

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War 1939-1945 - American

Personal Experience

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JOSEPH C HOWELL

Interviewed

by

Mark Dittmer

on

January 9, 1979

JOSEPH C HOWELL

Joseph C Howell was born to Mr and Mrs Clement Howell in Tauton, Massachusetts on February 22, 1917 He was raised in Tauton and completed his secondary education at Monsignor Coyle High in 1935 Like many communities in the east, Taunton suffered greatly during the Great Depression and work was hard to come by By 1939, however, there was ample employment due to the war defense build-up and aid to Great Britain

During World War II, Howell enlisted in the United States Army and was placed with the Thirth-Sixth Infantry Division The Thirty-Sixth Division was one of the first divisions to set sail for North Africa and prepare for maneuvers to invade Sicily and then the coast of Italy The Thirty-Sixth and the Fifty-Fifth Infantry Divisions were very responsible for the defeat of Rommel in Italy During the summer of 1944, after the invasion of Normandy, the Thirty-Sixth moved north from Marseille into the Rhone Valley At this time, Howell suffered a head wound in a cross fire attack by German troops

Recovering from his head wound in a GI hospital in West Virginia, Howell met and married his wife Mabelle in late 1944 Today, Mr and Mrs. Howell reside in Warren, Ohio and are the parents of a son, J. David Howell Mr Howell works for the Lyons Transportation Lines and is a member of the St James Catholic Church of Warren, Ohio

D This is an interview with Joseph C Howell for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on World War II combat veterans, by Mark Dittmer, on January 9, 1979

Okay, Mr Howell, I would like for you to try to move yourself back to pre-World War II and give me an analysis of what you were doing prior to World War II And since you were up in the Massachusetts area, try to give me an analysis of what the mood of the country was, especially in the Northeast and how the war in Europe was affecting your area

H Well, I very distinctly remember where I was when Pearl Harbor was bombed As a matter of fact, I was watching a football game, it was Sunday afternoon They broke into the game and announced that Pearl Harbor was bombed and, as I recall, it was about the third quarter. At that time I was seventeen or eighteen, and one of the things that I could see that did affect the area was, we came out of a big depression The Depression affected me tremendously as it affected millions of other people, but I can recall that Dad was not working, I had three sisters, and we had very little to live on However, we did have a happy family relationship

One of the things that was happening on the east coast was, a lot of the companies started calling men back to work and it was all due to the fact that we were arming England and European countries and this was good That started about, do not hold me to the dates, 1939, when things started to boom as far as the economy was concerned Now, when the shock happened, most of us went down to sign up Where did we go? It was a very different type of thing than what the Vietnam situation was where the Vietnam War --if I could just make a little parallel--was a war that, frankly, I do not think we should have even been in And it is quite obvious that the thinking is correct, because hindsight is with us now and we can see the horrible thing that it did to us It tore us apart We still are being affected by the financial outcome of it, billions and billions of dollars down the drain

But I will digress back now to the 1940's when Pearl Harbor was bombed All of us were spellbound Everyone was home listening to the radio I recall how important it was Everyone listened to President Roosevelt when he declared war in China and all of my friends and I, we went to sign up Patriotism was fantastic As a matter of fact, I was turned down, I could not get in I had some teeth problems, which I have rectified and paid for myself, and in the interim, my friends were all going. Then I was drafted By that time, I had my teeth all fixed. Ironically, I wish I had not because they would have paid for them But anyway, I was drafted and went through Camp Air, that is at Fort Devons Air is where Fort Devons is located, in a suburb of Boston From there I was transferred to Spartanburg, West Virginia. Matter of fact, I went all by myself; not with the group I was with I was with a group of fellows from my hometown They all went to Florida I was shipped to Spartanburg

I did have a background in painting and all that I like to paint They were sending me to camouflage school When I got there, the course had already run its ninety

days and when I reported into the barracks, I was the only one there, other than a sergeant. He told me I would have to wait about ten days. All the guys went home on leave. He showed me where the mess hall was, so, knowing where the mess hall was, I would get up and go to breakfast, lunch and dinner. And being from a small town, I was never away from home. I do not think I was ever twenty miles from my hometown. And so I started to go around the camp. It was fabulous, big and, at that particular time, we were making twenty dollars a month, that is what the pay was. And I recall once, I got on a bus and drove around camp and I saw a large sign that said, "Join the paratroopers. Earn fifty dollars more a month." I did not do anything right then. The next day, I went down, kept quiet about it, and I signed up. I had task training, ninety days. It was a ninety day deal.

D When did it start?

H What month?

D This was in 1942, right?

H Yes, right. We had fantastic training. As a matter of fact, I think this type of training got me through the war, physically. The last week at South Carolina, we were to take training jumps from towers and I sprained my ankles. I went into the hospital and by the time I got out, all my group had gone to Fort Benning. They were jumping three times from planes. Well, I went into a casual outfit and stayed for maybe, I do not know, ten days. Then we got orders and they shipped me to Camp Edwards on Cape Cod in Massachusetts.

D When was this?

H This was about the end of September, the first of October. At that time, they did not tell you where you were going. You would fall out and they would give you orders and you would report someplace and they would tell you what kind of clothes to wear. Well, on this particular instance they said, "Wear wool this time." So I figured I was going to a cold planet, but no one in the world would ever think that I would be going back home to practice at Tawnton Massachusetts. Anyway, we got down to Cape Cod. We actually did not go into Camp Edwards because it was a big camp back then. But we were the Thirty-Sixth Infantry Division which was activated in Texas, the National Guard outfit. They were bivouacked along a peninsula along Cape Cod. They were taking amphibious training on Martha's Vinyard.

We got down there, it was maybe one or two in the morning, and they had these tents, straw on the floor, and I just threw my gear in there, pulled some blankets up and sacked out. In the morning, there were not too many people around the mess hall. They went into the tent of the first Sergeant and reported in. They told me the fellows were out on a four day maneuver and I would have to get these little, they call them LSVP's,

Landing Ship Vehicle Personnel What they would do, a company, a regiment, a division would get on a larger ship, perhaps an LST, which would hold maybe fifteen hundred, there again, do not hold me to that We would take off in the ocean Now I never got involved in this part, see . They would go out into the ocean, maneuver around, and then they would climb down these large nets, packs and all, just like an invasion They would crawl into these LSVP's and I think the LSVP held forty guys, or fifty, I do not know Then these Navy people, a pile of them, they would go out and rendezvous, they would start a circle, until everyone was in a smaller boat, and then at a given time, a flare would be shot and these guys would head right for a specific part of the island in which they were to land It was just like you were going to have combat They would have mines there, but they were well marked, and they would go off automatically, to actually give you the flavor of what was going on in the real thing And then you had objectives, the officers had overlays, overlay maps of the area. They would discuss this with the Sergeants and all that and everyone knew what our objective was and all that So, I got involved in it about a week late and it was getting pretty cold down there now because we were talking about getting into November and we were still under tents, see.

D Up in Cape Cod, that would be cold

H Yes, and where I was, I was not any further from here to that outside door from the water Finally, I think it was in November, prior to Thanksgiving, they moved us into Camp Edwards in the barracks This is another irony I do not know how long the Thirty-Sixth was activated but, I am going to say maybe eighteen months, and it was the first time that division had been in an area in which they slept in barracks, other than that they were sleeping in tents

In that area there we went through a regular training period for nomenclature, guns and knives, physical fitness and all that jazz Every once in a while, maybe every eight or ten days, we would get an order at night, maybe seven, eight or nine at night to--well, I do not want to use the word--suit up We would have to get all our gear, pack it like we were going overseas, go down to the railroad track We would march down there in squad, section company strength see, we would get on the trains, go through the whole thing, put your gear right close to you They would close all the windows down and the next morning we would wake up, get off, and walk on back to our barracks The train would even start up and everything, just like it was moving. We did that about four or five times Now, what they were doing was, of course, there were spies all over the country and what they were doing was, knowing that spies were in the area, figuring that information would get back that the Thirty-Sixth Infantry Division is boarding trains and going to New York, and getting on a boat and going over Okay, that went on for five or six times Actually we got sick of doing it and it happened again We got on the train this day, but the next morning, when we woke up, we were in New York Harbor, and we could not believe it. Because you could hear the train going and you would fall asleep and it was moving anyway on these dry runs We were in New York Harbor, and we were the first infantry division to leave Camp Edwards, taking the train to New York

Harbor to get on a boat and depart.

Now, the mood of the people down on the Cape was one of, well, they were apprehensive, now they had the black-out's down there and at night, you were not allowed any lights. You had to have your windows all down and the cars had to have their headlights painted. They were allowed a slit, maybe an inch across. Civilian cars, army vehicles, all of them. Lights were taboo on Cape Cod because they felt that that would be an area in which someone could come up in a submarine, put some people ashore and all this business. And so, there was no panic or anything--do not get me wrong--because there were an awful lot of G I 's because that Camp Edwards was a big, big place. Then they had an airfield there, Otis Airfield. There were an awful lot of soldiers there but they really enforced this black-out on the Cape very strongly, and if they caught you with lights on--police, civilian, or MP's--wow, they were really after you.

So we get on this boat .

D Was this about November or December of 1942?

H Let me think. Yes, we would be coming into 1943. I could get my book and check the accurate dates of anything. Do you want me to get my book?

D Okay (Tape turns off) You were mentioning the date you left North Africa.

H It was in July, around July. Now, at this particular point, the first division, which is from New England, Yankee Division they call it, they made an invasion from North Africa. At this point now, the Germans had occupied France. They had over-run all of Europe. They had occupied France and the part of France they called Vichy or Free France, because the people just put down their arms and the Germans did not occupy it with as many soldiers and artillery and all of that. One reason that I can think of is because they were gearing their defense for the other side of France, which was facing England. The Germans, at one point, were going to invade England so they held the southern part of France. But it was still controlled by the Germans but not to the extent that Paris and the Eastern seaboard was. Okay, at this time, Charles De Gaulle was an officer in the French Army and General Mark Clark was dropped off at French Morocco and he met with Charles De Gaulle and, at this point, the Italian army was over in North Africa. Mussolini had sided with Hitler. So, Charles De Gaulle was dropped at French Morocco and he met with--I think it was De Gaulle--General Clark. He met De Gaulle and they worked out a deal. We were going to invade, as a matter of fact, the ships were already in the Atlantic Ocean heading this way, and he was trying to soften, to talk, diplomatically, to talk the Italians into capitulate, and he was quite successful. So, as the boats came up through Gibraltar, the first division landed at Oran. Now, Oran is a city in North Africa, and the port of Oran is Azu. Well, I think two divisions landed there and pushed in. One regiment landed at Casablanca on the Atlantic Ocean. Of course, they have back ups, tanks and all this stuff and they started to push in. Now, the British were fighting the

Italians over in North Africa and you have heard of Field Marshall Montgomery And then, the Germans were over there at this time, too

D Rommel (Field Marshall's name)

H Rommel They invaded at Casablanca without too many casualties and they also got in on Oran, but then they started to push So, as they started to build up, they brought in all the reserved forces and all this They were pushing and they started to push Rommel back to Algiers It might have been around the first part of August, the end of July We came over on a big ship, the whole division, and we landed at Azu. Now, our chief aim at that particular time, because it was not known to us then. We were the reserve division behind the first At that time, they did not expect us to go into combat in North Africa, the Thirty-sixty So we get into Azu and went up to a town called Mostaganem and that is where we stayed overnight. It was entirely different than South Africa, like a desert area and all this Our company bivouacked there and we were sort of spread out all over the place

At that time, a division was comprised of four regiments squared and, prior to our going overseas, they changed the division to a triangle, three corners They took one regiment from a lot of divisions and made other divisions and they did this because of the mobility of it It was better moving ahead in a triangle than a square, a block So, everything was going along fine there and we still took training, physical training And then we left Oran and we went all the way over to the west and we went through--I still remember it because I remember reading about it in history--the Sidi-bel-Abbes, the French War Matrons. We passed that and we wound up in a little town called Fez, F-E-Z Beautiful place It was the first westernized area that we saw We bivouacked in Port Corks there What we had to do, as I said, one of the divisions came through Casablanca and up into the Fez area They put them on trains and they kept them pushing south We sort of were doing the clean-up job there, no fighting As a matter of fact, I never realized until I was there that cork grew on trees Cork is the bark of a tree And we were bivouacked at Cork Forest. They had cork piled up in big stacks, ready to ship back to America someplace

We stayed there for about three weeks Then they shot us back on the trains again for Azu We took more amphibious training. There again, we were in these LST's and LCVP boats and we would go out for, I would say, six days or a week on the water I thought I was in the Navy. But all the time, we were getting good training. They knew what they were doing. We knew that sooner or later they were going to invade Sicily, Italy and France and, at that time, the Germans had broken through at Kasserine Pass. Right near Kasserine Pass is a place called Cadessa I guess it is a city And the Allies had millions and millions of tons, you name it, they had it. Ammunition, gasoline, food stuffs, everything that an army would need stacked up for as far as the eye could see They were afraid that when Rommel broke through, he could capture that So they took one of our regiments, which was not us, and they moved them in to fortify the line, that was a reserve thing, and they held and started to push, or they might have broken through

Now, Rommel capitulated in North Africa and we are coming now to September

Now they are really talking. We knew we were going to invade Italy, but where, we did not know. They pushed up on our training. We would have all kinds of talks from our officers. I was corporal at that time and you could almost feel the tension. And come September ninth we got on the boats. We got on these big LST's about September eighth and I never saw so many ships in my life, really. When we got on them, I do not think we were on for more than twenty-four full hours. This was an important fact, too, because we would have a section meeting. A section is two squads. A platoon is two sections. We would have section meetings and they would have--the officer that is--our platoon leader. I was a machine gunner. They would have done in, it looked like sponge or clay of the area in which we were going to hit. And the company I was with, we were on the extreme right of the whole invasion. It was Salerno we were going to hit. So, they had it up there and we all could look at it and they had hills and they would tell you how high the hill was, the name of the little towns. They had roads. They had numbers on the roads in Italian and English and we studied them so anyone that did not know where they were going or what they were going to do.

Now, in the morning of September ninth, just prior to that, the Forty-fifth Infantry Division, which came right from the States on boats, they swarmed down the Mediterranean and invaded Sicily. They might have done this, maybe, a month prior to us going, okay? They got in and they had a foothold and they crossed the Straits of Messina, where the heel is in Italy, and that was in conjunction without invasion. So we went in, and now it was just getting daylight. I was in the third wave. We all knew what we had to do. So, we had objectives we had to take. The first wave got in without any fire or anything. And obviously I know what happened. Then we did not know it. The element of surprise is a great thing in a battle. Well, lots of times you think you have the element of surprise and the enemy is allowing you to have it. This is what happened here.

The first wave got in and, of course, the beaches were loaded with barbed wire roll, like this. Prior to the first wave going in, they had these frog men. These guys had long pipes, maybe six to twelve feet long. They called them bangalore torpedoes and they had reflectors because before the sun was up, they were coming in. It was still dark and when they got on shore, they took these reflectors and stuck them maybe a foot or two down in the sand with the color part out so we could see it. If you are going to hit maybe a ten mile section, you got a big spread, and you can become confused in all of this. The Navy men, the guys that were piloting boats, would stick those colors, red, white, blue, you know? Then they would crawl up the beach and they would put these bangalore torpedoes under the barbed wire and it would blow it. It was supposed to blow a hole right in it so we could run through. They did this all along the beach. They allowed the first and second wave to sort of penetrate--not too much. What they wanted to do was, when they felt there were enough men on shore, they would all zero in with their machine guns. Let's see, they had eighty-eights and we had ninety millimeter guns. They had every part of the beach zeroed in. All they had to do was just give an order and everyone starts. They had mortars and artillery. When we were coming in, we could not

hear much fire or anything, maybe just sporadic gunfire. And the guy put down the ring. Now, here again, is where the training comes.

I must have been carrying eighty pounds. I had a tripod. I was a machine gunner and the machine gunner carries the tripod. When we were getting ready to fire, I would jam that down on the ground and a guy would come up with a receiver, that is the firing part. I have got knobs and everything I have got to tighten while he is jamming that in there and making it secure, yet, it would pivot. You do it simultaneously and you do it in the dark. If something went wrong, you could not repair it in the dark. I forgot what it weighed. It must have been thirty-seven and a half pounds plus my pack, shells, guns and all of this. Everyone was loaded. But you wore them loose, just like a backpack. And if anything happened, and you went in the water, all you had to do was go like this and it would fall off. Well, we were coming in and it still was not light. It was just getting like that. They were all lined up, all these fellows. Of course, it was sort of a nervous thing. I know the thing that went through my mind was, it reminded me a little of Cape Cod when you landed on the beaches. But this was foreign soil. We could here the scrape. When the pilot of the boat heard the scrape, down came the ramp and we were all ready to go. We started to go out. Man, we were in water over our heads. What happened, he hit a sand bar but he would not go any further.

D He did not know.

H And we all peeled off our stuff. I know I did, I did. I went all the way down and, man, these guys were just coming like flies over you. I took a good, deep breath and I went all the way down to the bottom, because I figured, "Man, I want to get up." When I hit the bottom, I allowed my knees to bend, and I just pushed myself up. I was banging into my own men, your helmet is gone and all this, see. I came up, got a gasp of air, and I was frightened. So, naturally, I started to swim forward and maybe, ten, fifteen, twenty feet, now, we are at the war. Of course, everyone is in the same boat as I am. I just got in, just about where the water meets and everything goes. Bomb! Bomb! And none of us had any--we had ammunition, maybe a couple of grenades--but none of us had any guns.

D They got wet?

H Yes. So I started to move in because they told us that when you hit the beach, get off the beach, get in. And I started to move in. It was deafening and you could hear guys screaming. It was very difficult to think. So, I started to push in. I found a hole in the barbed wire and you could see bodies all around. I kept pushing in and pushing in. And you know how, you have been down to the ocean, you know how there are dunes. I perhaps went in fifty, eighty, one hundred feet. And I started to head southeast because that is where our markers were. There were a couple of guys with me. We got in maybe one hundred yards, undercover, and just sat there to get our breath. We sort of looked back and all hell was breaking loose. The day was lighting up and then it was getting daylight. You could see what was happening and it was horrible, really. This was our

first indoctrination and I said, "We better move in," because it was better than being picked off here.

Shells were bouncing all over the place, we did not have any helmets and all this, so we were starting to push in a little more. We picked up a rifle we found and some grenades and started to move in. We got in, I'd say five to eight hundred yards and we could see the machine guns. The ones we could see were sort of on our left, there was nothing on our right. We kept going this way. We would go a bit and take a breath. We figured, "Well, they are killing those guys on the beaches." You heard that through the fire. See, they had zeroed all this in prior to the invasion. They would practice this also. So we decided we would go and try to knock it out. I think the last time I talked to you on the other tape, I wanted to detail this on what happened. The four of us were able to knock a machine gun out. One of the guys got away. I think we killed two. One got away and started running back. We could see him and we did not exactly follow him.

We went further south, and then came back. In the height of battle, you do not realize what you are doing. What we did, we could hear mumbling and all of this. We were in sort of a wooded area. And in the southern part of Italy, they have a lot of stone walls because they did not have enough wood to build fences. They had these all over the place. We came through this wood and there was a big stone wall and a big German tank, right there. Now, they could not see us yet. I think the wall might have been five feet high or something like that. We could see the top turret and gun, and had we had a bazooka or something like that, I am pretty sure we could have knocked it out, but we did not. They do have machine guns on those things. So we tried to collect our thoughts. We figured it would be silly to try to attempt that. So we started to come back and what happened was, we had gone way beyond the line. We were actually amongst the German soldiers, we had gone in so far. Actually, we probably found just a little alley that was not defended and we had penetrated it. So we came back and slowly, but surely, our guys were coming on and our company was attempting to regroup because everyone knew what area we should be in. And I would say maybe four or five hours later, we decided to push out.

We could not have gotten more than a half of a mile, three quarters of a mile. We could not go any further. We stopped in the front. We were stopped at the left and even the right. We were going up a hill. Our first objective was to capture a big hill. I think the name of it was Alba Hill. The paratroopers had jumped in there and they were to secure it and, obviously, they were running out of arms. Then we got trapped. We were trapped for about, oh, two or three days. As we looked back, we could see the beach, and we could still see the LST's coming in and dropping off GI's and we could see the larger boats coming in. They were getting tanks off and trying to get trucks loaded with munitions.

The thing that saved us was that the Germans were coming at us with tanks. They had mined the roads. They knew where the mines were but we did not. So they were very methodical in coming down the road. They would get off it or they would blow up a mine. They were coming down this road. There were four or five of them and all we had, at that time, were bazooka's. You can knock a tank out with a bazooka if you get

close enough to it. The only thing that saved us was that we had communications with the Navy. They had these big battleships out there. We could not even see them, they were that far out in the Mediterranean. One of the officers who was attached to our battalion, a naval officer, started to call in coordinates and fired these big sixteen-inch guns. Fortunately, he hit the first one and the other tanks could not turn around. They just stayed there. Some of our infantrymen went out there because the things could not come any further, although they were shooting their machine guns. They got around and they knocked out one through the rear. So now, the other ones could not go back, forward, or anywhere. We recaptured the whole area, and we started to push up to Alba Villa.

As we were going up to replace the paratroopers that had dropped there on D-Day, they were coming down. The stench was horrible, and there were dead bodies all over the place. You can imagine how everyone was in a state of confusion and shock. As I was going up, I spotted two of my friends that I had taken paratrooper training with. They were coming down. I called to them. They recognized me and one of them said, "I am glad you are going up and we are coming down." I said, "How is it?" and he said, "Well, we think it is pretty secure, but there are a lot of dead bodies up there." When we got up there, we took over their positions.

We did not have too much activity the next day, we had a counter. We had an attack at night, I think, and we held back. We held them off and we started to push in more. We ran into an awful lot of fights. We were trying to stay right with them, so they would not have the element of surprise. But they had established another line. I think it was called the Gustavus line. There was a river, and they had established a line right there so, as they were being driven back, they would cross the river. They already had troops right there, and they were fresh. Then we had our higher ups. We had to dig in. Plan an attack. Cross the river. Well, we pushed on through there. We had orders for Naples. Naples was the first real city that our division had taken. There was a lot of sea coast. We landed on a ten mile front. As I say, we were on the extreme right flank. We were south. There were a lot of guys further north than we were. Ten miles. Well, as everyone was pushing in this way, the guys that were ten miles up on us, they went right into Mount Vesuvius. We started to push into the center of the shoe of Italy and then we met up with the Forty-fifth division that was coming up the boot.

In the meantime, the British were going up on Adriatic Sea side of Italy. British, Polish, and then some Americans just started to push up that way. While we were a little beyond Naples, Mount Vesuvius erupted. I cannot think of the exact date, but the Air Force had to move all of their planes because all the fine dust which was flying around knocked the engines out. I could see the smoke.

We just kept pushing up into the Lira Valley. We had some pretty tough battles, and we stopped at the Rapito River. This is twenty-five to thirty miles from Rome. Near Christmas Eve and cold. The further north you go in Italy, the elevation rises. It gets colder and colder. In the southern part of Italy, I think they plant twice a year. They farm in big farms. Yes, I remember, because we had a really awful battle Christmas Eve. We finally took the mountain and then we pushed down into the valley near the Rapito River.

We held off there. We dug in and we could not break out. This was January. The infantry was out probing in the cold, rain, snow, and ice. They would get into these rubber boats and cross the river, paddling across maybe three or four guys. They would start probing to see how strongly they were fortifying. January twenty-first, I will never forget this date, we got orders to cross the river, in daylight, in conjunction with our crossing. If I had a map to show you, you could see. You obviously have studied about Anzio. You take history in school?

D Right.

H Okay, in conjunction with that, we were stymied there. We were going nowhere. And January twenty-first, we got orders to cross it. Now, when you cross a river, they probe for you. Maybe a squad of guys every mile or so to see how it has held. But we could see the Monte Cassino up there. It was only, shoot, it could not have been any more than two miles from us, but it was so high. And this valley that you are looking at, Cassino overlooked the whole thing. You could be there with just a radio and you could stop anything from coming down the roads. So the engineers came in first and we followed them. They had these little pontoon bridges. The walk area was maybe twenty-four inches. We went across and started. There again, we did not run into much small arms stuff, but once we got across and started to move in, we were maybe one hundred and fifty to three hundred yards in, when we were told to dig in. So we started digging and all hell broke loose. They had mortar fire, artillery fire, and all kinds of automatic weapons. You could not stand up. The fire grazing us was, I would say, thirty-six to forty-eight inches over our backs. We had to lie on the ground and set up machine guns. You could not sit up to shoot. We just did not have a chance. It was a surprise I do not think I will ever forget.

Our guys were twenty-five or thirty yards up ahead of us and it was our responsibility to neutralize the enemy fire with our machine guns. We also had mortars but they had a range of maybe a mile, effectively. And they were on the other side of the river. So what we needed were communications. Without communications, you cannot use your weapons. You cannot get orders. So, man, it was horrible. The Germans had something that was a large disc and it had tubes in it, maybe eight to twelve tubes, and it shot rockets, but it shot them in sections and they made a horrible, horrible noise when they went off. You could hear them, that is how close we were to things. And they would go in a high arc, then come down. They would spray an area of, I would say, fifty yards. When they landed on the ground, it was just like dynamite--pow!--lift you right up, drive you nuts.

They started to shoot these things. Well, we had to do something. At that time, I was a sergeant, Staff Sergeant, but the guy that was the Platoon Sergeant, he and I were good buddies. And I told him, "Man, we got to do something or we are not going to make it." Did you ever see these reels of wire? They are like telephone wire. The guy is supposed to spread them. I do not know how the reel got there, but it was there, and I picked it and tied it to the tripod of the machine gun. I said, "Look, hook this thing with

the phone I am going to go back and I am going to try get some communication for us because if we could just get back and hook up on the other side of the river, man, we have got communications ”

What you have to watch out for now is if this is going to be a close call because the guys in back of the river cannot see their target They need someone up close that can see the target Here is how they do it Are you familiar with a mortar?

D Yes

H Okay, it has a high trajectory and it comes down. Now, when you are in a battle, these things are great They have thirty millimeter mortars and eighty millimeter mortars These are great because you are fighting close You can take a fellow on a phone hooked up to a sergeant back there, tell him to ‘fire one’ but he will give you a splash That is because there are so many shells bouncing all around the place, how can you tell which one is yours? So, the increments that they put on these things, he can tell about two or three seconds, maybe five, when that will explode, when it will hit the ground. You would just ask him for a splash. I am not a mortar man, but I told you, I took training You would call back and say, “Give me a splash on it ” Well, about five seconds before it was to hit, he would give you a splash and then you watch (snaps finger) and you can see it hit

Now, let’s say you could see a machine gun with the cover up to protect it and you want to try to knock it out Let’s say the shell that he shot was missing it by twenty yards Now you have something to go on. You would call him back and you would say, “It was twenty yards right The range was good ” He would say, “Okay, I am going to give you another splash ” They do this fast now, see. He would call back and these guys set these things and he would give you a splash, say, ten yards left You would call back and tell him He would say, “Okay, fine.” So then he would come back and you would say, “Okay, we have ten yards this way and twenty that way ” He would say, “Okay, I am going to fire five rounds for effect.” What he is telling you is he is going to fire five as fast as he can and they are going to hit in that area of ten or twenty yards Hopefully, one will hit where the machine gun is and you will knock it out If it happens, then you can move your guys up Then you would repeat this

I started to go back and I had to crawl all the way to the river, one hundred and fifty yards, approximately, and, as I say, it was January, there was snow on the ground, ice And I rolled over to the river and I have got this reel When I got down to the bank, I took my helmet off I took my jacket off. I took my shoes off I was freezing I tried to figure out a way to get this reel on my back On the reel they had a couple of straps I put two arms through it That is how the other guy was carrying it Then I pulled to make sure the wire was loose, and I got in the water. If I had to do it today, I would probably flip, it would be too cold And I started to swim the river Now, it was not too awfully wide where I was It was right on a bend I would say it might have been fifty yards It had a good current but that did not phase me because I am a good swimmer

I started to take off and I was just about to the center and the water started. I

could hear machine guns. The water was beating up all around me. I looked this way--I mentioned that I was on a curve--just beyond the curve. The Germans had a machine gun set up there. I said, "Oh, my God." And, as I started to swim faster, my hand caught the wire. It probably saved my life. When it caught the wire, I could not come up any further, but the wire was tight and the current took me this way. It took me out of their view, but it did take me right back to the bank I started from, only maybe twenty-five yards down further. I got to the bank and I was exhausted, frightened, but I was thinking of my buddies, so I would give it another try. I took off again. As soon as I got in that water, I started going as fast as I could, and I almost got to the other shore. Then they could see me and they started to open up, but fortunately, they did not hit me. So, I got out of the water and there was a little bit of brush and stuff there. I had to just go over a bank, maybe three or four feet high. I was getting my breath and there was ice all over my hands and hair. Everything I had on was turning to ice when I got out of the water. I took the reel first and I threw it up over, and then I got enough wind and I got over there and rolled down. I went to a tree because all the trees were--what few trees there were--hit with shrapnel. I tied the wire around it.

Now, I was getting my breath again and I wanted to find our mortar patrols. They had to be around someplace. I was freezing. My teeth were chattering. I looked up and I could see someone coming down the road. It was a general. It was General Walker, the general in our division, and there were at least six or seven GI's around him with sub-machine guns. One of them spotted me. I wanted to get out of there and I started to run towards them. One of the guys came up and grabbed a hold of me. He said, "Soldier, have you been across the river?" I said, "Yes." He said, "How is it?" I said, "It is horrible." And I said, "Listen, we need communication. Down on that tree there is a line. All you have to do is put phones on the end. It is connected to corporal so-and-so with these machine gun sections. But we need mortar fire." And he said to me, "you better get back to the first aid station." And I said, "Well, is someone going to take care of that telephone?" He said, "Some more platoons are coming. We will take care of that."

So I started to scoot back and it is surprising how fast you can run when your feet are cold. I did not go back to our first aid station because, all the time we were fighting up in Italy, the farm people stayed in their homes and all their homes were brick, mortar, because wood is a premium over there. The poor farm people stayed right in their homes while the fighting was going on. They would be down in their basements.

D In the wine cellar.

H Yes. They had an awful lot of wine cellars. I remember this house. I ran up to it and I pounded on the door. It is amazing how you can make yourself understood. I pounded on the door and I think I was calling her Madame or Senorita. The door opened and a young lady came out. She recognized me. She said, "Mama mia." She pulled me inside and got a blanket. It was a GI blanket and she wrapped it around me. She started jibbering in Italian. She got me close to the fire and started to throw wood on it. That is the worst thing you could do because smoke is coming out of the chimney. Someone

could put an artillery shell in it. She got me some wine. She even had to hold it up to my lips so I could drink it. So, I stayed there. I took my clothes off. She got me some more blankets. I think I stayed there about four or five hours, got rested and thawed out. I gave her a big hug and squeeze and told her that I wished her well. I told her that I was going back to my outfit. Now we were on the back of the fire. I know where to go now. We had been in that area for maybe three or four weeks.

So I went back, rejoined our company, or rather, what was left of our company. I think we lost, oh boy, we had to lose half of our company. Not all were killed, but captured and wounded, because I got cards later on from some guys I was with over there, and they were working in potato fields in Germany. They were captured, this is how close we were to them. So, we got back and it was horrible. I did not have any shoes. The lady had a pair of old beat up Italian shoes that I threw on. So, anyway, it was a disaster, and wouldn't you know, that night we got orders that we were going to try it again. Can you imagine that? Well, the ones that were not in a state of shock were. I could not believe what I was hearing, really. And we tried it again and we got knocked back again. And we lost almost half of what we had when we came over. As a matter of fact, that was quite controversial in World War II. The Thirty-sixth Infantry Division wanted to have an investigation of the commanding general, who was Mark Clark. I do not take any sides. I look at it as tough. It was just one of those things.

On the twenty-first, when we tried to get ahold of the first aid, simultaneously, we invaded Anzio. I think it was the Third Division, I cannot be sure. Do not hold me to that. I could check in my book. But they invaded Anzio. It was just up twenty-five miles. And what they were trying to do was invade them. Had they had more troops, it would have worked. But they went into an area understaffed. We were coming up the front this way. (Showing on map) Twenty miles, twenty-five miles up, they land here. Something has got to happen. The Germans are on order to protect this area. This is what our commanders felt and I agree with them. We were going to have to pull some troops here where we were crossing to fortify that because as they went through there, these troops were all trapped down in there. Well, they invaded and there were some units. I do not know whether it was the Third or the Forty-fifth that were on the outskirts of Rome, but they were too thinly spread out. And then the Germans pulled some of their men from up around Rome. I think they were a little north of Rome. And of course, our guys started to back up and then we built the perimeter around Anzio. So when you build a perimeter, you are digging in. It was going to be a defensive thing and what they wanted to do was hold that area.

Okay, now I can understand a commander telling, "You make a crossing one, coordinate it with this, it backfires for us," he tells you to cross again. Obviously, he did not have fresh troops and all that and wanted to try and see if he could get across with any amount of force, troops, that is, bodies, people. The Germans would have to pull out if it did not work. Consequently, they did not break through the Rapito River until, oh, shoot, let me restate it this way because I was in there when they bombed it. Well, we were there at the Rapito River. Of course, we worked our way down. We worked our way west and came around but not across the river. We were there in January, February,

March

D It is 1944?

H Yes, March and April, I think I cannot be sure But then they decided to bomb it And when they bombed that Abbey in Cassino, I had a group of machine gunners--we had to move because we even got the debris from the place, we were so close to it. They kept telling us that they were going to bomb it but they did not want to bomb it because of the religious significance of it The day that they bombed it, what we were doing at night, since I had had a promotion and was in charge of the machine gunners, was I would take them under cover of darkness We would go down in the valley and we would make sure we had that crossfire because the Germans could come around and up the valley around this way We had some pretty fights, but we had to leave before daylight because we could be seen And we would pull out every morning before daylight Well, this morning they bombed the abbey, I do not know, maybe it was seven thirty But at a distance you could see, it looked like a black cloud and we could hear this tremendous roar and the cloud started to get a little closer to us We knew that they were going to bomb it Man, we were all there looking in awe and happy that they were going to bomb it We forgot that we had to get out of the area

If you have ever seen planes bomb, as they come in for their run, they get themselves closer together so when they do drop their bombs, their pattern is overlapped We were all there marveling and real happy, forgetting that we have get out of here We finally regained our senses and we got our gear and started to go down when they started to drop their bombs I think it was shortly after that that we did cross the river We did not cross; some other group did. We were sent back to Naples Then we got on the boats, those LST's again, and they sent us up to Anzio, now that would have had to have been May because we landed in Anzio and on June sixth--I will never forget this date either--we broke out of Anzio and headed for Rome Now the reason I cannot forget this is, they had the Piper Cubs They used to have a guy out there, an officer, and they were artillery squadrons for Americans, but Piper Cubs went so slow and they stayed just about out of range that they could not knock them down. Not that some of them did not get hit, but they were artillery squadrons for us

And this day, the morning that we got the orders to attack, the Piper Cub came over, they had a loudspeaker on it that probably was not anymore than twelve hundred feet high, and they announced that the Allies had invaded Normandy and man, you should have heard our shouting! Oh, baby! We figured we were going to be home in a month, and we started our way up into Rome And, as I say, it is not that far We did not run into too much fighting, just sniper firing And here again, I remember reading in school about the Colosseum and they even put cover in the Colosseum, snipers And one of the nice things about it--you should always try to look for something good out of something bad--is, they were coming in from all different angles, going north now, and the people started to come up, Italians, mostly women, ladies, girls, older men, and they threw flowers and brought wine and bread I will never forget that We started to push,

and we got on the other side of them. We got more north of Rome, and what we were trying to do now was maintain contact with the Germans. When we got there, some other group came right through us. We went up almost as far as Florence, then we came back to Naples again. We thought we were going to get a trip home. We got back, got deloused, got a new issue of clothes, and then they told us we were going to invade France.

In the meantime, I got a call. My captain called and he told me that they wanted to give me a battlefield commission. Man, I had enough points to go home from North Africa when I was there, but it paid more money and they said, "Well, I want you to go up and see your regimental commander." So I went up and we had lost an awful lot of officers. The second lieutenant has a gold bar, the first lieutenant has a silver bar, captain has two bars; major gold, colonel, silver. The commander of our division insisted that all our officers wear their bars, not camouflaged, but they had to be exposed. And we lost an awful lot of officers because you could zero right in on them, you know, in the sunshine.

At that point, I guess the officer's training was not supplying them fast enough. So I went up to see him and he was a real fine guy, a gentleman. I said, "Well, I have been around enough now, and just a few scratches." The guy said, "Well, normally when someone gets a battlefield commission, the procedure is to take them right out of their environment that they have spent all these months, years, and they transfer them to some other battalion. The reason behind it is that there is a fine line you have got to keep when you are an officer and an enlisted man, especially if you have been an enlisted man with your buddies and you are now an officer." So I told them, "Gee, I have been with these fellows since we landed in North Africa. I know who is dependable, who is not. We have lost an awful lot. I would not want to get transferred, not under any circumstances. If that is the case, I am not interested." He said, "Well, I will tell you what. If I made an exception in your case would you accept the commission?"

I was not expecting that. And I thought about it a second and said, "Okay." He said, "Fine." Right then and there, he made me a civilian. You have to be a civilian for twenty-four hours if you get a combat commission. And I said, "Fine." He wished me well, and I went back to our guys. Now, instead of being an enlisted man, I was an officer because I knew everything. But the guys sort of ride you a little. The officers eat in a special place and all this.

But anyway, shortly after that, we got on the LST's and moved up the Mediterranean. We made the invasion of southern France and again, we were the extreme right flank and our captain gave me a bar to put on but I put on some dirt and brush. I was the intelligence officer and we made the landing at Nice. It was not too heavily fortified nor defended. Now there is a port over there. I cannot think of the port

D Marseilles?

H Marseilles, yes. See, there is a port over there and we landed in an area twenty miles north. They captured that and we kept pushing in and, the roads there, going north and south, we got down in the Rhone Valley. You told me you were over there. Were you

in the Rhone Valley?

D Yes

H Okay, that is a main artery We were on the extreme right We did not run into much resistance The Germans started to push back using that Rhone Valley Oh, there are some things that happened as far as combat was concerned, but one of the interesting things that happened to me, I got called again up to the regimental headquarters Paratroopers again, jumped ahead of us and they had lost contact, no contact with them and the regimental commander wanted me to take some guys in a jeep and make contact He gave me a sealed envelope to give Major so-and-so, I cannot remember his name And he gave me an overlay of the area in which they were supposed to land I was to give them the envelope, wait for a message, seal it and return it So, I came back and I got a jeep from our company and a fellow that spoke French--we are over in France There were four of us And as I say, I knew them all, I was with them all those years These guys were GI's, just as I was, and I told them, "Listen, this is what we are going to do If anything happens, you all know what is going on Here is the envelope I have got it in my pocket We give it to Major so-and-so, wait for him to answer it, seal it, and take it back "

Because of the fact that I was an officer, it did not mean much to me--I never was rank-conscious We took off, and some funny things happened. We ran out of gas, the three French helped us They pushed our jeep I could not believe the hospitality And we had gone through areas no American GI had been before The Germans obviously had pushed back I think the second day out, we ran into my contact, the major. We gave him the letter, waited for him, and he answered it We took off and went back We had been making excellent progress, good time, speed, and we were going along so fast that a machine gun opened up on us We ditched the jeep. All four of us hopped out We had gone right through our own flanks on the other point We were going through German territory and they opened up on us. We crawled back, fortunately, no one got hurt We crawled back and I delivered my message.

The next day we got orders We were going to attempt to cross the highway, it was up the Rhone And we got into an awful fight I got wounded there Matter of fact, I got a trip home We got into an awful fight It started early in the morning and I saw the guy that got me I was trying to get the machine gun into position, I felt like a tick on my arm I did not pay too much attention to it because I was concerned about a good field of fire and our infantry guys were about a hundred yards in front of us and they were being held down by enemy fire When I felt the tick, I sort of looked on back of me--we were always going up a hill, it seemed, always--and I could see the dirt pop up. I looked and there was a church tower and it was up on a hill The guy could not have been anymore than three hundred and fifty yards from me, and I looked, and something flashed up there The sun was hitting just right I said, "Who is that?" I was going to take a shot at him. Well, I was carrying a carbine And a carbine has an effective range of about a hundred and fifty yards So I stood there with two sights on it, one for a hundred and I

think one hundred fifty I flipped it up and I got it right there. I was just holding my breath, squeezed a shot and the next thing I knew, wham, I got hit It knocked my helmet off and I spun around It sounds a lot worse than what it was But I put my hand up to my head and there was a big hole there! I could feel the bone

I reached back for the first aid kit and I did not have one. The medico came over He was a Mexican kid, a lot of Mexicans in this outfit. He said, "Get down there, get down!" I said, "You have a first aid kit?" He said, "Yes " And in the meantime he was already pulling it off and he stuck it right in there They just tie it around your head I told him, "It was like getting hit with a bat " I was still conscious He said, "Come on " Now you aid stations forward and back The one that you are leaving, you are pushing in I had been in the forward aid station in the morning and they had not been able to get any of the guys that were wounded out I said, "Let's go back." The rear end, they call it. And then the blood started to get into my eyes and I could not see So he put his arm under me and, of course, they had the Red Cross on his helmet and he said, "It is getting pretty hot " And I said, "Well, do you want to lie on the ground?" He said, "No, no, no, because there is a lot of small arms firing " And, of course, I could hear it, but you do not think of those things then Anyway, we struggled, walked across all this open fire Neither of us got hit again And he put me down on a stretcher and the captain, who was a doctor, came over and he said--I remember his words--he said, "Well, they finally caught up with you."

End of Interview