoned. And at Baldy, my particular outfit, we really didn't do a very good job. We were just a bunch of raw kids, who hadn't got our feet wet in any degree yet. We did all right, but we found out, you know, looking back, of course "the rear view mirror is a marvelous thing in life. You learn so much. But we really didn't do "we could've done a better job in Black Baldy, the first Battle of Baldy.

Interviewer

What about "

Fr. W. De Biase:

And then we got into blocking position, and then we went up to hills and various positions, okay? Various.

Interviewer

But you'd mentioned there'd been some turnover. How about among the leadership, the Senior NCOs and the Officers "had there also been a lot of the experienced guys had left, and now they were new as well?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. A lot of the experienced guys had left, either reassigned someplace else "one of the Sergeants that I had when I first went there, he was reassigned, and so some of the senior guys were. And some of the Officers "at Baldy we lost a very good Officer, an

Academy man, but.

Interviewer

Do you recall his name?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Valsing. I think he was an Academy guy, but Lieutenant Valsing. He was very â€œ he was a good man.

Interviewer

Well, so you â€œ

Fr. W. De Biase:

So we lost a lot by the ordinary rotation thing.

Interviewer

But so you â€œ when you referred to him as being, for example, a good Officer, what does that mean to you? â€™Cause I'm sure you served with a lot of Senior NCOs and a lot of Officers. What distinguished to you the good ones? What made them good?

Fr. W. De Biase:

It was a sense that this man projected, that using a term that is very common now, you know that this guy had your back.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

You knew that this guy knew what he was doing, and if he was going to tell you to do something, he'd be out in front. That was my definition of a good Officer in that environment. Now, of course, that's going to change if you get to, say, a regular base. But I knew that this Lieutenant, he had my back, as I had his. But he had more of my back than I had of his, because he had the bars. Laughs

Interviewer

That's certainly one of the challenges is gaining that trust and credibility.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah, and he gave that impression, of being â€œ and the fact that he didn't make it off of Baldy goes to prove that. You know, he was out there. He was a good man.

Unfortunately, I can't say that for some of the Officers. But you know, after you're in combat for a while, it's a terrible thing to say at West Point or a graduate of the Naval Academy, but after a while, you know, you look at Officers and say, â€œWell, they're in the same boat I am,â€ you know? â€œThey're shooting at him just as much as they're shooting at me, so.â€ You know, if he tells me to do something, I'll do it, but, you know, that sort of â€œ which wasn't disrespectful in that environment. It wasn't disrespectful at all. It was â€œWhat do you want me to do, sir?â€ And then you do it.

Interviewer

Well, oftentimes what you want â€œ

Fr. W. De Biase:

Sometimes an Officer that you really didn't get these good vibes from would tell you to do something, and you do it, but you really weren't happy. Other Officers would tell you to do something, and you knew that if the roles were reversed, they would do it, so that made it easier. You know, you had that. Hard to explain, but I think maybe you know what I'm talking about. You had that sense.

Interviewer

It's almost a decisiveness, where you know you believe in the competence of this leader.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

When the leader tells you, â€œThis is what we got to do,â€ may not sound like something you would want to do, but hey, we must have to do it. And so when you get a decisive order, and you're being properly led, hey, we'll do anything you want, right?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

But when you get somebody that doesn't seem to really have the big picture, doesn't seem to have confidence themselves -

Fr. W. De Biase:

Well -

Interviewer

That's a tougher order to follow sometimes.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Well, anybody who gets told that they have to go out in the middle of the valley with nothing between them and heaven except 2,000 Chinese, in the middle of winter, and says they enjoy it, is absolutely crazy.

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

But you do it, with a sense of because this man we have trust in told you to do it, so it's - it made it bearable.

Interviewer

Now, you mentioned -

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Fr. W. De Biase:

But one of the - may I?

Interviewer

Oh, please.

Fr. W. De Biase:

One of the other things that I discovered - and this happened to me. One night I was on guard duty, behind my little 30 caliber machine gun. I looked across at the Chinese hill. And I saw a flash of light, and I said, -I wonder what that is? And then it occurred to me it was a fire. And then it occurred to me, -Wait a second, now. We do that here, too. We have a little fire going here. We open up a curtain, and the Chinese can see it. So I'm seeing a bunch of Chinese guys sitting around a fire, trying to get warm, the same way I am. And all of a sudden, it occurred to me that these were people. These were people with mothers, wives, children, the same as us. They were people waiting to get home also.

Interviewer

People taken from their homes and sent to go to something they would prefer not to have to do.

Fr. W. De Biase:

That's right. That's right. I don't think if their Commanders told them to go out into the middle of the valley, I don't think they'd be, -Ho, ho, smiling.

Interviewer

What were you told about -

Fr. W. De Biase:

So I think what that broke down, Scott, in my mind, was demonization.

Interviewer

Exactly what I wanted to ask. What had you been led to believe about the North Koreans or the Chinese?

Fr. W. De Biase:

I don't know. I don't know if I was ever taught directly. I can't pinpoint that. But I know by attitude, you pick up attitudes, well, these men aren't the same as us, you know. They don't have family lives. Their mothers and their wives and their sweethearts, you know, they don't really care about them.



Interviewer

They don't believe the things we do â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

And therefore, you know.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. And you know, they're not like us, and that sort of area, so it made it â€“ the whole psychology, whether â€“ and it's a horrible thing. The whole psychology was that it made us easier to fire a bullet at these men, because if they were depersonalized â€“ and that's the horror, another horror of war. I don't care who he is, that person is a human being, and to dehumanize that person, that's a terrible thing.

Interviewer

And so â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

It's bad enough we have to shoot at one another, but at least we could feel sorry that we have to do it, rather than taking that person's personality away from them.

Interviewer

Well, and I think, you know, that â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

But all of these things don't occur to a 19-year-old kid, I have to â€“ you know. The idea of demonizing, that did, but the implications of that didn't hit me until I got back to the comfort and the solace food of the States, and many years.

Interviewer

There you go. So it sounds like, though, during World War II, for example, there was a concerted, overt propaganda campaign to make the Japanese look less than human.

Fr. W. De Biase: \* {:.text}Oh yeah.

Interviewer

So it sound like there was not anything that sort of orchestrated, and yet you just picked up, through conversation or through orders or something â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

It was just an attitude that you sort of got by almost osmosis.

Interviewer

Right. I think one of the challenges also, though, of that dehumanization thing is how do you turn the switch off after the war is over? You know, once you've internalized the idea that these people are not human, well, the war's going to end sometime. What do we do now, right?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. We're basically going through the same thing now, the dehumanization with this thing in Syria â€“

Interviewer

Sure.

Fr. W. De Biase:

And all these other places, and I don't think â€“ we shouldn't do that. We shouldn't do that.

Interviewer

Right. So you â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

People do bad things, but you don't have to deprive them of being human.

Interviewer

Exactly. Now, you had said, though, that there was â€“ that for example Baldy had been taken by the Chinese â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

And then youâ€™d just have to take it back. This is sort of a hallmark of the Korean War, isnâ€™t it, that there are battles over terrain where it changes hands, and youâ€™re basically fighting several battles for the same piece of land.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yeah, yeah, especially when you got up to Baldy and Pork Chop, because these were what I think they would be called blocking positions. They were out there, reinforced blocking positions that they were supposed to blunt attacks, and they were there to let us know whether the Chinese were coming. Or in their case, to let them know we were coming, right? So they were important, and there was always a little to-do about those places.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Pork Chop, later on, that was a big one. Iâ€™m sure probably in military history classes youâ€™ve touched on the Battle of Pork Chop, which July of â€™53.

Interviewer

And of course, there were really two battles for Pork Chop.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer

So now you were at Old Baldy in December â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

March â€“ oh, wait a second â€“ yeah.

Interviewer

December of â€™52, and then into spring, early spring â€™53.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

So where were you then between Old Baldy and Pork Chop?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Most of the time, I was in blocking position. We were in blocking position, and then we went up to some hills.

Interviewer

Were you always forward, never pulled all the way back?

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Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh no.

Interviewer

Wow.

Fr. W. De Biase:

No, that wasnâ€™t in our life. So you asked a question, what was my experience of Korea? I was thereâ€”I had no experience of Korea as a country. My experience of Korea is that Korea was hills, more hills, cold, dirt â€“

Interviewer

Explosions.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Laughs Yeah, right.

Interviewer

Right, yeah.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Which is unfair to say about any country.

Interviewer

Oh, you wonâ€™t judge Korea based on your experience there.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Right. So yeah, we were never pulled. We were always within earshot of the artillery. And then we went up to other hills. Now, my memory on this is a little bit hazy, but it seems to me that hills like Sandbag Palace, Baby Snooks. I donâ€™t know if they ring a â€“

Interviewer

Oh yeah.

Fr. W. De Biase:

You mightâ€™ve run across.

Interviewer

Well, itâ€™s part of that constantly shifting landscape as the U.N. forces and the Communist forces are jockeying for position.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

And so itâ€™s a constantly changing environment.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. Yeah, we went up to hills like that. And of course, one night â€“ and it seems to me â€“ okay, blocking position â€“ Iâ€™m trying to answer your question. I canâ€™t give you specific dates, of course, but â€“

Interviewer

No, of course not.

Fr. W. De Biase:

We were in blocking position after Baldy, and then sometimes maybe in the late spring, Sandbag Palace, Baby Snooks, we went up for a while. Then we went to a hill, I forget the name of it, but we were there. And then one night we were called. At that time, I was in Heavy Weapons Platoon. I picked myself up from the back. I started off with a BAR, and I picked myself up by my bootstraps to a heavy 30, a water-cooled â€“ I donâ€™t know if they have those now, but 30 caliber machine, so. Anyway, we were called in. They got intelligence that the Chinese were about to attack Pork Chop. This was July of â€™53. This was the second Battle of Pork Chop, okay?

Interviewer

Now, before you actually leave the battle, the Armistice negotiations â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

Still going on.

Interviewer

Have been going on now.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yeah.

Interviewer

So all this is happening while people are trying to talk about ending the war.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Talking about peace, right?

Interviewer

Exactly.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Guys are getting killed â€“

Interviewer

Exactly.

Fr. W. De Biase:

And theyâ€™re talking about some â€“

Interviewer

The shape of the table or something, right?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Fr. W. De Biase:

We didnâ€™t even pay attention to it.

Interviewer

Well, after itâ€™d been going on for a while â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yeah.

Interviewer

It doesnâ€™t seem like anything is going to happen.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

All this was like 30 miles from where our guys were getting shot, these people were talking about esoteric things that really didnâ€™t make any difference â€“

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

To us. Anyway, the second Battle of Pork Chop, we were in control of Pork Chop. The Chinese attacked.

Interviewer

Now, were you involved in both battles or just the second one?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Pork Chop? No, I was involved in the Battle of Baldy, and the second Battle of Pork Chop.

Interviewer

The second battle â€“ okay.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. And so we got called, we were told that expect, and the Chinese attacked, and my outfit was called up. My job at that particular time, as I said, I had this heavy machine gun. I took up a position with two missions. First of all, I was in such a position that I could give covering fire to the Rifle Companies, or I was also in a position, strange as it sounds, I could interdict Chinese reinforcements. So I was given â€“ I was told to keep my eyes open for both of them. And that was a very â€“ my recollection is the battle lasted for three or four days, but very, very, very intense. And we didnâ€™t find out until later that it was really a pivotal battle. Because the Chinese realized that they couldnâ€™t break through, and about two weeks after the Battle of Pork Chop, they signed the Armisticeâ€”Iâ€™m saying two weeks, but very short period of time, yeah, they signed the Armistice. So it was in that sense worthwhile. Itâ€™s a shame you have to do it, because a lot of good men didnâ€™t make it, you know.

Interviewer

Who do you remember? Who, again, stands out? One of the opportunities that this interview presents is, you know, tell us about some of the people, you know, again, realizing that some of the communications with the names and everything, sometimes keeping people at armâ€™s length.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

But what are some remarkable things that really stand out in your memory?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Of guys that came back, or guys that didn't come back, or either?

Interviewer

Guys that you served with, right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Guys that I served with.

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Well, I like to remember the guys that are still with us, and I still keep, after 60 years, there's two men that we still get together. One guy's out in Wisconsin, and the other man is in Jersey.

Interviewer

What are their names?

Fr. W. De Biase:

The one out in Wisconsin is Harold Jackson, and the one in New Jersey is Bobby Atkinson, and "

Interviewer

What made these guys special to you?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Pardon?

Interviewer

What made them so special to you?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Well, you have an experience like that. We were together for day in and day out, well, from December until " nine months " nine months. I knew what Jackson's girlfriend looked like " I knew what she liked. By the way, they subsequently got married, and celebrated their 50th anniversary " or it's coming on 60.

Interviewer

Wow.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Fiftieth was a while back. They're coming on " yeah. He's blind now, not combat-related, just deterioration. But you know, that sort of thing.

Interviewer

You'd been with him enough, and long enough, and had shared just enough, that over time, here was somebody you could actually get closer to.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yeah.

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Only after time, though.

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Only after. But I still never called Jackson " have you picked it up? I've never called him by his first name. And Bobby Atkinson was the same, you know. Bobby Atkinson, at that time he was already married, so, you know, he showed me pictures of his wedding. And he'd cry, which is normal, and I'd hang around, and so they were two guys that I stayed close. Another guy was a guy by the name of Hayes, came from Illinois. Another one was Clark, who comes from a little town out in San " Vallejo, California, something like that. There was another man, Martinez, Luis Martinez, who was killed on

Baldyâ€™ another guy by the name of Oâ€™Donnell, who was killed on patrol.

Interviewer

Do you remember the circumstances?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Of?

Interviewer

Of their â€™ you said he died on patrol. Were they â€™

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah, artillery.

Interviewer

Oh, artillery.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. He got some shrapnel, and. Luis, I never knew, because Luis Martinez, I think heâ€™s still MIA. But after 60 years, maybe been upgraded to â€™ wait a second. Iâ€™m going to backtrack on that now. No, Luis Martinez was killed in action, officially. Everybody knew he was killed, but he was killed in action. And the reason I can say that is because once coming back from Japan, I stopped at the Punchbowl, and I looked for him specifically, and his name was there, so. Luis was, Oâ€™Donnell, a kid from Brooklyn.

Interviewer

Did you serve with anyone youâ€™d known back in New York, before you went in the Army?

Fr. W. De Biase:

No. Nope. Iâ€™ll get to that.

Interviewer

Okay.

Fr. W. De Biase:

I have all these â€™ youâ€™re rattling my memory now, you know that. Laughs

Interviewer

Good.

Fr. W. De Biase:

I donâ€™t know if I like it or not, but there it is. Anyway, so that was Pork Chop, and â€™

Interviewer

Youâ€™d mentioned your machine gun was in a position to cover the American troops, and also to watch out for the Chinese reinforcements. Was there a lot of contact there?

Were you .

Fr. W. De Biase:

Well, to cover the American forces, yes. You know, I had to give covering fire, I guess, but thank God there was no interdiction. The Chinese I didnâ€™t have to worry about. They had enough with guys covering the other way, you know â€™

Interviewer

Yeah.

Fr. W. De Biase:

So I didnâ€™t have to worry about that. I was there, and I had everything all set, but. This seems so â€™ you know, you talk about it now, Scott, and it isnâ€™t 60 years agoâ€™ it was yesterday, huh? And thatâ€™s another thing about that experience, you know. I look at these young guys coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan, and theyâ€™re not young anymore, but guys from Vietnam, right? And once you have that experience, it never leaves you. It becomes â€™ I mean you can lead a good, healthy, normal life. I donâ€™t want to be morose about this. But thatâ€™s an experience that you canâ€™t tuck away, even though you try.

Interviewer

Itâ€™s part of who you are.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Itâ€™s part of who you are. After that first bombardment, that was an experience that Iâ€™ll never forget. You come into contact with your mortality. Maybe Iâ€™m not indestructible, you know? Laughs

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

That was another thing I found out, looking back, that the oldest guy in my outfit, with the exception of the Senior Non-Com, some of the Non-Coms, who were my recollection was a couple of North Korean men, so they were older, early 30s, okay? But the guys in the Platoon my recollection is that the oldest guy was 21, 22, and thatâ€™in that age bracket. And one night we were after I came back to the States I was talking with a group of people, veterans, and they said, â€œYeah, in those companies the guys had to be young. If you were any older, you would find out that you were destructible. When youâ€™re that age, youâ€™re still indestructible.â€

Interviewer

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, yeah.

Fr. W. De Biase:

I donâ€™t know if you learn, you know, if that meshes with your experience or not, but.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

That note of indestructibility.

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Then you realize that, â€œWell, maybe Iâ€™mâ€ â€“ the first time you see somebody who you knew dead, the light goes on all over the world, you know. Boom, boom, boom.

Interviewer

When did that happen for you? When was the first time you actually saw someone that you knew either get wounded or get killed?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh. It was on patrol. One night we had sent a patrol out. They had made contact with the Chinese. There were a couple of wounded people, or dead people â€“ dead bodies â€“ out in the valley, and we were told to go and donâ€™t leave the bodies out there. So we went out and set up our perimeter, and we had a demolition team to make sure they werenâ€™t booby trapped. And then usually the Chinese, strange as it sounds, they were very good about this, that if we were just going out to pick up the bodies â€“ if we had taken one step past the bodies, we know what wouldâ€™ve happened. But sometimes they were very nice about that, but any time, this one particular night, they werenâ€™t nice, and they fired on us. And one of my close friends was hit right â€“ and I donâ€™t know what happened to him, because he was â€“ it was a pretty bad wound. He was shuffled right away to whatâ€™s the name of that television program?

Interviewer

MASH?

Fr. W. De Biase:

MASH â€“ he was hustled away to a MASH, and then we lost contact. After that, everything was rumor, Scott. You know how the military, you know, if you donâ€™t know it, tell a story, and before long the story becomes reality. You donâ€™t know what youâ€™re dealing with. So I really donâ€™t know what happened to him. But I remember carrying, him being carried. I remember the evacuation very clearly, and the pain. Yeahâ€“that was the first time.

Interviewer

Yeah, after second Pork Chop, how much longer were you still there in Korea? And when did you â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yeah.

Interviewer

When did you realize you were actually going to be leaving? I mean I realize the Armistice gets signed, but then I'm sure you didn't just immediately disappear, right?

Fr. W. De Biase:

No. The Armistice was signed I think July 27th. I'm going to say the 27th, somewhere in that neighborhood, somewhere around there, wasn't it, the 27th? And we were brought back to this very nice place, living in tents, and doing basically nothing.

Interviewer

Finally, right?

Fr. W. De Biase:

I don't recall that period.

Interviewer

Well, I hope you slept a lot.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh, I got my "but I don't" "I'm trying to be" once the Armistice was signed "oh, that was hilarious, by the way. I have to tell you. the night the Armistice was signed, at one minute to 12:00, all heck broke loose. The Chinese bombarded us, we bombarded the Chinese, for one minute. It was eerie. For one minute you thought the world was going to stop with all this artillery" and then exactly at 12:00, silence.

Interviewer

Wow.

Fr. W. De Biase:

And that was "it was eerie.

Interviewer

You're still sitting there, they're still sitting there, but "

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

The fighting, the shooting stops.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. And this isn't really nice to say, because it really "but the next morning, here we are, guys who are up in the front lines for nine months. The next morning, guys who were back in Seoul for nine months got rides up to the front lines, had their pictures taken in front of the dugouts that we were living in, and all of this stuff. And we just stood around. Who wants to have their picture taken in front of a dugout? Laughs So we thought that was cute, you know.

Interviewer

Yeah. Now, there was a little bit of a lag between the agreement to the Armistice and the implementation of the Armistice, right? There's a little gap there, right?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Well, the only thing we were "I think I know what you're talking about. The only thing we were interested in was the cease fire. As long as they weren't shooting at us and we weren't shooting at them, anything else was up for grabs. But my recollection is that we had a "there's something called a DMZ "and I don't know the details, but it seems to me there were a couple of days in there that we had up on the line, and then we had a pull-back.

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

And maybe that's the implementation.

Interviewer



Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

And the other implementation it seems to be was the exchange of prisoners. Yeah?

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

But they were all very important, but believe me, Scott, as far as we were concerned, the cease fire, that was it.

Interviewer

But in some respects â€

Fr. W. De Biase:

Everything else, fine, let everybody else worry about that, you know?

Interviewer

But it almost reminds me of the end of World War I, where you had the negotiations, and â€œOkay, weâ€™re going to stop the war, but weâ€™re going to do it at this time,â€ and people are still getting killed.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

And I think there was some bitterness that arose out of that. Did you sense any of that among your guys, with all the talk about the Armistice and the negotiations, and yet people are still getting killed? Was there cynicism or anger about that?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Gee, thatâ€™s â€ I have to rely on a 60-year-old memory, but it seems to me that if I had some of the guys in this room, I think weâ€™d all agree that we had pretty well shut off those negotiations. They really werenâ€™t part of our lives.

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

And all we had to do is take care of ourselves and do what we were told. So was there any bitterness, or frustration? I donâ€™t think so. Of course, everybody wanted those guy to do somethingâ€”you always had that, you know. But I didnâ€™t â€ we were pretty well reconciled to the fact that we were cannon fodder, and we were just doing what weâ€™re supposed to do.

Interviewer

So once the shooting stops â€

Fr. W. De Biase:

I donâ€™t think there was bitterness â€

Interviewer

Okay.

Fr. W. De Biase:

As much as â€

Interviewer

Relief?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Well, yeah. As much as the ordinary American citizen may feel about the Congress at times, you know. Does that make sense?

Interviewer

Oh, absolutely. Oh, yes sir, absolutely.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

So after the shooting stops, then I imagine youâ€™re still out there for a little while, but like you said, you came back, youâ€™re in the tents, and itâ€™s actually an upgrade for you,

right?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yeah, God yeah.

Interviewer

So how long were you still in Korea before you shipped Stateside?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Bright and shiny, August 22, 1953. We had a " we used to call them "drops." Now, a drop was defined as a list of names of the men who were going to be rotated back, okay?

And that, of course, was by length of service, and we had a point system, Scott. If you were up on the front lines, they had Korea divided. There was a four-point area, three " maybe you've heard about that.

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Two-point. Well, most of the guys in my outfit were all four-pointers from day one, so we were all nine months. Now, August 22 at noontime we were out in formation. The First Sergeant came out and read off four names: Jackson, Atkinson, Hayes, right?

"You're going home." Then I knew I was number one, so next month, I was going, right? So I was a little disappointed to say good-bye to these guys. So I'm out there, still in formation, and Jackson, Hayes, and Atkinson, the guys I really bonded with, they leave.

All the guys in the Platoon look at me, because they knew probably what I was going through. And five minutes elapsed. The Sergeant comes out again and said, "De Biase, you're going home." And I looked, and I said, "Did I hear my name?" Stupid me, I raised my hand, and I said, "Hey, Sarge " did you say my name?" Well, of course, he used an Army expression, so as much as to say, "Get into your tent and get your gear. You're going home." So August 22, 1953, is when I left Korea, basically exactly nine months to the day, which doesn't sound long, but.

Interviewer

Seems like a lifetime.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Anyway, so off we went. And I looked at Jackson, and they looked at me, and the four of us had a grand old time saying, "How long is it going to take us to forget this place?"

Laugh.

Interviewer

Laughs

Fr. W. De Biase:

So I got home, back to the States, back to my house, which was very emotional, of course. When I walked in the house for the first time, my mother broke down.

Interviewer

Had you " I mean I realize you didn't have a lot of time for writing letters, but had you had any contact with home?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yeah, sure, I made a point of that.

Interviewer

Good.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Scott, once a week, even if I had to use the back of a bag, I would make sure that my mother and father at least got a note saying, "I'm okay. It's cold here." I have to tell you a little story. But, "It's cold here. Don't worry. I'm fine." Even if it was just that, okay? Only a mother could think of this. In one of my letters I said, you know, "It's very cold," you know. Now, you have to remember, I'm living dirty, cold, living in the ground, literally. I get a care package from my mother. Only mothers could do this. She sent me this beautiful pair of slippers, insulated slippers, and said, "I hope

these help.â€

Interviewer

Laughs

Fr. W. De Biase:

And I said to her, I said, â€œOnly a mother could do this,â€ right? You know? Right?

Nobody else could â€ you know.

Interviewer

Wow.

Fr. W. De Biase:

They were a beautiful pair of slippers. I wish I had them now. Theyâ€™re highly impractical in that situation.

Interviewer

Right. Right. Laughs

Fr. W. De Biase:

Anyway, so I got home, and that was September 5, 1953. Had a month furlough, which I enjoyed, then I was assigned to Fort Dix, troop training.

Interviewer

Was it a difficult transition? I mean sort of re-integrating into a non-combat environment?

Fr. W. De Biase:

In my particular case, looking back now, okay, when I was going through it, the answer to your question would be no, but I was sort of not the brightest light on the Christmas tree. And looking back now, I was a sick kid because of that experience. Sick not in the sense of being psychotic or, you know, but flaky, and

Interviewer

It was baggage.

Fr. W. De Biase:

But I didnâ€™t realize it. I thought this was â€ no roots, really, you know, and - So in answer to your question, yes, I shouldâ€™ve gone â€ maybe it was the transitional, unconscious. I donâ€™t know, but was it post-traumatic syndrome? I think, personally, that if they had that diagnosis now, and I had been diagnosed in September of â€™53, I probably wouldâ€™ve been diagnosed as a little bit of post-traumatic stress syndrome. But the more I read about it, it wasnâ€™t â€ it was the temporary type, not the ongoing type. I think they make that distinction now. You can have it for â€ maybe thatâ€™s the transition. And as I said, my mother and father, if this is part of â€ they found me a couple of times on the windowsill, like ready to jump out the window, and that calmed down. I guess thatâ€™s sort of it.

Interviewer

And you were asleep.

Fr. W. De Biase:

I was asleep, sound asleep, yeah.

Interviewer

But then that stopped eventually.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yeah. That only lasted maybe a month or so, reallyâ€yeah. Just a â€ that was not a â€ you know, it was a big deal when I was going through it, but in the big picture, it was not a big deal, because it faded.

Interviewer

And you said you were at Fort Dix?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah, I went to Fort Dix, troop training. I enjoyed that. I liked that. I was there from October, and I was discharged in January of â€™54. And then I went to a little school out in western Pennsylvania called Saint Vincentâ€™s, which I enjoyed, and very good school, but I decided that maybe Iâ€™d stay back in the city. So I went to â€ I donâ€™t know if youâ€™ve ever heard of Fordham. I went to Fordham. I had the best of both worlds, and

looking back, I had a full-time job. I was going to Fordham at night, so I had a full-time job.

Interviewer

And what were you studying?

Fr. W. De Biase:

I was in a pre-law program.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah, pre-law program, and so it was a lot of fun. I worked during the day, a job that I enjoyed—it has to do with real estate, and —

Interviewer

Was this with your father, or —

Fr. W. De Biase:

Father, right, so I sort of got, you know, I sort of liked that. Not the selling part, but I liked the — I always thought I—d like real estate law, and stuff like that was sort of a possibility. But having said that, being a priest, from when I was about that high, was always in the top five of my life. Now, oftentimes it depended on what day you would ask me what I want to be, and there was a fluctuation that would take place. You know, one to five, five to two. And I look at some of the college kids now, and I work with them, and so I can—t blame them. —What are you studying?— —Well, this year I—m studying sociology, but I think I—m going to change to math soon.— You know, maybe you—ll go through that with your —

Interviewer

We already are.

Fr. W. De Biase:

You know the —

Interviewer

We already are, yes sir.

Fr. W. De Biase:

You know the syndrome?

Interviewer

Oh, yes sir.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Well, that—s the way I was, so it depended on what day you would ask me.

Interviewer

Sure.

Fr. W. De Biase:

But it was always sort of hanging around, even when I was going to Fordham. So I had, you know, a good time. I had this nice job, I go to school at night from 6:00 to 10:00, come home, put a pot of coffee on, study until 2:00 in the morning, after this morning of work. But you know, after Korea, that was a cake walk — it was a cake walk. Laughs

Interviewer

Laughs Exactly. Nobody was trying to blow you up now, right?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. I—d look at my warm bed, and I—d say, —Look, at least I—ve got a warm bed. I—m not freezing to death.— So that was a cake walk. So one day after, I just decided. I heard this voice, almost, saying —

Interviewer

This is when, —55?

Fr. W. De Biase:

We—re up to —55 now, 1955. We—re up to the fall, October of —55. I heard this voice saying, —Okay, Bill, you—ve tried a lot of things. You tried pre-law. You—re

having a good time. You go to dances. Youâ€™ve had girlfriends, all very nice and happy. Now, why donâ€™t you sit back and do what youâ€™re supposed to do?â€ And Scott, it was the strangest thing, so I, â€œYeah, thatâ€™s a good idea.â€ So the next day I called up the Franciscans, and I said, â€œIâ€™d like to be a Franciscan.â€

Interviewer

Why the Franciscans?

Fr. W. De Biase:

I just finished â€“ you know, every question that you ask â€“ donâ€™t blame me for being a blabbermouth, because every question that you ask has a story behind it. The reason â€“

Interviewer

Weâ€™re all about stories here.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Huh?

Interviewer

Weâ€™re all about stories.

Fr. W. De Biase:

The reason that I chose the Franciscans is because one night on my way from work to school, I stopped at a bookstore to pick up the new Agatha Christie book. Thatâ€™s all I had in mind. On the way out, there is this counter. There was a series of books called the Image books, so I just browsed and I saw this Life of Saint Francis. And for no â€“ I didnâ€™t sit back and reason about it. It was almost impulsive. I picked it up, threw it in my attachÃ© case, and went about my business for a couple of weeks. And then one weekend, there was nothing to do, so I decided to read this Life of Saint Francis, and it absorbed me. So when I made the decision, it was a natural thing. â€œHey, heâ€™s a pretty good guyâ€“ I think Iâ€™ll follow him,â€ and off I went. And Iâ€™ve never looked back. After all of that â€“ that was October of â€™56 â€“ October of â€™55 â€“ October of â€™55 â€“ Iâ€™ve never looked back.

Interviewer

Well, so you end up in Japan for a long time, right?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. Well, I went into the Franciscans. It took me â€“ if I can backtrack â€“

Interviewer

Sure.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Ten years. That was â€™55. I was ordained a priest in 1966, March of â€™66. September of â€™66, I went to Japan, and I stayed in Japan until 1994 â€“ 28 years?

Interviewer

28 years.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. Thatâ€™s a long time.

Interviewer

Did you choose Japan, or was that just where the Order sent you?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah, I chose. We had options. At that time, it was Brazil, Bolivia, Japan, okay?

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

So I always wanted to be a missionary, and of course, I had this sort of light sort of thin sort of thread to Japan, because of the Far East. So I chose Japan. And I never regretted it. I have a cute storyâ€“ can I tell the story?

Interviewer

Please.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Way back when we were teenagers, okay, I had this girlfriend, and she was I guess what the terminology, weâ€™d go steady, going steady?

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. And so then I went into the Army, and she went on to college, and we communicated, and everything was fine. And we got back, and we tried it again. And one night, we were sitting over Cokes, having a Coke together, as we usually â€” Iâ€™d better be careful of my terminology â€” Coca Cola.

Interviewer

A Coke, right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Coca Cola.

Interviewer

Thank you for clarifying.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah, I wanted to make sure. Laughs

Interviewer

Laughs

Fr. W. De Biase:

This day and age, you have to be careful with some terminology, yeah?

Interviewer

Yes sir.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Coca Cola. And we came to an agreement that we had both changed. We were not 16 and 17 anymore. That there were things happening in us that didnâ€™t â€” I didnâ€™t know what was happening in me. She knew what was happening inside of her. She wanted to be a lawyer and have a career in law, and I wasnâ€™t quite sure. So I said, â€œYou know, weâ€™re not 16 or 17 anymore, where we can go through life going through the fields like Pollyanna.â€ So we decided, very amicably, maybe itâ€™d be good if we just separated. Stay friends, but separated. So thatâ€™s the way it was. And then when I decided to become a priest, she calls. And very nice â€” we just maintained this friendship. She said, â€œIâ€™m glad you found out what was happening inside of you.â€ And over the course of the years, at Christmastime weâ€™d exchange Christmas cards and stuff like that. I was ordained a priest. One week after ordination, after I became a priest, I received a phone call. â€œBill, this is so-and-so. Do you want to marry me?â€ And I said, â€œWhat?â€ She said, â€œI didnâ€™t mean it that way. Iâ€™m getting married. Do you want to perform the ceremony?â€ Laughs

Interviewer

Laughs

Fr. W. De Biase:

So I said, â€œYeah, sure.â€ So we set up the date, and we had a blast, and I performed the ceremony, and a lot of our mutual friends were there. And Iâ€™m sure â€” I never asked them what was going through their mind as I was the priest at her marriage. But after the ceremony, we were talking with the family, and I said, â€œYou know, when we were 16 or 17, did you ever figure that our lives would end up like this?â€ And she said, â€œIf somebody had told me that this was going to happen, I wouldâ€™ve laughed out loud.â€ And I learned God plays funny tricks on people. So thatâ€™s just a little tidbit.

Interviewer

No, thatâ€™s a wonderful story.

Fr. W. De Biase:

And she, unfortunately, she died about four or five years ago.

Interviewer

But you remained friends.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh, throughout the years, yeah. Her husband â€“ when I came back from Japan on leave Iâ€™d always make a point of going out and having supper with her husband, she and her husbandâ€”we maintained that friendship. Her brother was my best friend. I practically â€“ I mean it wasnâ€™t just one of these relationships that came out of the sky. I practically grew up in their house, so it was good.

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s great. So how â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

So I went â€“ yeah, go ahead.

Interviewer

I just wanted to say, how was Japan? This time you actually got to experience the culture.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yeah, yeah, at long last.

Interviewer

So how was that?

Fr. W. De Biase:

You know, Scott, right from day one, I didnâ€™t have any difficulty. The question thatâ€™s always asked is how did you enjoy Japanese food? I never had any problems with it. These horror stories that you hear about raw fish and stuff like thatâ€”well, by the time that fish gets on your table, itâ€™s absolutely delightful, right? And you have it â€“ Iâ€™ll bet youâ€™ve gone to sushi bars, huh? Thatâ€™s the raw fish, marinated, especially with a glass of beer. So I never had difficulty with the culture. I just made my mind up that Iâ€™m going to respect it, that I wasnâ€™t living in the United States, that I was expected to abide by the cultural norms of Japan.

Interviewer

Did you ever face any â€“ I donâ€™t know â€“ resentment or hostility from either local officials or anything like that?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Never. I donâ€™t know what they were thinking, but face to face, never. Never.

Interviewer

But 28 years in Japan, then, occasionally coming back.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah, once every six years.

Interviewer

Okay.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Then it got cut down to once every three. Yeah, go on, Iâ€™m sorry, just got â€“

Interviewer

No, but then after Japan, then what?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Well, I finished â€“

Interviewer

Youâ€™ve been a lot of places, so I want to make sure we have a chance to talk about them all at least briefly.

Fr. W. De Biase:

So I was in Japan for 28 years. I absolutely â€“ I enjoyed it immensely. And then I finished up my tour in this one parish in Tokyo that I had been at for 18 years, which was altogether too long to be in one place for me. I need rehabs every now and then, right? If Iâ€™m in a place too long, I need a new environment. so anyway, I was relieved â€“ you know, very happily. And I had the opportunity to go down to India, which was â€“ to work in a leprosy area was something I always wanted to do, because that was a very important part of Saint Francisâ€™ life. I donâ€™t know if youâ€™re familiar â€“

Interviewer

Sure, absolutely.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Working with the lepers. And I always wanted to do that, just as a â€“ so I had the opportunity, and I went down to India, and I worked with Mother Teresa, who I had known from previous things, because I used to at one time give retreats to her Sisters. And I met Mother many times, and we worked together on projects. So down in India, it was, you know, it was real nice, working in a leprosarium. It was tough work.

Interviewer

I was about to say, it must have been challenging.

Fr. W. De Biase:

It was challenging, because Iâ€™m not â€“ Iâ€™m a little bit squeamish. The first day on the job â€“ I donâ€™t know if this is being recorded or not, but itâ€™s a â€“

Interviewer

Sure.

Fr. W. De Biase:

I was always squeamish about peopleâ€™s feet. I always hated to touch feet, or wash feet, or you know. Even â€“ I donâ€™t know if youâ€™re familiar with on Holy Thursday â€“

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

The Catholics have the â€“

Interviewer

Sure.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Tradition of washingâ€”the priest washes feet. I always hated that job. Laughs

Interviewer

Laughs But you did it.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah, I did it with my eyes closed, right? But anyway, back to India. The first day on the job, this leper sits in front of me, puts his foot up in my face, takes his bandages off. I have this pussy, stinky, dirty foot in front of me, and the guyâ€™s looking at me and saying, â€œDo something.â€ So I have a leper who was supposed to be teaching me, and he said, â€œOkay, what you do is go into the wound with a scalpel, and you scrape it.â€ Itâ€™s called breathing, where you scrape off the old wound to give it a chance to come to life again. So I did that, and fortunately I did it mostly with my eyes closed, if I can recall, because the one thing when youâ€™re dealing with lepers, itâ€™s very difficult to inflict pain on them, because it kills the nerves.

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. So anyway, the point of this thing is from the first day until I left the change that no longer â€“ these guys would come in and put their feet in front of me, the same as the first day. But no longer was it a stranger or somebody impersonalâ€”it was almost like a friend. I couldnâ€™t speak Hindi, they couldnâ€™t speak English, but we could sort of communicate. And then that part of my life â€“ I was only supposed to be there for a short period anyway. It wasnâ€™t a permanent change. So then the opportunity came, they needed somebody in the Holy Land, in Israel. So my Provincial approached me this time and said, â€œLook, you donâ€™t have an assignment. Youâ€™re the â€“ you know, youâ€™re not bodied down to anything right now, so how about giving this some thought?â€ And I said, â€œYou know, I donâ€™t have to give it too much thought. Whenâ€™s the next plane?â€ So off I went to Israel, the Holy Land. And the assignment there is specified, two years, so I went there for two years. I had a great old time.

Interviewer



And your job there was working with pilgrims, is that correct?

Fr. W. De Biase:

That's right. That's one of the jobs, Scott. Actually, I had three jobs. I was taking care of the pilgrims. I was the editor of a magazine, The Holy Land Review. And I was also the pastor of a small Filipino community in Jerusalem.

Interviewer

In the Holy Land "wow.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. They were hired as domestics and home keepers, so I had that job. Now, you could ask me, well, which one did you enjoy the most? It depends on what I was doing at the time, you know? I always had that "I guess it's part of my personality that I enjoy very much, but no matter what I'm doing, I always manage " that's the thing I enjoy most.

Interviewer

And it's some variety there.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh yeah.

Interviewer

Different things, right?

Fr. W. De Biase:

I love that. I love that variety, so I have some very happy memories of that. I did some writing over there, and it was a very touching experience, to walk in the footsteps of the Lord.

Interviewer

This was the mid-1990s, right?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah " we're up to 1994-1996, right"

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Time frame now "1994-1996. 1966 to 1994, Japan "1994-1996, with the exception of a few months in India, basically the Holy Land, okay, Israel.

Interviewer

And of course, Jerusalem at that time still a lot of "

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh, bombs were always going off.

Interviewer

Exactly.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer

Did that affect you at all, or?

Fr. W. De Biase:

I guess it should have, but I just "

Interviewer

But if you've been there. Laughs

Fr. W. De Biase:

You know, that's why " and I don't mean this disrespectfully in any sense of the word, but the United States now, with the security that we're going through, and airport security, we're just catching up with the rest of the world. Countries like Israel, Germany, Philippines, they've had it for years. So it doesn't " I don't necessarily like it, but it doesn't shock me. We're just catching up.

Interviewer

Right. Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

I don't know if many people agree with that, but. Yeah, you get used to young guys walking and girls walking through the streets with their machine guns on their shoulders, just hoping that they're not " that they're in touch with reality. Laughs

Interviewer

Right, right " oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Fr. W. De Biase:

One day I was in my room doing something, and I heard this little explosion. And I looked out, and two blocks away a bus had exploded. It was a terrible thing. And I shouldn't come close to making light of it, but a horrible situation, you know, when people have to live in fear. And no matter how tight the security is on both sides, it's always " it was always there.

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Some horrible " well, they've all made the press, and there's no need of going into the horrible things that can happen over there. So anyway, that part of my life ended. And I came back to the States, and I was assigned to a " we have a chapel in a shopping mall. This is probably the only place in the world that has this. A regular shopping mall " there was an empty store, so many years ago, Franciscans decided this'd be a nice place for a church. So we rented it, just as a regular, so you know. And people as they're out buying their Christmas gifts come to this little chapel that we have right smack in the mall. It's like a regular store.

Interviewer

Being out among the people " it's Francis, right?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. It's a regular store, and we, as best as we could figure, this little chapel, throughout the course of the day, something like, counting our services and confession and all the other things that we had, something like 400 people a day pass through those walls.

Interviewer

Every day " wow.

Fr. W. De Biase:

And of course that's because it was so convenient.

Interviewer

Yeah, mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

And good people who wanted to go to church, but they had the normal things of life to take care of, but this way they're at the mall anyway, so why not, you know?

Interviewer

Is this in Pennsylvania? Where is this chapel located?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Oh, I'm sorry " Albany, New York.

Interviewer

Albany, okay.

Fr. W. De Biase:

In a little " actually, it's outside of Albany, Colony.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. And it's still going strong, after all these years, and people really appreciate it.

Interviewer

Sure, mm-hmm.

Fr. W. De Biase:

It was something like a magnet. We get people from all over the tri-city area â€“ tri-city, thatâ€™s Albany-Troy-Schenectady area â€“ and they would come. It was a good service, a good service for the people.

Interviewer

And how long were you there?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Six years.

Interviewer

Six years.

Fr. W. De Biase:

And then one day I got a telephone call. â€œHow would you like to go to Philadelphia?â€ Now, youâ€™ve been around long enough, Scott, to know when you get a telephone call from an echelon or two above you with the question, â€œHow would you like to,â€ you sort of have a feeling, well, maybe you should say â€œyes.â€

Interviewer

The term these days is â€œvoluntold.â€

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. Laughs

Interviewer

You volunteered for something youâ€™ve basically been told to do.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

Right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

So, â€œOkay, Iâ€™ll volunteer to go,â€ right? Yeah. And it was a tough assignment â€“ supposedly a tough assignment. This is another â€“ it was a soup kitchen, and it was very depressed. Could we have a â€“

Interviewer

A break? Yes sir. Break in audio

Fr. W. De Biase:

A level test?

Interviewer

No, weâ€™re back, sir.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Are we? All right.

Interviewer

So we were saying that you had finished up, or that you had been in Albany, and then you got the call to go down to the soup kitchen.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah. One of the â€“ and itâ€™s in a very tough section of Philadelphia. Itâ€™s a soup kitchen that was started by the Franciscans in the late â€™70s. Through a whole bunch of circumstances â€“ but anyway, weâ€™re there now. We average feeding, itâ€™s gone up. Itâ€™s between 300 and 350 a dayâ€“300 to 350 a day, and now weâ€™re touching 400 a day quite often. But the number of families coming have increased. Thereâ€™s probably a lot of reasons for that, but. And we do a lot of â€“ we have â€“ thereâ€™s an attorney on staff, and a social worker, so we do a lot of things like that, besides just the meals. I am at present not really hands-on too much. I guess I would be classified as a consultant, which means, in my definition of consultant, is that I show up every day at the soup kitchen to find out whether they need help. And sometimes they say, â€œyes,â€ and sometimes they say, â€œno.â€ So if they say, â€œyes,â€ I stay and help, and if they say, â€œno,â€ I go someplace else. Laughs Besides that, Iâ€™m also a chaplain, part-time chaplain at a hospital. I do a lot of preaching for a very good organization called Food for the Poor. So

Iâ€™m quite â€“ at my age, Iâ€™m quite â€“ Iâ€™m busy enough.

Interviewer

And how old are you now?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Iâ€™ll be 82 next birthday.

Interviewer

All rightâ€”cool. Now, how many â€“

Fr. W. De Biase:

So Iâ€™m very thankful that I still have my health and I still can do all these things.

Interviewer

Still active, absolutely.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

Now, in your experience with the Franciscans with the other Orders, have you come across many others who had that military experience, or some military experience, like you had?

â€™Cause I would think that might be a little bit unusual.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Iâ€™ve had â€“ one of our Friars is a graduate of Annapolis, but not quite the experience.

A lot of them have had military experience, but I canâ€™t â€“ maybe there has been, but I canâ€™t recall any who have had Infantry experience, so that I hate to sound snobby about this, but you know, thereâ€™s the Infantry, and thereâ€™s the rest. Laughs

Interviewer

Laughs We sometimes hear that around here, yeah.

Fr. W. De Biase:

You know. Thatâ€™s another strange thing. If a young man or woman asks me what branch of the service would be good, I would probably say, â€œWell, youâ€™re bright, and why donâ€™t you think about Intelligence, or Communications, orâ€”â€“ you know, Iâ€™m just going, I donâ€™t know whatâ€™s available. But I donâ€™t think I would advise the Infantry. But if I had to re-enlist, and if I had to â€“ thank God I donâ€™t have to now. But if I had to go back, checking my experience, and my own life, I would be not satisfied unless it was the Infantry.

Interviewer

It was a good fit â€“ a very good fit.

Fr. W. De Biase:

But I wouldnâ€™t advise this young person. I know thatâ€™s a real anomaly, and â€œWell, how come youâ€™re doing it and youâ€™re not telling me to do it?â€ Well â€“

Interviewer

Well, it made sense for you.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah, and I donâ€™t even know what. But I guess thereâ€™s a â€“ and Iâ€™m going â€“ thereâ€™s, you know, this whole thing about war, Scott, and these experiences that Iâ€™ve had, I have mixed feelings about them. And one part of me will say, â€œWell, Iâ€™m glad I could serve my country. Iâ€™m glad that I could pay back a little bit for the opportunities that this culture has given me.â€ Even though politically I may not have agreed with it, or blah, blah, blah, right? Iâ€™m glad that I could fulfill some sort of obligation to my country, okay? Thatâ€™s one part of me. The other part of me says, â€œWhat a shame. What a horrible thing war is.â€ General Shermanâ€™s â€œWar is hellâ€”â€” going back to Eisenhowerâ€™s statement, no glory of war can ever match the blood and the pain and the anguish that it takes. So you have both of those things sort of operating.

Interviewer

I mean one of the sad things about it as well is that itâ€™s young people who go off to fight these wars.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah.

Interviewer

You know?

Fr. W. De Biase:

Sure. And I don't know if, you know, it's "nobody" and you know, this is "a sort of a little bit of a history buff, not" but sometimes it comes out very clear to me that the people who are adamantly against war are the military people, MacArthur, and Eisenhower especially. They were trained. They were supposed to, in one way, make their living by war and both of them were very "if you had to put them, they were pacifists.

They would do anyt

Interviewer

But it's almost like your reference earlier to a guy who has no fear. You know, someone who wants war, there's something wrong with them, you know? If they actively seek it, if they're a glory-seeker, that's a dangerous person.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Yeah, very dangerous, very dangerous person. I don't care what he does with his life, because he's dangerous. He's messing with a lot of other people. Laughs

Interviewer

That's right, that's right.

Fr. W. De Biase:

That sounds awful coming from a priest, but I'm just "this idea of" yeah, so I have mixed feelings about these, all these "the men that I met, I'll never forget. Like I said, I still keep in touch with two of them, and looking back now, I went through their marriage, I went through their children growing up, I'm going through their grandchildren growing up now. Plus that experience in Korea, and it never leaves. There's always something that said, "We shared fear. We shared cold. We shared horrible things together that have made us friends that will never cease."

Interviewer

Mm-hmm, yeah.

Fr. W. De Biase:

And that's about it.

Interviewer

We're very grateful that you took the time to sit and talk with us today and tell your story.

Fr. W. De Biase:

I hope I said something that will help somebody, Scott.

Interviewer

Absolutely "yes sir.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Good.

Interviewer

Thank you very much.

Fr. W. De Biase:

Okay. End of Audio