

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II Veterans

Personal Experience

O.H. 1162

THOMAS R. STREICHER

Interviewed

by

John M. Demetra

on

November 29, 1988

TOM STREICHER

Tom Streicher was born and raised in the Pittsburgh area. He is also a lifelong railroader, working 46 years for the Pennsylvania Railroad and its successors, the Penn Central and Conrail [Railroads]. Tom retired early in 1988 and remains active in the local V.F.W. organization, in addition to the Knights of Columbus.

A U.S. Army combat veteran, Tom served in the European Theater from 1944 to 1946 seeing some combat and earning the Bronze Star, Purple Heart, and Combat Infantry Badge, which is his most cherished award.

He and his wife, Gladys, have raised three children and now reside in Mars, Pennsylvania. They have four grandchildren.

Mr. Streicher is an avid reader and Pittsburgh sports fan, and also confesses to have developed a taste for opera.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II Veterans

INTERVIEWEE: THOMAS R. STREICHER

INTERVIEWER: John M. Demetra

SUBJECT: Depression in Pittsburgh, Army life, combat experiences in France, Germany, return home

DATE: November 29, 1988

D: This is an interview with Tom Streicher for the Youngstown town State University Oral History Program, on the World War II Veterans project, by John Demetra, on November 29, 1988.

What can you tell me about growing up in the 1930s here--where your father worked, what kind of house did you live in, that kind of thing?

S: The town I grew up in was Pittsburgh. In 1932, I started first grade. I was six years old and the Depression was still going on. My father worked for the railroad and he never missed a day of work.

D: That's the Pennsylvania Railroad?

S: Pennsylvania Railroad, yes. We didn't feel the tension that a lot of the people did. I remember going into the school I went to. In first grade, there were many children whose fathers were unemployed. The school had a free milk program. The only milk that some of the kids got, I guess, was at school. There was a great fuss that Roosevelt would be elected. Everybody thought that was going to be the salvation of the country. He was elected in 1932, and things didn't get much better, I don't think, until about 1938, when we were starting to think about getting ready for war. I

remember an uncle who had no job, and he was in the WPA, the Works Progress Administration. He would go to work everyday, and they'd fix a road or do something like that. [They would do] some kind of public work, not a whole lot. It seemed that most of them stood around, leaning on their shovels. But at least, it gave them some money and a little bit of pride. They were out doing something. They were earning what they did get, and it helped them over some rough spots.

I had a step brother that couldn't get a job, and he was out of high school. He went to the Civilian Conservation Corp, they call it the "Three C's." He went off into the mountains of Virginia somewhere, and I guess they did a lot of work on the skyline drive, building dams or trails and things like that. It helped him and gave him something to do. It kept him out of trouble, probably, and he was none the worse for it when he came back.

D: As you got older, in high school, do you remember any soup lines and meat give-a-ways, or had those been done away with by the late 1930s?

S: I never saw any, even when I was younger. Definitely by the time I was in high school, they were all done away with here. I started high school in 1939, and things were pretty good in this country at that time.

D: Do you remember where you were on the day they bombed Pearl Harbor?

S: Yes, I definitely remember that. That's like, "Where were you when Kennedy was shot?" I was on the floor at my father's house in New Castle. I was laying on the floor listening to the radio, and a news flash came on and said, "The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor." I remember, my dad was in the kitchen, and I went out and told him. He was stunned and thought it was one of these Orson Wells type programs and that it wasn't true. He came in and started listening to the radio with me. As more bulletins came in, we knew that it was the truth. We were all shocked! He was with the railroad still. That night, I remember, he had to go to work, because there were precautions taken that night to guard bridges and guard certain stretches of the railroad, in case somebody would sabotage or hurt the railroad.

D: That night?

S: Yes, they started that night. They started putting guards out on the Gallitzin tunnels and bridges. At that time, nobody knew what was going to happen. I think that's the reason they took all of those Japanese people from the West Coast. They looked upon them

almost as subversives, that they were going to do damage to us. The only way to watch them was to move them inland to these big areas, almost like camps. Looking at it today, everybody said, "Boy, how cruel," but you had to be there at that time to realize what was going on. There was hysteria on the West Coast. After Pearl Harbor, our Pacific fleet was in bad shape, and the Japanese could have landed on the West Coast if they wanted to pursue it. Thank God they didn't.

D: You finished your last two years of high school during the war?

S: Yes. In December of 1941, I was a junior. I graduated in 1943. Many of my classmates took an accelerated course. They got out in February of 1943. They were the older boys. They got out in February so that they could go to the service. I think the Navy and the Marines took you at 17 [years old]. I stayed until June and graduated in June. I was still 17 years old, so I went to work for the railroad. I had no thoughts about enlisting or anything like that. Probably, I should have. While I was in high school, I took a test, a government test or aptitude test. I never thought anything more about it, but in December of 1943, I got a notice from the government. [It said that] if I wanted to go to college, they would accept me. The only thing I had to do was join the Reserve Corp. I had to pass the physical. So I passed the physical, and they dispatched me to Penn State University. I was in the Army Specialized Training Program. Every college in the country had units like this, that the soldiers were studying, and the government was paying for. We lived in big fraternity houses. We had a little bit of Army discipline. We had to conform to hours and things like that. I, and several people like me, had no basic training up until that. We went straight from where we were taking the physical, to the college. We had no training in weapons or discipline.

D: So, you were not a civilian anymore, you were in the Army?

S: I was in the Army then, but I didn't have the real Army camp discipline. I was a student soldier. That only lasted for about three months, because the Anzio Beach Head Battle took place in Italy. There were a lot of casualties, and the infantry replacements were getting scarce and things like that. Anyhow, people wrote to their congressmen and asked, "Why are they in college [when] there are other boys over there dying?"

So anyhow, the program ended in March of 1944. By that time, I was 18 [years old], so when the program ended, they sent me home for two weeks of leave. They said,

"Report back to the Reception Center at New Cumberland, Pennsylvania," which is near Harrisburg. At the Reception Center, when you go there, they give you your issue of army clothes and shoes. They give you more testing to see what your aptitudes are and where you should go, where they should place you. I scored well, I scored high, I'm sure. I'm not bragging, but I think I did. I was there for about two weeks, and I had some friends there. Every day, a whole group would get called out to go to the Air Force training place, an artillery base, or maybe, a tank corp base. I was there about two weeks.

Finally, on Easter Saturday night, we were all on a troop train. We didn't know where we were going. The troop train left New Cumberland. We came right through Pittsburgh. On Easter Sunday morning, we were at Pennsylvania Station, in Pittsburgh. We left the station on the pan-handle side, [and] we went west through Columbus. We went through Columbus, and then we turned and went through Cincinnati. At Cincinnati, we turned and went south. So, we knew we were going south.

On Monday morning, we woke up, and we were on the outskirts of Anniston, Alabama, which is near Birmingham. There's a big Army base there, Fort McClellan, Alabama. It was an infantry replacement training center, so we knew what we were into then; we were in the infantry. One of the things that happened, my dad was in the field artillery, the twenty-eighth division, in World War I. We were standing in the station, in Pittsburgh, before I got the train to go to New Cumberland. He said, "Whatever you do, don't get into the infantry. Get into anything [else] you can." I said, "Yes Dad, I understand." But you really had no control over it, you know? I'm writing him my first letter. I was writing to him from Fort McClellan, Alabama. I'm telling him that I'm going to be an infantryman.

There, we had 17 weeks of training: two weeks of learning how to fire the M-1 rifle, how to throw hand grenades, how to fire machine guns, [and] how to fire bazookas. Of all the 17 weeks, we spent about four weeks out in the mountains of Alabama, the Talladega Mountains. In connection with the training, we had a 25 mile hike, and we had a couple of 10 mile hikes. It was all good training. You bitched at it when you were taking it, but afterwards, particularly when you got overseas, you wish you had more of it. You felt you weren't trained enough. After that 17 weeks, the Army gave me 10 days to come back to Pennsylvania.

D: On a train?

S: Yes, everything was on a train. They paid your way up to Washington D.C., and you had to pay from Washington to Pittsburgh. Then, they told me to report, after the 10 days, to Camp Pickett, Virginia, which is south of Richmond. After 10 days at home with the family, I went back to Camp Pickett. They assigned me to Company A in the 309th Infantry Regiment, 78th Division. So you go in like a new man, but then, there [are] many people like you, new, coming from basic training. All they had was the established Cadre, which were the officers and maybe the noncoms, the sergeants. So we formed that group there, Company A. I guess all companies were being replaced. After about six weeks there--everyday we would just train, go out to the rifle range, hike, or have maneuvers or something like that--we took off by train to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, which is at New Brunswick. We went by troop train. Of course, by that time, we all knew we were going overseas, because everyday they would read the articles of war to us. For desertion, you could be shot at that time. Once they read these articles to you. . . .

D: They read them to you?

S: In fact, while I was at Camp Pickett . . . on September 15, I had a good friend in the Marine Corp who was killed in a training accident in California. His body was being brought back to Pittsburgh. I couldn't even get home. They wouldn't allow me to go home to go to his funeral or to his wake, because we were more or less on the alert. We were going to go overseas. I guess, they figured if I went home, I wouldn't come back. Whatever the reason, I couldn't get home, and I regret that to this day. There was nothing I could do about it.

Anyhow, we went to Camp Kilmer by train, and we were there for about a week. That's what they call a staging area. They get you there, and when the convoys are right or the ships are right, you're there, and you're going. On Friday the 13th of October, we left Camp Kilmer by train for a short ride to Weehawken, New Jersey. We got off the train, and there was a ferry boat there. The ferry took us across New York Harbor to where our big troop ship was docked. We loaded that troop ship on Friday night, and we slept on the deck, on Friday night. Saturday afternoon--we stayed there all Saturday--late Saturday afternoon, about 5 o'clock in the afternoon, the troop ship left. It pulled out of New York Harbor. It was a sad day when we were going down the harbor. You see the statue of liberty, and then all of a sudden, it becomes a speck in the distance.

D: Was it a big convoy ship?

S: It was a big ship. It was a Swedish luxury ship. It was the sister ship of the Gripsholm. It was called the John Erickson. The U.S. Navy had requisitioned it for a troop ship. It was a nice ship, if it had the normal passenger list, but we had a whole regiment on there, which was over 3,000 [people]. It was crowded. For some reason, they always thought the infantry was tougher than the other branches, because they put us out on the deck the first night, out of New York. The North Atlantic [Sea] was rough, stormy, and the waves were splashing. We were sleeping under shelter halves. It was miserable. Finally, somebody woke up, probably the captain of the ship. He said, "Hey, you've got to get those men off of the deck." They found places for us down below in some of the state rooms. Where they had four or five men sleeping in the state room now, they put cots in the middle of the aisle and made it a little more crowded for those people, but it got us in shelter.

The first morning--I remember this happened to many people--we went to the mess hall and lined up to eat. As soon as the smell of the steamed eggs, which were powdered eggs--of course, the ship was pitching pretty good at that time, too. That smell hit us, and many of us got sea sick. The ones that got sea sick, maybe half of the soldiers, were sick for two or three days. After that, no matter what that ship did, we were okay. The ship turned around the bottom tip of England to go up the channel to Southampton, [and] the waves were breaking up almost over the ship, it seemed. It was that stormy and rough. Everybody was out on the deck just having a good time looking at it and watching it. No matter what the ship did then, it didn't bother you. It seemed like you had your sea-legs. It took us about 12 days to get there. We were in a big convoy, and you'd see ships move right and left, all around you.

D: Zig-zagging?

S: No. We didn't zig-zag. I heard this story that if anybody fell off the ship or fell overboard, that was it. Nobody would stop for them. They might send a message to somebody else to watch out for them. We heard a story that somebody in the garbage detail was throwing garbage off the rear end of our ship, and they slipped and fell overboard. I don't know whether that was true or not.

We went up the channel and headed into Southampton. Everybody was out on the deck watching. It was sort of fun. At Southampton, we got onto a train and went to a town, about 30 miles south of Southampton on the channel coast. It's called Bornemouth, England. They

put us into billets there. Our company and several other companies were put in a big luxury hotel, called the Hadden Hall Hotel. We were assigned three or four [men] to a room. Of course, all of the furniture was gone, stripped, and everything was out of the hotel. There was no heat in the hotel. It didn't bother us, though. At least we had a roof over our heads.

D: How far was that from London?

S: It was probably 100 miles from London. Some of our officers and sergeants got passes while we were there, to go to London. My biggest problem was money. I was a PFC [private first class]. I wasn't making a lot of money, and when I went over seas, I was in a crap game and a card game. I lost all my money. When I got on the boat in New York that day, I had 13 cents in my pocket. I sailed from the United States with 13 cents. My friends loaned me money to buy PX supplies, like candy and pop.

In Bornemouth, we had duty. All we did all day was drilling or marching. Every evening was our own, so we went out on the town. Bornemouth, of course, was all blacked out, but we had a good time. We got to socialize with some of the English people, mainly in pubs or places like that. They were nice people. We enjoyed ourselves.

D: Were they pretty receptive to Americans?

S: I think so, yes. The ones that I saw there were receptive to us.

D: Because a lot of times you hear that. . . .

S: There was a little friction sometimes, I think, between their soldiers and our soldiers. I only saw that once in a pub, where somebody said, "To hell with the queen!" I'm not saying the word that they really said, they just said, "To hell with the queen!" The Yankee soldier said that. Then, the English soldiers were so frustrated, they didn't know what to say. They finally said, "To hell with Roosevelt!" We all laughed, because half of us didn't even care about Roosevelt. (Laughter) I guess, in England, the queen was the big thing, and still is. We drank a lot of beer, and we got to meet a lot of girls, because we were all young guys.

After about three weeks at Bornemouth, we were told that we were going to leave. That was about [on] November 20.

D: This is in 1944?

S: [This is in] 1944. So, we got back on a little train and went back up to Southampton. We got on an English Liberty ship--[it was] built by us and given to the English--to go across the channel. For some reason, that trip across the channel took three days and three nights. It was real rough. Everybody on the ship was sick again. So we were all sea sick. Finally, we got to La Havre, and La Havre was totally destroyed. We couldn't even get off the ship. We had to climb a cargo net to get down off the ship [and] onto the dock. Trucks took us 30 miles outside of La Havre, near Rouen, France. We bivouacked in a big field, a big meadow, on somebody's farm. We put our pup tents up, two guys to a pup tent. It just seemed to rain every day. We were in the mud and rain. I remember, by the time we got there, it was Tuesday, and Thursday was Thanksgiving. We were lining up for our Thanksgiving piece of turkey, stuffing, and mashed potatoes. Our mess kits were full of water from the rain. These were miserable conditions. We were there for about a week. It was just terrible to be wet and cold.

After about a week there, we packed up. We got on these little French railway cars--they call them "40 and eights"--from World War I. I guess they really are for 40 men or eight horses. We had about forty guys in the box car, and straw. Everybody just laid in the box car, and we headed for Belgium. It took us about 24 hours to get into Belgium. We went to a place called Tongeren, Belgium, which is near the German border. We unloaded there, and we bivouacked again in an apple orchard. The apple orchard was a direct line from Germany to Antwerp. While we were there, the Germans were firing buzz bombs, that was the V-1 rocket. A fueled engine fired this big rocket, which was a bomb. They were flying right over our bivouac, real high, probably about 1,000 feet or so. You could hear them; they made a noise. You could see them, too. Every once in a while--they'd be in our area--you'd hear a noise, and all of a sudden it would just stop. Everybody would look around, and it would maybe crash short of the target. It would make a huge explosion. The Germans were trying to cause havoc in Antwerp, because that was a harbor that the English, I think, had just captured. It was used as a supply area for us because, up until then, they had to bring the supplies all the way from France.

We stayed there for about a week, in the bivouac. We were out in the same conditions, cold, miserable, and wet. Finally, somebody in our regiment, or division, woke up and said, "Get these men in a house somewhere or something." So, they found billets for us. We were

in with Belgium families. Maybe six of us would be sleeping on the floor in the living room of a Belgium house. That helped.

D: Did the family live there, too?

S: The family lived there, too. They would just keep to themselves, you know? They would give us the room. We didn't bother them, and they didn't bother us. In fact, I think a lot of the GIs befriended these people. They gave them things, like food, candy, and cigarettes, because these were mainly poor people, farmers, and people like that. I spent one Sunday walking around Tongeren. It was a nice little town. While there, we all got a chance to take a shower. They had a portable shower unit, like a trailer truck. [It was] equipped with shower heads and things like that.

D: [Was it] a hot shower?

S: [It was] a hot shower. They had something there, some boilers, I guess, making hot water for us. Everybody went to take a shower. When you came out of the shower, they gave you clean clothes, clean underwear, and clean socks. It was a great thing, because we hadn't had anything like that for about two weeks.

We stayed at Tongeren until December 10. There, in trucks again, we went up to the German border, to a place called Eupen, Belgium. The division bivouacked there in the Eupen forest. We were still about five or 10 miles behind the front line. The next day, they moved us closer up to about a mile behind the front line. We were living in the forest. Everybody made little lean-tos out of pine trees and branches. It was snowy. We got hot food. Our kitchen would send up hot food for us, hot meals.

We were told on December 12--that was a Tuesday--that tomorrow morning we were going to attack in Germany. Of course, there were other units holding the front at that time, I think it was the 1st Division. We were going to go through the 1st Division, down the road, and attack the Germans. So we were all excited. You're in the Army and in the war, but it still hasn't sunk into you. [On] December 15, we went down the road in the dark. There were big guns on both sides of the road. The 1st Platoon of our company was leading. We were the 2nd Platoon. We were behind them. We walked on the road for, it seemed like, a half an hour or so. All of a sudden, machine guns opened up. It was getting light then, so we went into the ditches on each side of the road. Then, the Germans started shooting mortar shells, because they knew we were there. The officer said, "Get up in the fields." We

went up in the fields. This one field we went into had shoe mines--a little wooden mine that was just put under the ground, and you stepped on it with your shoe. It would explode and just mangle your foot. It wouldn't blow it off, but it would damage your foot very badly. I remember one of my close friends, he stepped on one of those. His name was Carl Summers. He was from Missouri. He stepped on one of those, and he was writhing on the ground in pain and yelling! Before a medic or anybody could get to him, he rolled on another one. It must have embedded in his body somewhere, and it killed him. He was laying there dead. That was shocking to all of us.

We got out of the field and went back down the road a piece. When we got down to where we were stopped, there was a lieutenant lying dead and another soldier laying on the road, dead. They were the ones that were leading the column when the machine guns opened up. It seemed like a funny way to attack, [to] just go down the road until they open up on you. Somebody is going to get killed right there, but that's the way they did it. For some reason, we had no artillery barrage in advance of this attack. We thought it was going to be a surprise, that everyone was going to be sleeping or something. It didn't work.

We were in a ditch then, and there were machine guns holding us down. Our captain said, "We have to charge the machine guns. We're going to have to go at them." Our lieutenant, John McIlwinen, said, "Captain, this is suicide." He said, "I know John, but we have to do it." So we charged them. They opened up, and McIlwinen and his aide, PFC Gordon Tillis, were killed. The machine gunners, they gave up when they saw us coming and firing at them, I guess. They gave up. We captured this little village. It was called Simmerath. We dug in, because they always told us [that], after we capture something, there's always counter-attacks. We were in shock to see those people killed, our friends and officers.

- D: How did you feel when he said that you had to charge with machine guns?
- S: No good, but we had to do it. You still felt that it couldn't happen to you. It wasn't going to happen to you.
- D: Did any guys chicken out?
- S: No. A lot of them were wounded or killed right there. After three days of fighting right there, what happened was [that] our company was gone, either wounded or killed. And that was in three days. Like I say, we

were green. I think the Germans probably knew we were green. They had a lot of artillery firing at us. The Germans had great guns. They could hit everything with a "German 88." They could almost use it anyway they wanted to: flat trajectory or an anti-aircraft gun.

D: Did you come across any tanks?

S: No, we didn't have any tanks there. We had tank destroyers supporting us. They were a little leery of the 88s. They tried to stay out of the range of the 88s behind a hill or something. There were snipers. The Germans always had snipers. You'd hear it coming around you, but you didn't know where it was coming from. If it was long range, it really couldn't hit you, but they were shooting at you. It was scary.

That was on [December] 13. [On] December 14 and 15, we stayed there. We tried to capture a town called Kesternich, which was close by. The Germans just wouldn't let us capture it. They defended that thing like crazy. Of course, all of this was in Germany, and you've got to figure that they're fighting for their homeland; and they're going to defend it like we would in the United States. Kesternich was just a nut that nobody could crack at that time. We found out later, the reason why. It was right in front of a big road junction, behind their lines where they were funneling a lot of troops down to the Bulge [Battle]. The Bulge started on December 16, and that was about 15 miles south of where we were. They didn't want anybody getting too far in there, or it would effect their drive in the South. When the Bulge started south of us, all they did was just sit there and hold what we had. There was very limited action.

D: You didn't want to attack?

S: We didn't attack. We just held our own. All of the action was going on south of us. Of course, we were a new division, too.

We didn't do anything until January 13. We started attacking again. We were trying to capture a town called Schmidt, which controlled the high ground over some big dams. They were some big dams on the Roer River. We had to control these dams, because the 9th Army and the British were going to cross this river further north, as north [as] the river flowed. They felt that, if we didn't have control of these dams when they started to cross, the Germans would let the flood gates go, flood the attacks, and catch these men trying to cross the river. Besides our division and the 9th Division, the 82nd Airborne [Division] was in there.

We finally captured these dams in the first part of February, and we captured Schmidt, also. From then on, we just held the line at Schmidt until February 28. We started a big drive towards the Rhine River. That was the spring drive. Everybody, the British, the 9th Army, and the 1st Army, were all lined up and ready to go. At that time, the Bulge had been wiped out. Once we jumped across the Roer River in February, it just seemed that we didn't have near the opposition. The Germans were surrendering in droves.

We came up to a town, a German village. Our tactic was to line a whole company, or two companies, up in a single line across the field. We'd start walking towards the village, and we'd just start firing. That's called marching fire. The Germans and some of the people in the town were flying white flags and sheets out of their houses. The German soldiers, they either ran further towards the Rhine [River] or they surrendered, too. We had a lot of prisoners.

D: Were the prisoners treated fairly?

S: Yes. In fact, that's why I still thank God to this day [that] we had a group of prisoners. . . . [We] probably picked up 36 to 40 prisoners. Two other men and myself were designated to take them back to the next town. We were marching back, and one guy said, "Why don't we take those guys over here and just shoot them, get rid of them?" I told him, "We can't do that. They're just like us. They have mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, and probably some of them are married." Most of them were older. We were seeing some of them in their late 30s, probably. There were young ones, too. The SS were long since dead or captured. "We can't do anything like that. Are you crazy? You'll get court-martialed. You're not supposed to do it! And furthermore, it's not right," I said. To this day, I'm glad. How could you ever live with something like that?

After what happened at the Bulge, I think a lot of our fellows killed prisoners, because the Germans killed hundreds of Americans. At Malmedy, Belgium, there were 70 or 80. There were atrocities in other places. Then, we kept going every day [with] good strides and captures.

D: [Were] you moving on foot at this time, or [were] you on trucks?

S: [We were on] foot. We would move maybe 10 miles a day. I think it was March 8 [when] we attacked late in the afternoon and went down a big hill. We were all firing. Everybody was attacking this town called

Ahrweiler. It's on the Ahr River. We went straight through the town. I thought we were going to be killed that time. We took cover in a big shell hole. We were trying to bomb this bridge at some time. It was a huge bomb crater.

Anyhow, the Germans retreated, and we captured the town. We stayed there that night. The next day, we just sort of laid around there and rested. It was a nice town. It was spring, I think, in March. At about 6 o'clock in the evening, they said we were moving out. We marched until about midnight. We were exhausted! We went up hills and on old roads.

Then, we loaded on trucks. They drove us. We didn't know where we were going. It was a dark night. We drove all night and morning. We got off those trucks, and were at Remagen. Looking around, we could see the bridge, the Remagen Bridge. We went down in the town of Remagen, which had been captured, and the bridge had been captured. The 9th Armored Division captured the bridge. When they found out they had a bridge intact, they tried to get all the troops in the immediate area to cross as soon as possible. So we went down into the town of Remagen. It was a Saturday morning, about 12 o'clock [noon]. They said, "We're going to cross." We started crossing. Just about then, a German plane came out of the clouds, a German jet plane. Nobody had ever heard of a jet. At least, I hadn't. It came straight for the bridge. It seemed like everything in the world around us opened up on the jet plane. We had all kinds of anti-aircraft positions around that bridge to try and save it. In the meantime, we're trying to move under fire. We're in the middle of the bridge. We're going to get killed here. Either the plane was going to get us, or something was going to get us. But, we all got across. Some guys fell down [from] running so hard. We went across the bridge.

D: Did they shoot the jet down?

S: Whether they shot that one down or not--I know there was one shot down, because I remember seeing it crash on the hill, about a mile away. They guarded that bridge, though. That Germans were sending frogmen down to try to explode mines on the bridge piers and stuff like that. It was a railroad bridge. They put [up] planking, so trucks and tanks could cross it from time to time. Finally, after two weeks, the bridge collapsed. But it did get a lot of shelling. The Germans were sitting back, shelling it from a distance.

Anyhow, we got across the bridge, and we went over there. We turned left and went down to a little town--I think it was called Honnef or something like

that. We stayed down there until about four or five in the evening and at about 7 o'clock, we went on combat patrol. We were just going to go out and keep moving until we ran into something. So we started up a hill, a public road.

D: Is this the whole. . . .

S: This is the whole company. We went on top of the hill and ran into a German tank. It was a big tank. He pinned us down in a ditch, down both sides of a road. The tank was down the road, and he had us all under his guns. He can't hit us with his machine gun or his shells, because we were in this ditch. We tried to send guys to the side with bazookas. At nightfall, anyhow, the tank retreated. It didn't cause us anymore grief. (Laughter) He got back to where he was, so our captain said, "We're going to dig in right here. Just hold where we're at." Later on that night, guys came up behind us from another company. They went right through us. We said, "Where are you going?" They said, "We're going down here to find a tank." Apparently, it was the same tank, and they were going down to try and get it. We were dug in. We were in our holes, and we could hear machine guns and all kinds of fire going on. I remember that night, there was a guy out there just yelling, "Mama, Mama." It was pitch dark. Nobody wanted to go out and get him. Nobody knew what was out there. It's funny how things are. He was going to die, and he was calling for his mother.

Then, that night was over. The next day we moved on. We just started down the road. We kept looking for trouble. The Germans seemed to be trying to back off from us in some defensive line. Sunday night we got into some big holes. We ran into some German holes. They were great, their holes. They dug them deep, and they were like graves. They were 6 feet deep. When you stood in them, all that came out was your head, and they were long. There were two men in them, you and another guy. At the bottom, they had it dug out sideways. You could crawl sideways in it and just be covered from shell fire. If the shell exploded right over the hole, the shrapnel wouldn't get you if you were in this little area that was dug in. I remember, we stayed in that hole the whole night. You took turns with your buddy. He would lay down and sleep. After about two hours, he would get up. Then, you would lay down and sleep. You just stood there with your gun in your hand, looking out at the darkness and hoping that no one would sneak up on you. We saw a lot of dead Germans around there, so apparently, someone went

through ahead of us. There were a lot of dead Americans, too. The 9th Division went there and lost a lot. There were Germans with their heads blown off from 20 millimeter fire.

The next day, March 12, we were attacking. [We'd] go down the road, and the Germans opened up with shell fire. It exploded in the trees, and we all hit the dirt. When I was there, this piece of shrapnel came down and hit me in the leg. It didn't go through my leg, it just cut it. So, I went to the medics to get patched up. When they saw me, they sent me to a hospital in Aachen. From Aachen, they sent me to LeMans, France. It was about three weeks before I was ready to go. By that time, before I could get back to my outfit, the war was grinding down pretty much. They reassigned me in the replacement depot, as a clerk. I had a clerk MOS, also. So, I became a clerk in the replacement depot. When the war ended, there were thoughts to go to the South Pacific.

They had a point system: how old you are, how long you've been in the Army, how many decorations you have, how many battles you were in. They all got points. People who had been in the Army for two or three years had a lot of points accumulated. They were the first to go home. That's how they did that. That's a fair system. Of course, I didn't have enough points. At that time, I was 19 years old. Somebody had to go to the Army Occupation, so I accepted it. I was sent to Frankfurt, [Germany]. I got to be a clerk in Eisenhower's headquarters. That's where he made his headquarters. I went up there in November of 1945. I stayed there until April of 1946, for about six months. I came home in May of 1946 to Fort Dix, New Jersey. I was discharged a private first class.

D: What did you do in Frankfurt?

S: I was a clerk in the Top Secret Control. That has a funny name, but they got messages from the United States, mainly for the next of kin. If somebody died--say, your father died--the Red Cross would send the wires and things like that over there. They would get that person and fly them home on a C-47 sky-master. They would try to get them home. It was mainly personnel business and filing. It was nothing spectacular. I was just a PFC at the time.

But we had very nice living conditions in Frankfurt. We had apartments, with two or three men to an apartment. We had the run of the town. No one was there to discipline us. The food was good. We first bought fresh eggs in Frankfurt, in the Spring of 1946. You'd go to the mess hall, and they would fry as many as you

wanted to eat. I know some people that could eat a dozen fried eggs at one sitting, just to catch up for all the powdered eggs that they had been eating for the last year or two.

D: Did you run into any of the native German people?

S: Yes, there were several. They were very nice and very friendly. I felt sorry for them, because Frankfurt was just devastated and bombed very heavily by the Americans and the British. There were a lot of people that were dead, and they haven't been recovered yet. They were in the ruins, and these huge apartment buildings were just piles of bricks. The Germans were very nice. They were very proud people. They were very clean. They wanted to clean up their city, but at that time, our occupation policy was [that] they couldn't touch a brick. It was going to stay as it was. That was in 1946.

D: Why was that?

S: I don't know. That was just the way it was. Since then, I think, with the Marshall Plan and things like that, they've helped them. It's a beautiful city, now. I haven't been to Frankfurt, but I understand that it's a beautiful city. In 1946, it was a disaster! It probably wasn't as bad as Berlin, Hamburg, Colon, or some of those places. Those whole areas were wiped out. The building that Eisenhower had his headquarters in was a huge, the largest office building in Europe, the I.G. Farben building. Farben was a cartel, a chemical cartel. I think that the DuPont's had an interest in it. They said that allied bombers had orders to stay away from this office building. It was beautiful. It's still in tact. That's where Eisenhower had his headquarters, and that's where we were. It's probably still standing there today.

D: What did you think of Eisenhower?

S: I thought Eisenhower was a good General, very good. I've read a lot about him since then, and he had a terrible, tough job. He had to deal with Montgomery and the British and keep everybody happy. The French got into the war, and he had to try to keep them happy. I think Eisenhower did well with everybody. Our division was never under Patton, but he was a great general. We were always in the 1st Army, under General Hodge. He was a tough guy, too.

D: Did you ever see him?

S: Yes, we saw him at Tongeren before we went into battle. They were driving by in a car. We never saw him

up close, [and] he never came to address us. In fact, I never even saw my own division commander. His name was Parker. I don't remember ever seeing him. I saw the colonel. The infantry regiment had three battalions. Each battalion had four companies in it, so the regiment had about 3,000 [people] in it. I saw him once in a while.

Our company, a rifle company, had 187 men in it. Our company commander was the captain. That's the table of organization, the captain and four or five lieutenants. He was an ex-Arkansas state policeman. He was a tough guy, and a lot of people hated him, especially when we were in the states, [than] in England. Once we got to the front line, everybody loved him, because he was just as tough there as he was when we were in training. He was really tough. He survived the whole war, and I think he became a major. What happened to him since, I don't know. I think he's dead.

Our company had 68 men killed out of 187 men, but that doesn't mean of the original 187 in the company. The company was probably replaced three times in the course of four months. Probably, at one time or another, there were 500 men who said they were in company A. Our regiment lost over 1,000 men [who were] killed. No, our regiment lost 588 [who were] men killed, and our division lost 1,326 men [who were] killed.

We were north of the Bulge. Then, after we drove to the Rhine and crossed the Rhine [River], the division went to the Ruhr Pocket Battle. Their combat days ended on April 18, so they were there about four months total, 120 days [of] front line fighting. They weren't seeing the cream of [the] German Army. Maybe people did on D-Day. The Germans were pretty well beaten by March of 1945.

D: What weapons were you trained to use?

S: [We were] trained to use an M-1, garand rifle, 30 caliber, semi-automatic. We were trained to use a 30 caliber carbine, hand grenades, machine guns, and browning automatic rifles. In fact, I carried a browning for a week or so. [It was a] 30 caliber.

D: B.A.R.?

S: Yes, B.A.R. It was heavier, which was bad, but it really fired.

D: Why only a week?

S: I really didn't start out carrying them. Then, I guess, one of the B.A.R men either was killed or wounded. They asked, "Who wants to carry it?" I said, "I'll carry it." Then, when I left, somebody else took it. But I remember firing when we went into Ahrweiler, coming down the hill and firing at those houses.

D: What did you think of the German weapons?

S: I thought they were very good. They were superior to ours. The German 88 was fantastic. The German machine gun could fire very fast. Their machine guns seemed to fire much faster than ours. You can tell the difference between machine guns just from the way they fire. Their's were much faster. I never had a 45 [caliber], but the officers had them. I don't know how they compared. Their bazookas were good, too. One man could almost take out a tank by himself with them.

D: How about the tanks? Were the German tanks better or worse than the American tanks?

S: From what I could see and from what I knew about, they were better, because they were bigger and had more armor on them. Most of them had this 88 gun, which is something. They must have had weaknesses that we were able to explore, probably on the sides and around the ventilators. That's where we were told to aim with the bazookas, the sides and around the tracks. I don't think we had anything that could penetrate the armor and kill the people on the inside with that shot. What we tried to do is get them burning, and then guys would come out of the tanks. You could shoot them, then. The Germans really had some great weapons.

They were great soldiers, too. They were very well trained, very aggressive, and. . . . I guess it's just part of their national make-up. They're just soldiers [in] a militaristic country. The German soldiers were very well trained. Of course, the ones that we were seeing at the end of the war were youngsters and the old guys. Their heart really wasn't in it, but they were soldiers. When they started reading the hand writing on the wall, that the war was going to end and they were going to lose, they figured, "Why lay down your life for your country?" Then, they just gave up?

D: Did you ever hear any German propoganda on the radio?

S: No, I never did. Like, Axis Sally?

D: Yes.

S: No. The only thing I ever heard was [when] our company CP used to listen to BBC, and they would play nice music. You could hear that. I didn't hear Axis Sally. It must have been very disheartening. I never even saw any propaganda leaflets dropped. I'm sure that our Air Force dropped, and theirs did, too. A suggestion to surrender. . . .

D: Did you know of any guys that got Dear John letters from home?

S: No. I had a girl that I wrote to quite a bit. We weren't serious. She wrote me a lot of letters, and I thanked her for that.

About February of 1946, she wrote me and told me she was going to get married. I didn't consider it a Dear John letter. She didn't break my heart, and I didn't break hers, either. There really wasn't nothing. . . . We weren't married or even engaged. I guess some people got them, but I didn't know them. Some of the guys in my outfit that were killed, they were married and had kids. The lieutenant's aide was Gordon A. Tillis. He was from Montour Falls, New York, and he had four kids. He was 38 years old. He got killed. That's sad. We know where some of these people are buried. I even wrote the grave registration, who told where they are buried. Carl Summers, they say he's not buried in Europe. He's buried in a private cemetery in Missouri. So apparently, his parents had him moved back.

In 1948, I went to a funeral in Cheswick, Pennsylvania, for one of the men in my company [who] was killed in Germany. In 1948, his mother wanted to bring him back home. Of course, the coffin wasn't open [at the funeral home and cemetery]. It was just as sad as if it had happened three days ago. He got a full military funeral. And some of them are buried in Arlington. They would bring them back and bury them in Arlington if their parents wanted it.

D: Did you ever run across any Negro soldiers?

S: Yes. There were none on the front line. They were not in an infantry division. After the war, I would see them. They were driving trucks, and they were in the Quartermaster Corp. Their jobs were to unload supplies at the boats, put them on the trucks, and haul them up to the front line organizations. I'd run across them in town when they were on leave, in Paris or someplace like that. Of course, they were getting leaves to go there, too. But, I never saw them in combat. They just didn't have them. At that time, the government,

for whatever reason, didn't have them. The Army was segregated. The Navy was, too, from what I understand. Negroes were only allowed to be cabin boys, or something like that. They weren't "sailors."

D: Was there very much of a black market, as far as what you could get for candy bars?

S: Yes.

D: And cigarettes. . . .

S: Yes, especially in France. In France, it was big. In Paris, you could sell cigarettes for \$20 a carton. This is [in] 1945. The war in Europe was over. Twenty dollars was a lot of money! Of course, the \$20 you got [was] in French money. So, if you went to Paris for a day and went to one of their nice clubs, restaurants, or a stage show, it cost \$60! That's how high the standard of living was. So you had to deal with the black market to get some money! You didn't make that much money yourself, so you took advantage of it. You could take a carton of cigarettes in Paris and sell it for \$20. It would keep you going. You could live the whole day with that.

I've known guys that would go into Paris and put two shirts on, two Army shirts. When they got to Paris, they would meet somebody, maybe a Parisian. You could usually tell who you're dealing with. You motion them over to the doorway or something, take the top shirt off, hold it, and say "How much?" You could sell them the shirt. To Parisians, money was nothing. They needed goods. They had the money, and they needed the goods. So, they would buy the shirt or buy the cigarettes.

In Germany, the black market was a little different. They wanted to convert what money they had into something good, like gold, silver, or American dollars. The guys would send home, and tell their parents to send them money, send them a 10 dollar bill. They'd sell this 10 dollar bill on the German black market, and they would get maybe \$40 worth of German money, in Germany. The GIs in Germany were sending so much money home to their parents and their wives by money order, the government finally had to put a stop to it. The guys were sending home \$400 and \$500 a month, and they were making \$21 a month, because they were selling money. Especially to the Russians, in Berlin, they were selling Mickey Mouse watches to the Russians. The Russians thought they were the best things that were ever made, Mickey Mouse watches. You know how cheap the Mickey Mouse watches were at that time! They were \$2 watches. These guys were getting these watches sent

from home, so you can sell them to the Russians! The Russians are giving them the money. The guy would take it to the American Army Post Office and convert it to money orders, and he would send it home. Some of the fellows in Berlin, the paratroopers particularly, made \$1,500 in 1945. That would be enough to come home, open up a business, buy a house, or whatever you want to do, just from selling black market goods.

Finally, the government put out an edict, I remember, when I was in Frankfurt. You could only send home your pay, up to 100 percent. That wasn't realistic, either, but they allowed you that much. You had a currency control book; everybody had a book. When you got paid, they made an entry there. So when you went and got a money order, they had to see the book. They tried to keep control of it. But as it is, when somebody makes a rule, there's a hundred guys out there thinking how to break the rule. They found out how. You get more currency control books. Some guys had four or five currency control books. So, there's a way around everything. But at least they got a handle on it. We were dealing with occupation money. It wasn't dollars.

D: Script?

S: They printed script. The Germans seemed to like it.

D: Do you remember where you were on V-E Day?

S: Yes. On V-E Day, I was in a place called Troyes, France. It's about 30 miles southwest of Paris. I was in the 19th Replacement Depot. There was a lot of gun fire. Everybody was celebrating.

D: Did you already know that Hitler was dead?

S: Yes. We knew he was dead.

D: Did you know anything about Truman?

S: No. I didn't know anything about him. He took over, and he did well. He handled the Russians well in Berlin. There was the Potsdam Conference in July of 1946. Truman was pretty good.

D: Were a lot of guys using drugs or alcohol?

S: No. Drugs, no. People drank, people got drunk. Nobody was an alcoholic, I would say. The guys enjoying the town would get some fresh champagne or cognac. They'd get stupefied drunk, but it wasn't like they had to have it every day, because they couldn't get it

every day. They went back to camp. Nobody was carrying any bottles with them in camp. Nobody was taking drugs that I know of. It was unheard of.

D: Do you remember what the trip home was like?

S: The trip home was very nice. We were sent to La Havre, France. They had a series of camps around La Havre. They called them cigarette camps. One was Camp Philip Morris, one was Camp Lucky Strike, [and] one was Camp Chesterfield. Some guy ended up in Camp Lucky Strike. It was on a high bluff, overlooking the harbor. We were processed there. One of the things they did to cool you off, they didn't ship you straight from Germany, to the boat, to home. They staggered it. It took about two weeks from [the] time we left Germany, to get on the boat. They were waiting to see if any venereal disease was going to show up on anyone. That was one of the things they did. But many times, it would show up. This guy was going home with his wife, and they found out he had gonorrhea in La Havre. Right away, they took him off of the shipping list and started treating him for gonorrhea, which is a good thing. He was married. There were single guys that didn't worry about that, but I think that's one of the reasons why they slowed you down. They had to get caught up on your records. We came back on a victory ship. It was called the Claymont Victory. We left on May 16, out of La Havre. We docked on May 24. I've been on the ocean a couple times since then, but I never saw it as I did one day, one afternoon. It was like glass. I never knew the ocean could get like that. It was just perfectly smooth, the middle of the ocean. We were all at the rail of the ship, looking. We saw a fish of some kind. It looked like it might have been a whale or something. But the ocean was perfectly smooth, and that only lasted for a couple of hours. We had a nice ride home. The shower on the ship [was] cold salt water.

D: Cold salt water showers?

S: Yes. I think that was the first time of all my time in the Army, that I ever ran across anybody that I even thought might have been homosexual. We were all taking the showers in a big room. There were benches where we dried off, and this guy was a medic or something. He said, "I'll dry you off. Do you want me to dry you off?" I looked at him and said, "No, never mind." I thought that he was homosexual. The medical corp men were soft and nice, so they were suspect, I guess. (Laughter) They were like male nurses. Anyhow, we had a nice trip home. We arrived in New York.

D: Was it good to see the Statue of Liberty?

S: Yes, the Statue of Liberty. . . . Of course, the troops that had come home right after V-E Day, when they got into the New York harbor, there were all kinds of carrying on, whistles blowing and parades. When we got home, it was May of 1946. It was a year after V-E Day, so the luster had left for the troops returning home, now. And some of us were combat troops. Anyhow, that didn't bother us. We were just so glad to get home. They took us by truck from New York to Fort Dix, New Jersey, which is probably 100 miles away. The first thing I did when I got to New Jersey [was], I got to the mess hall, and there was a big steak there and all you could eat of vegetables! At Fort Dix, they gave you a real good physical, looked at your teeth and anything that you wanted fixed. If you wanted your teeth fixed or you thought that there was something that needed done, they did it. In three days, they had all of your records processed, and then they gave you all of your pay, back pay and mustering out pay. When I left there, I had about \$300 or \$400 in pay. From there, I got on a bus to Philadelphia and caught a train to Pittsburgh, and I was home.

One of the things they did at Fort Dix [was] they tried to talk you into joining the Reserves. I didn't think much about it. They said, "You don't have to do anything, just join." I said, "Okay." I enlisted in the Reserve Corp. So I'm back in Pittsburgh. I get mail every month from them telling me this and that, but they never said anything about going to meetings. So I didn't go to the meetings. That was [for] three years. In 1949, my three years were up, and I thought, "I'm not going to reenlist." They sent me some kind of a discharge from there. I've often thought that I was very thankful that I did [get discharged], because Korea started in 1950, and I probably would have been one of the first ones to go, because I was in the Reserves. They go right away.

D: Did you get any kind of money from the state for serving?

S: Yes. I got married in 1949, and by the early 1950s, there was a state bonus. The state of Pennsylvania put a bonus on those [who] were honorably discharged. I got \$300 or \$400 from the state of Pennsylvania.

One of the things I did in 1946 when I came back from the Army [was] I loafed for about two or three months that summer. I signed up with what they called the 52-20 club. Every week, I would go down and sign up for unemployment. Thousands of GIs were registered. You signed up, and you got a check. A check came every week for \$20. That doesn't sound like a lot of money,

but that \$20, you could almost get through the whole week with it. If you bought beer, cigarettes, or had a date. . . . So that [money] got me through that summer.

Then, I still had my job on the railroad to go back to if I wanted to. So I went back to the railroad and started working. I was working in the freight house in Pittsburgh, unloading boxcars. That was the only thing that I could do. There were no openings in the offices or anything. That winter, in February, I got fed up with it. I thought, "I have to do something better than this." So, I got a leave of absence and went to business school, the Robert Boris Business School. The government paid for it. It was the GI bill, so they paid for my books, my tuition; and they gave me \$30 or \$40 a month to live on, a check for expenses. That was a 10 month course in accounting and secretarial work. So I went to that. After that, I came back to the railroad, and they gave me an extra clerk job. The government was very fair, and the state was fair.

D: Did you know about any kind of land in Alaska or land out west for the GIs?

S: No. I never heard of anything like that. Well, there was a GI Bill to buy a house. People did that. I knew people who used that. I was in the railroad, and I was moving around so much that I didn't stay in the same town long enough to buy a house. The railroad at that time, when you bought a house and they wanted you to move somewhere else, it was your baby to get rid of. You might be stuck with it. You had to do that wheeling and dealing. Now, when you move with the railroad, the railroad steps in, Merrill Lynch or somebody will take your house off of your hands for you. They make it much more easier to move than they did in those days. For many years, we rented houses. The government had made it possible to buy a house at a low interest rate.

One of the things I've joined in the last eight years is an association called the 78th Division Association. It was something I didn't know existed, but these are all former members of the 78th Division. There's a large membership, and we have a convention every two years. The most recent one was this year in Omaha [Nebraska], and in 1990, it will be in Pittsburgh. We had a meeting a week ago with the chairman of the Pittsburgh convention, just to see how many people would serve on committees. He sent notices out to everybody in this area. There were 32 men that

showed up that live in Beaver Falls, Pittsburgh, Greenberg, and the whole radius of Pittsburgh, 32 people from the 78th Division. . . . We had enough to have our own mini convention.

In Omaha, we had 595 members come. Most of them bring their wives or their girlfriends, so we had over 1,000 [people] at the convention. It was a four day convention. We do that every two years. We have a publication that comes out every three months, a magazine with the news. One of the big things is called TAPS. It lists the members that pass on. We lose about 50. . . . I was 18 years old when I enlisted. The average age of the guys that were called were probably 24 or 25, so I was one of the youngsters. I'm 62, so the average age of the membership is probably 68 or 69 [years old]. It's a dying organization.

D: Do you ever run across anybody that you served with?

S: Yes. One man at the convention in St. Louis, he was a sergeant. He and I spent a lot of time together at the convention. Not everybody belongs to this organization. The guys you want to see don't belong. Maybe they don't want to, or maybe they don't know about it. It's their loss, that's all. I never really kept in close contact with people after the war. It seemed like after the war, I could care less about anything connected with the Army. As you get older, you start wondering, "Where did so-in-so go," and, "Where's he at?" That's what these organizations are for. We go on nostalgia trips, too. But there's never a day that goes by that I don't think about Army friends.

D: That's all I have. Is there anything else that you want to say?

S: That's about all I can say. You say some of these things, and it's a review for me. Sometimes I think I ought to put this all on paper, where I've been and dates, because sooner or later, I'm going to start forgetting them.

D: Well, thanks very much.

S: Thank you, John.

END OF INTERVIEW