

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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World War 1939-1945

Personal Experience

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RALPH GLEITSMAN

Interviewed

by

Mark Dittmer

on

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D This is an interview with Mr Raphael Gleitsman for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on World War II combat veterans, by Mark Dittmer, on November 19, 1978.

The first question I wanted to ask you is: go back prior to U S involvement and talk about what your opinion of the war in Europe was, and generalize what the American movement was.

G I did not have a definite opinion then, and I cannot really say that I have one now Like most people, it appeared to be necessary, but I had no strong feelings of wanting to do something about it. I hoped that the Americans would stay out of it. I did understand something about what was happening politically and militarily, but I cannot give any definite, fixed opinion on it

D How did your peer group think about it at the time?

G. I would say that might not have been a contributing factor to my own vague opinion because most people I had talked with and heard talking all seemed to have conflicting ideas about the war. I would say most people thought we would not have to get in it They were perfectly willing to contribute to England's effort, especially when France fell, but as far as actual involvement is concerned, these people were not too fond of the idea of actually participating. Some were a little stronger about it and would have done anything they could have to be kept out of it Once in a while people, as they became more and more frightened of things that were happening over there, probably did begin to think, perhaps they should help To recapitulate, people's opinions varied.

As I say, it may have had something to do with my own lack of a strong opinion one way or the other. So far as the seriousness of it is concerned, I would say that I certainly understood that I think most people I remember hearing make comments on it from time to time were aware that it was a serious situation. There might have been a brief period during the so-called "phoney war," around 1940, when the French set their imaginary line and nothing was happening and the people did joke about it a bit. The "phoney war" they called it There was not any war at all. Even so-called "patrolling" hardly existed at all. It looked as though there really was not any war. I suppose it was kind of a relief for people to think there would not be any bad European war after all. I think that is probably what it was and why they liked laughing about it, because they hoped that the thing would not explode. I would say to some of them, there was hardly ever any lack of seriousness about it. People did realize that it was serious and could be much worse than it appeared it was I would say I shared the same opinion.

D I do not know if Hitler was considered a threat by the American people or just something that would not go away?

G Yes, I would say that most people did. A lot of people actually had a certain admiration for

Hitler I would say that was mostly ignorance, because I do not think they understood how dangerous he and the government were, in reality I just do not think they realized it I would still say that most of the country, I am going entirely on what I heard, and of course I read quite a bit about it from time to time, followed him with a certain amount of interest and they did, as you said, hope he would go away He was something dangerous, unpleasant, potentially ominous, but they hoped he would go away, something like that

D· Okay, let's start talking about your days in the war Can you recall the day you were called up? Was this right after Pearl Harbor?

G. No, it was some time after Pearl Harbor. I had gone through the usual preliminary classification in my own town They were interested in a physical examination that was held at the local armory and that is where we were supposed to be classified Those classifications were subject to changes from time to time as the government, as the selective service agency changed and they would reclassify and so on Also, it depended on what we were doing at the time. If you were doing something that was considered of some importance, at least for awhile, you could be held in a tentative position. I went to Goodyear Aircraft making aircraft for the Navy because a friend of mine I had known for many years was there and said they needed people that could read blueprints and do drafting and that sort of thing

D· This is all in Akron?

G. Yes I could do all of this and he said that it may keep me out of the service. I finally decided to go out I was there for over a year, I guess I think in the fall of 1943 is when I finally got my notice to appear for induction.

D From the notice that went out, can you tell me about how you were inducted and your training period?

G: We were instructed to meet at some specified place at such and such a time and we were all transported up to Cleveland where they had larger facilities for induction We went up there and it took the entire day. I was there at a time when word went out to take everybody they possibly could because, in line, there were fellows that had been through it before. One fellow, I remember, was right behind me and had been in the service at least two times before this and had been turned down, but that was at a time when it apparently was not urgent to take so many. The quota was suddenly up. I have a clear remembrance of his saying something about we are all in today. He said we went at such and such a time and we are clear up to the typewriters now He said before that, we would not even get to the typewriters before hours and hours, stalling around, it was a matter of form, running through that, and most of them were turned down. We were inducted into the oath and were, at that moment, in the Army

We also had a choice, which they did not always have Two high-ranking officers

representing the Army or the Navy were sitting at the desk, side by side, and when we got up there, that was the last place before we went to take the oath. We actually had a choice and you did not often have that. All you had to do was say Army or Navy and you could have it. I chose the Army. Anything else about it?

D. Let's start with the training period. Where did you go?

G. After that there were further instructions. On a certain date, it was some weeks from then, we were to report to the Union Depot Railroad Station and take a train there for Columbus. That is where we would go through further examinations and so on, and where we equipped. From there we would be shipped down to training camp.

D. This is infantry training camp?

G. It just so happened that there was sort of a joke that really was not much of a joke. It certainly was not fair to the younger grade. They were talking about these tests that we had to take, aptitude tests and various other things, just to get a general idea of how well you were educated and what you could do. There were many of them who had never done anything except come right out of school, and the joke was that if you scored below a certain point, you got thrown into the infantry. As I say, it was not much of a joke, but I have often thought of what I saw afterwards that there might have been some truth in it, at least because I think they did. If the fellows had no skill of any kind or experience of various things, generally, it seemed they would end up in the infantry. I could read maps, including topographical maps, I knew something about using a compass. I could read blueprints and plans and all that sort of thing, I had been an artist. I had had some things published in Life Magazine, and I was urged by an Army officer friend of mine to take those things with me to Columbus because this would help me. Because of what I had done beforehand, they put me in the engineer corps. The call was out for lots of engineering troops and that, I think, possibly had something to do with it. It had been a combination of the two things: what I had done, and what I was able to show them that I had done and could do, and the fact that there was a call out for engineering troops. In about two weeks or so we were shipped out and sent to our fort.

D. Where was your fort at?

G. Missouri. It was a very large camp. It was huge. They were noted for turning out excellent troops there, engineer combat troops in particular.

D. Turning to your training period, what were your likes and dislikes?

G. My likes and dislikes were like all of them, I guess, when you go from soft civilian life into something like that. It was like somebody was on your back all of the time. It is a hundred times worse when you suddenly find yourself in that, where every single moment of your

time is decided by somebody else. It was pretty rough. At first, you think, this is terrible, and that you will not live through it.

Corporals in the training regiment are like drill sergeants in the Marines. A corporal is pretty important in a training camp. It was the corporals, most of the time, that worked on us. One time, a corporal stood out there one day and we would all answer his call, go down to the assembly area, and line up. We did not get down there fast enough to suit him, so he made us go back up again. He blew the whistle again and we came down and it still was not good enough. I remember him standing there and saying, "When you come down those stairs, I don't want to see any of you individually. I want to see a blur." That sort of thing happened all of the time. And, of course, road marches, road marches.

I should say that the engineer corps is made up of various types of detachments, like heavy machinery groups and other heavy companies. Then there are what you could call lighter equipment, which is used in the battalions. The infantry has combat engineers with them all of the time. They have to be, because of all the different things the engineers are trained in, such as the use of explosives and all sorts of things, as well as infantry weapons, which we carried. In a way, they are sort of half engineer, half infantry. That is, the light groups of so-called combat engineers travel with the infantry regiments at all times. I remember a lot of the gripes and objections to all the heavy infantry training we had when we thought we were going to do a lot of things we thought the engineers were supposed to do, and nothing but that. Of course, that is not the way it was.

The basic training is rough on you. I think most fellows had the same experience of it. Probably ninety-nine out of one hundred would say the same thing. In spite of everything, you begin to realize after a while that, physically, you are better. As the weeks passed into a couple of months, you were in better condition. I think you could do things that you could not do before and you could do them better and faster. I had the flu one time and was confined to the barracks. I looked out the window one day and watched my company as it formed up, went out on the road, and disappeared. I could not help but admire the well-drilled, smart appearance that they had. That was the first time, I would say, I got to look at myself and fellow soldiers. Instead of being in the ranks with them and doing it, I was there at the window watching them. I never realized before how we had transferred from an unruly mob of civilians to a smart, well-drilled company of soldiers.

After basic training was over, there was a low. That is when they began to weed out. At that time, they knew who they wanted to weed out, those they did not think were fit for combat. They transferred the men to other branches of the service, like cook and baker school. A certain number of those went out, and we had to wait for awhile. Then we had a little rest period. We had to wait for replacements, and I said earlier that the call at that time was for lots of engineers. It was still out until we went to Europe, and then the great need became the infantry. It was the other way around. I suppose, at that time, the call was still out. An order will go out, and it will still be standing, even after the need for it is long past. Actually, they undoubtedly had all the engineers that they needed. We had to wait for replacement to fill in for all these that were weeded out. All of the replacements, without exception, oddly enough, came from the infantry transferred to the engineers.

Then combat training began. The whole business after that ended up in a sort of

grand finale in maneuvers That was the first time, they had just started that when I went there That was to be the pattern from then on. Different units and a couple of infantry divisions came in, including the one that I finally saw later in Europe, I think it was the 76th division and some other ones There were some armored units that came in with a lot of artillery Of course, with maneuvers, they set them up far off away from camp, many many miles. That camp, by the way, is in a very wild area, part of the Ozark Mountains. There are hardly any civilians around at all There would be a farmhouse, a little shack you would pass when you were going out on a long road march. Maybe you would go twenty miles or more before you would see the next little shack. It was that kind of country Those maneuvers would be as near conditions as they could make it, conditions we expected to have, eventually. It went on for days and nights. I do not recall exactly how long they were. It was something like two weeks

D Was this more like war games?

G. Yes, like war games. It was something like that That was the grand finale When the big maneuvers were over, we were finished there, and would wait around until it was time to ship out

D That would take about a year?

G No, it was about six or seven months, something like that. It seemed like six or seven years.

D Let's go in to your active duty then. Can you give me a documentary of your time over in Europe and from the day you left the country?

G We did not all go out at once. Groups of them would go out at a time. Then a couple of days would pass and some more names would be on the list and they would ship out. When you did, by that time, they had your orders made out where you were supposed to report. In the meantime, you had a furlough of thirty days and the orders read that you were supposed to report at such and such a place for transportation to such and such a camp That is the way it was I had the thirty days and I was to report to a certain railroad station in Cleveland, take the train at a certain time, which would take me to a place called Camp Reynolds, over in Pennsylvania. That was the equipping area We were there for a few weeks and there we would be equipped You would get a couple of inoculations and then you were ready to ship out. They would ship out in large contingents, many, many hundreds. From there were were shipped out to the staging area.

D. Was this early 1944?

G By that time it was Spring, March of 1944, I think. We went to Camp Shanks, in New York That was the staging area and where we got more inoculations. Also, we

got instructions on various types of life jackets, how to use the emergency lights they had on them. They had an area with actual lifeboats and we would have to go through simulated things, going to boat stations and waiting for water to get in the boat, the usual thing for preparing for shipment overseas.

After we were through there, we boarded the train that came right into the camp. The train took us directly to a ferry. We went across then, straight on to the ship, and we were ready to start on the sea.

D How was the moving? Were the men in your group scared?

G I would say there were very few who were not concerned about it. The big thing was they hated to leave the country. It was the thought that once you left the States, that just about did it. It was trying to stay in the States that most of them wanted to do. If you could not get reclassified somehow into something else, then you did not have much of a chance of staying in the states. Many of them, I have to admit that I did it myself, talked to those "sea lawyers," the ones that were always telling everybody how they should do it, how to work around this or do that, and do everything you can to get reassigned, get out of being a combat replacement. Very little of that happened by that time, so it was one step after another, of a relentless way. I finally accepted the fact that whatever it is, that is the way it is going to be and I am going to quit trying to be something else.

D Okay, now let us move to your time in active duty, whenever you first shipped off to overseas and your first general impressions of the war.

G. I can say that my first feeling or realization that there was a war on was enroute to England because, although the German submarine business was pretty well solved by that time, never-the-less, German submarines were still active and still trying. I do not recall, at the time, how far away we were from the British Isles. I would say not by more than a few days. There was a large convoy and, as a matter of fact, I heard later in a letter from home it was such a large convoy, it apparently arrived with no losses. Nothing was said about losses. Eisenhower himself made the announcement some days after the convoy reached England.

The German submarines, of course, were always active and trying, even though it was very difficult for them at that time. One evening I heard some depth charges going off, that is at some distance, and I went back on the fantail of this ship which was a Canadian liner. I stepped back there this late afternoon and I watched one of the escort vessels, either a Corvette or a Destroyer. It had something further back to the rear of the convoy which, I understood later, after the war, was probably a trailing submarine. They would have submarine packs and they would be stationed at different areas, fifty miles apart maybe, but close enough so that when they got the word, six, seven, or eight of them would form the pack as soon as the convoy was found, which they knew was coming anyway. All they had to do, one of them, was to get on the convoy and trail along behind, continually radioing to headquarters and relaying it from there down to the submarines. I watched them as the sun set, until, finally, it was so dark that I could not see them far back on the horizon. They

definitely had something back there because it was doing what they call a hold down. They simply keep it slowly circling around and once in a while, they let off some depth charges. The pack must have gotten the word, because about two days later is when they made their play for the convoy. The first I knew of it, we had hit a bad storm, and they might have made their try for the convoy before, but the rough weather lasted about two days and nights. A storm at sea is terrifying.

One day I listened to thundering explosions. Even as big as that ship was, the whole ship would shudder. At first, I did not know what it was. I thought that it might be submarines. For a while, what I was most concerned about was aerial attacks because I had read about the Germans, especially in some of those more northerly convoys, using a combination of submarines and aircraft that would sometimes sink half or two-thirds of a convoy. It was aerial bombs that I thought of, but actually they were depth charges, and the alarm bells all started going off. Of course, I did not know that either at the time, but I learned later that it meant at least one submarine of the pack had gotten through what they call the screen, and had gotten in amongst the convoy. Everybody had to wait. We were two or three decks down. We had to wait until all the troops up above had all gone to their boat stations, and then we could start up the stairs and go to ours. They were thundering all over the place. They make so much noise, the vibrations are so heavy it is almost unbelievable. I never knew depth charges made that much noise. It was a beautiful, sunshining day and there was all this action going on. I thought, "There really is a war going on because here is part of it right now."

That went on for some time, and then there was an all clear given. Some of us were sent up to the boat deck for exercises, calisthenics, which we were never even able to start, because as soon as we got out there, the alarm bells went off again. All the men were clambering up to the guns again, and the depth charges started going off.

It was still a little more, and then a few days later, as we slowly eased down towards Liverpool, we heard many explosions at a distance. We did not know what they were at first, until somebody noticed up in the sky, towards where we were heading, the air was just full of big, black blobs, like cottonballs, which were anti-aircraft batteries firing at some German planes that were probably over for some nuisance raids. The big raids on England were over at that time, but they still came over occasionally to take pictures or drop a few bombs.

All in all, with the submarines and anti-aircraft, nobody on that ship could be in doubt about it any longer. There really was a war going on somewhere.

- D: You had a really nice indoctrination.
- G: Yes, that is right. It was kind of a little preparation for us. It was kind of exciting, but slightly ominous, too.
- D: What did you do in England? Did you get shipped out gradually from there?
- G: We went into Liverpool. We also saw our first visible appearance of war because Liverpool had been bombed like other cities. It so happened that where the boat

docked, you could look into a square of the city and see many badly damaged buildings. We were there about two days That was right alongside the stations which were full of well-known or famous boat trains When we finally disembarked, we went straight into the station, onto these trains, and immediately started for the area we were to go over to.

In England, there were many replacement camps for various outfits. It was so heavy, the common saying was that if we got any more soldiers on this island, it would sink. Being a small island and having hundreds of thousands of men and all of the equipment, it was very crowded.

D Okay, you were just getting off in England From there, where did you go?

G: To their replacement camps. All the talk at that time was about D-Day and the invasion of the continent I should say that was the prime topic All the replacement depots were handled by the infantry. It is never the custom to have soldiers sitting around doing nothing, even though there is not anything useful to be done They had to be kept busy The infantry kept us busy by constant road marches, a lot of combat tactics, especially at night, exercises, that sort of thing. Everybody was talking about D-Day and wondering about how soon we would be assigned to outfits, different divisions, and so on. Some fellows would spend what little free time they had practicing with knives and throwing them and sharpening them.

Finally, one day, there was a call for assembly and they started reading off the list of everybody that would be shipped out In the meantime, we knew that the invasion could not be far off There was one fellow in the group I have always remembered He had been going to New York University and he seemed to know things about tides, the moon and the different times of the year I remember one day a group was around there while he was spotted down on the ground He was sketching something about tides, ocean tides. He said, and this was sometime in May, there were certain days in May they could do it because of the tides along the other side of the Channel, along the coast of France. He said it was a little late for that and they could not do it now. He said the next time would be next month, June, and named three dates. I think it was the fifth, sixth, and seventh. He said my guess is that it will probably be about the fifth or sixth of June He was exactly right. None of us really knew that, but we sort of took his word for it because he seemed to know about that sort of thing It turned out later that he was exactly right. He was exactly right

In the meantime, everybody was shipped out, except myself and about six other fellows. We could not understand why we were not on the list, but we found out later we were all down in the books at the dispensary for trips to the hospital. I was supposed to get X-rays of my ankles. I was still making an attempt to get out of combat, so it did not make a difference what you were down for. If you were down there for trips into a place called Warments, which was a big headquarters and had a big hospital in there, your name was struck off the list. We did not find that out until later. All of these fellows went out and we found out later, after D-Day and our trips into the hospital We began to see all of these fellows, some of them we had known had been with us and shipped out. They had all gone to those special engineer brigades, two of which they had for Omaha Beach, and some of

them went to the first division. They were all in on D-Day. Some of them were killed and quite a number were wounded. The wounded ones were the ones we saw in the hospital, after they shipped them back over the Channel to hospital trains which you could see on the railroad. They were coming in there, making trip after trip after the sixth of June.

I think it was the 116th infantry that came in and took over the camp. We had to wait for more people, and they shipped down quite a group of them. They had been up in Iceland for three years and they came in and started filling up the group.

Finally, we got the news that, instead of going with the first army, which had originally been intended, we were going to be replacements for a third army. We had to wait until a third army was sprung loose, sometime after D-Day. We were shipped across the Channel, to Omaha Beach. That is where most of the men were coming in from. We traipsed up over that long hill that became famous in pictures and in Life Magazine. You left the beachhead to go up over that hill, and they had a big arch up there that somebody had painted something on the side about, through this arch passes the flower of the American Army, or some such thing. Looking up to the left, over a little draw on some higher ground, was a huge, muddy field, up kind of high. Up there, we got our first sight of many, many white crosses. The burial parties were up there. That was the first U.S. military cemetery, as they moved into the continent. As the fighting moved beyond the beaches, the casualties were all brought back and buried there until they moved on still farther, then they established another.

We moved on from one replacement camp to another. These camps were very primitive. Sometimes we would not be in a place very long. This was up in the hedgerow section. We moved from one place to another. Finally trucks came one day and we started on a long trip to try and catch up with the third army, which was moving so fast at the time that not very much could keep up with them. We finally got up there. They were along the Moselle River and there is where I finally joined the outfit. That was the 249th Engineer Combat Battalion.

At that time, the third army was not doing very much. They had had to stop because of supply problems. What they were doing was gathering supplies and building up, ready for the next push. There was a lot of elation up to that time. Everybody was optimistic, I have a clear remembrance of that. It ran all through the army, probably all the way up into the first army area as well. Most everybody was optimistic because, although there had been plenty of heavy fighting, it seemed as though a lot of progress was being made. It all went so good, it seemed like the war might be over before Christmas. I remember one fellow saying something about that and one of the sergeants who had come up from Iceland and seemed to be a little wiser said, "No, about this time next year." That was in August. He turned out to be right because it was almost that long.

I was in a platoon first, but they finally asked me to go in the operations section of G2 to be assistant to the operations sergeant. It was some time before that happened. At first, I did not want to do it. I sort of felt at home with this platoon. I was welcomed in such a manner after the replacements, which is kind of a cruel, hard life. General Bradley himself said it was a very hard, cruel kind of a method that they had to use. You always felt like you did not really belong to anything. They called it a home in the Army. If you did not belong

to a regular outfit, you were a replacement just waiting around to get thrown in to some outfit. You did not know where, and you were afraid and apprehensive. As I had been told, once with an outfit, the whole attitude changes, and that was true. It did change. You felt much different then, you felt like you belonged. The other fellows began to mean something, too, especially the way they treated and welcomed you. I suppose the beginning of what you might call unit pride began right there. I would not have done anything to be a discredit to that company and battalion for anything, because I was proud to be with them.

Before I went with operations, which as I say, I did not want to do because I did not want to leave the platoon, I felt sort of disloyal leaving. One of the first really scary things I had to do, there was a bridgehead up on the Moselle River some miles up the way. They wanted some engineer troops to go up there and guard it. We went up there and had to go in the positions at night. We had the usual placements there to handle that bridge, nothing heavy. The heaviest thing we had were rockets, or bazookas, a couple of light machine guns. The rocket positions were the ones farthest out on the left and right flanks of the bridge. It was on the left one that I was assigned, with one other fellow. As I said, they would take us out at night and we would relieve the ones that were there during the day, so they would not see us change.

One night, one of the fellows on this heavy machine gun post got himself badly burned doing something. I often thought he did it purposely so they had to pull him out. They sent him back to evacuation hospital for a while and I guess it was a couple of weeks before he got back with us again. They had to have another man, they could not lose one on the machine guns. They pulled this other fellow out that was with me and that left me alone in this position. All the time there was this talk about the Germans up on the horizon on a high bluff. There was a flat plane in front of us, as flat as a billiard table, with a single road coming down it, excellent for tanks. It was a very scary place. The Germans were up on the flat of the plateau, up above, and there was always talk about a counterattack. They wanted that bridge back.

I had to put in this one night all by myself when they pulled this other fellow out, and it was the scariest, most nightmarish night I think I had ever spent. I kept watching and watching, and I set a charge in the rocket gun so that all I had to do was shoulder it and squeeze that button. I do not know whether I would have used it or not. If I had seen a tank coming across there, none of us would have had a chance if they would have hit us with what I think they had planned. I finally put it aside. I laid out along these sandbags, put my rifle out over there, and I kept watching and watching. There was a little bit of a moon, as I recall, but it finally went down. It did not last long and then it was dark and your eyes tried to make out objects. I was sure I saw an object out there. I was not sure I saw it move. I know I had to be on the alert every second because I was alone.

I watched and watched, and the only way I could determine whether that object was a man and moving, or if it was something else out there, was to set the front sights of my rifle on it and watch it. At least if it traversed to one side or the other, I could tell. I would have to close my eyes momentarily to give them a rest, and then open them. Then I would be able to see a little better. If the object had moved forward, the only way I could have told would be that the object would be a little larger if it moved far enough. If it moved right or

left, I could definitely tell that, because I was holding this rifle in that fixed position and using, as a point of reference, the front sights. Your imagination could go wild. For a time or two, I was sure I saw it move, but it did not. Finally, the long night ended, and I saw the first little peek of dawn. It was the most marvelous thing. It was a moment I have never forgotten. People talk about being born again, that is how I felt.

They pulled us out of there. There was a beat up house on the other side of the river and we were going there to sleep until it was time to go back out again and relieve the others. All of a sudden, I was awakened. I had not been sleeping for more than a couple of hours, and I was awakened by some thunderous roar and crashing. It sounded like a terrific thunderstorm. I thought, geez, they have started the attack. I raced to this open door, and one of the fellows was standing there, just leaning kind of casually against it, and I thought, he seems awful casual for what that sounds like. I said, "What's up, what's going on?" He said, "Our fighter bombers." These were P 47's and they were right close. I could see what they were doing. They were all peeling off, one by one, as they would come in in three's, or whatever. They peel off, one by one, quite low, opening up those fifty caliber machine guns. I do not remember them using bombs. They may have, but it was the heavy machine guns which I heard. I had never been that close to fighter bombers before, and I never realized how much noise they made. It was absolutely thunderous. You could feel the ground and the air shake as they peeled off, one by one, and roared down on that plateau up there. What they were doing, of course, was laying it on to the Germans up there who were apparently getting ready to try and grab that bridge back.

About two weeks later, I happened to be up that way on a reconnaissance with somebody, and I saw all along the road and in the orchards heavy stuff they had packed in up there. Heavy artillery, tanks, infantry half tracks, and just everything that you could think of which could only have been there for a big attempt to get that bridgehead back. I had a soft place in my heart for those fighter bombers. I always thought they saved our necks. I am skipping all sorts of things here, trying to hit high spots as best as I can remember.

Finally, in November, they were ready for attacks. The third army launched there, and it was not too successful. At least not the way many had expected. All the optimism of that summer had ended by that time. We became a little glum.

We were with the 80th infantry division with the 12th corps. We were not divisional troops. That is a permanent part of the division. I do not think we were even corps troops. We were army troops because we could be attached that way to any outfit in the entire third army, which happened later on. I often thought that, had the Ardennes counter offensive not taken place, we might have remained in the 12th corps all the way through, and possibly with the 80th division most of the time.

The 80th division was a good one, and it had lots of success. There is a tendency where a unit is successful, to keep using it as much as possible. Nothing begets success like success, as they say. The 80th division was always engaged by regiment or two regiment sections. Once in a while, they would pull a battalion out for a couple of days of rest. I think that is the way they did it. I was never sure of that. Whatever regiment it was, I do not remember anymore, in the fall, they were pulled out for a rest and they pulled us out with them. At that time, thoughts were on the Rhine River. They were already looking ahead to

making the Rhine River crossings, which were going to be difficult because if strongly defended, they expected that a river that big and wide would form an obstacle and it would be another D-Day all over again.

It was going to be a big enough effort that the Navy was going to have to be part of it. The Navy had various equipment back in Tulle, France, on the Moselle River. Whenever engineer outfits were pulled out with different divisions or regiments were supposed to have a rest, they were sending most of them back, one by one, as fast as they could, to rehearse the salt crossings with the Navy with these big landing crafts they had, LCT's, or LTC's, or whatever they were. Back we went, and we were not there very long. I do not think more than about two or three days.

I remember one morning we were in a building that had been a big French military base of some kind. Most of the buildings were about five or six stories high and we were up on the third floor. This morning, I came in to what was our little headquarters, and across the hall was another outfit. They had set up their radio. As I remember, we did not set anything up there because it was not very important, except to get in touch once in a while with the company commander. I came in and sat down on this pack I had on the floor, feeling kind of glum, and I noticed the first sergeant looked more glum than usual. Suddenly, out of nowhere, he quietly said, "The Germans made sixteen miles today." It did not soak through too fast and suddenly it did. I thought to myself, one of the Germans has been making sixteen miles going the other way. I said, "How many miles did you say?" He said, "Sixteen." I said, "Against who?" He said, "The first army." I thought, well, that is the first army's territory, but sixteen miles sounds bad. I started to worry about it.

In the meantime, we heard a little more about it. We started to go down to the river and by that time, we had found a way to enjoy ourselves a little while we were down there. They had a lot of boats and we found some little inlets around the river, little islands, and we had places where we would go back there and sit awhile, play cards, and fool around as much as we could until somebody came after us. I was telling the fellows that the Germans have a big counter-offense going on, they were making headway and it does not sound good at all. They said, "Where?" I said, "The first army." I told them nothing will happen, that will not affect us. I said it might because it sounds like it is a huge counter offense and they are making headway. I said, "You know what will happen. You know who is going to have to go up there and help out. The third army will have to do it." They laughed and said we would not have to do that.

As usual, we went back with our boats to that place and were fooling around when, all of a sudden, a speedboat came down the way and a fellow was up there with a bullhorn calling out, "All units to report to offshore." I said, "There you are, it is even sooner that I thought it would be." We all lined up and, of course, they did not tell us anything right there, but they said all units should go and pack their stuff and be ready to leave in thirty minutes. We went back and found out that that is what it was. I told them, "You know what is going to happen. We are among those units that have ready transportation of our own. We are detached, we are not engaged. We are going to be among the first units up in that salient and they are going to be awfully short of infantry up there." That is the way it was because the engineer combat troops can be used instantly as infantry because they are trained that way.

There is not any special disposition or anything, they do it right there. That is what happened.

Then began the harrowing trip, day and night, grinding mile after mile, to get up into that salient, or so-called bulge. The nightmare then began, which many experienced at that time, crowded roads, trying to get through them, and finally, when you got up into where you began to make contact with the Germans, a good deal of the time, hardly anybody knew who was who. Hour to hour at times, the enemy would be in one place and, maybe two hours later, they would be behind you, or they would be to your right. Of course, it was the same way for them, a very disconcerting and confusing kind of thing. We went through all of that business.

We were then with the third corps, instead of the twelfth, and we were with the 26th infantry. The sixth cavalry, which was a special reconnaissance unit of the third army whose sole purpose was special reconnaissance for General Patton's use, besides the usual patrol reports that they would get from all the different units. He wanted a unit of his own, and it was his own, enough that they called it Patton's Household Guard. That is what cavalry units are anyway. They are mainly reconnaissance. What this sixth cavalry did was go through the lines, penetrate as far as they could and roam back and forth behind the lines. Collectors of information and prisoners, that is what they did. They were going to move through a town, I do not remember the name of it. At that time, there was a lot of snow, bitter cold, terrible weather. I have yet to read anything about it that, in any way at all, exaggerated the terrible weather conditions.

We were detached, then, from the 26th, and attached to part of the sixth cavalry, to do a spear head operation. We worked our way out of Wales, and after we got out a ways, we started running into them. The snow would start and Dean Figures would be singing, "Shooting will begin." I remember once we almost shot some of our own men. It was hard to tell. Sometimes, with a silhouette, you could tell the Germans, especially with their long overcoats. Our own were short. Often times that was the only way a dim figure in the snow or fog could be distinguished from your own. It was a harrowing day and night.

Finally, we worked our way up into this little town. We had to hit house to house and make sure that there were not any of them in there. We took over a little place and, since I was, by that time, with operations, I was in with the company commander. It also meant that I read all the reports and I collected them from the patrols we had sent out. At that time, I did know more about what was going on than I had before because most of the time, it was pretty hard to tell what was going on. It can be very confusing. The men themselves will often sense beyond things, sometimes before officers, sort of gut feelings.

Most of the time, as far as strategy is concerned, you do not know very much of what is going on tactically. You do not know what one of your other companies in the battalion is doing and if they would be a couple of miles down the road or only one mile. Especially when action starts, that is when you really do not know any more than what is around you in a very short distance, yards, you might say.

We finally got to this little place and, after we checked all the houses, some of the sixth cavalry went down the road and set up a special place for interrogating prisoners. It was not long until prisoners were brought in by themselves and by us.

I would say that the most nightmarish of all things was probably the Battle of Ardennes, partly because of the winter and certain other circumstances. One time, it was my job to collect all these reports and check the enemy disposition. Everyday that had to be done using an overland map. I put it up on the wall and, with a black crayon, I would draw the rough outline of the enemy line as it was then by checking the coordinates. I was drawing away, half dreaming about home, and I was not really concentrating on it, but I was doing it correctly. I stepped back and looked at it, and I saw this little town we were in I had drawn sort of a rough, irregular circle around it, with only a tiny opening behind us I looked over my shoulder to the operations officer and said, "Am I doing this right? I checked this two or three times." He looked up at it and kind of laughed. He said, "Yes, that's right. Just like you see it there." I said, "We're surrounded, practically." He did not seem concerned about it at all, but then some infantry came up I do not remember who they were anymore. I went out this door and somebody was knocking on it. It was swirling snow again, a bitter cold night, and here were all these figures. At first I thought they might be the enemy, but then I saw that they were our own. They were so overjoyed to see us and I said, "Where have you been? How did you get here?" He said, "We are wondering how you got here. How did you get here?" I said, "We came up here several days ago." He said, "How did you get here? We had to fight our way through " That was the little opening that was on the map. It was one thing and then another. It was very discouraging.

A big Russian offensive had started near the Ardennes. It was of interest to us only for one reason. We all kept asking one another about it. What is the latest on the Russian offensive? The reason we were interested was that we hoped that it would take pressure off of us and perhaps end the thing sooner. Misery loves company, you know.

Finally, after the long weeks passed and the thing was finally over, we were in the vicinity of Baston. There is where I saw the largest tank battle I have ever seen, which was taking place on the perimeter of Baston. Most people think that when the third army unit, which was part of a small portion of the fourth armored, reached Baston, that was the happy ending, that the cavalry came to the rescue. But that was not so at all, because it was not until after that that the Germans began to pull their reinforcements in there, many divisions coming from all parts of the Ardennes. That is when the heaviest fighting of all began. The heaviest casualties lasted for weeks.

Then we finally went up above Baston, to a place called Falaise, an important town. That, I think, is as far up as we went. After it was officially contained, that is when they really considered the Battle of the Salient, or Bulge, over It seems to me we went up as far as Saint-Vallier, another important town. As far as a roadmap and railroads were concerned, it was as important as Baston. That is where I saw the first British troops since Normandy

We got pulled out for a rest again. The worry now was the Rhine, because the whole front was closing in on it. A lot of us were worried about that, myself in particular, knowing that if they were well-organized and if they were really able to make a strong stand on the Rhine, it would have been a terrible thing. By that time, they were unable to do it quite that well. I am not saying that they did not put up a resistance, because they did.

Then we moved to another little place for a bit, and we all got called out in a field one day, far away from the handful of civilians that were in this beat-up town we were in, so that

nobody could hear. He read off some orders and told us what our next mission was going to be, and that we were going to be attached to the fifth infantry for a surprise assault crossing on the Rhine. It was quite a ways. We left early, at dusk, and traveled all night. The assault was to have been at night. We could not get there in time, so one of our other companies did the actual assault. The casualties were very few, I think there were only about three men lost that night.

The real resistance did not begin until the next day. It was a surprise, they used no artillery preparation or anything. So the next morning, the rest of us got ready to move out to the river. By that time, of course, they were bringing reinforcements, heavy machine gunfire, jet planes, semi 262's. Somehow, I got the feeling that night that my luck was going to run out. I was so sure of it that I took a few personal things and put them on top of a bag of stuff I had and I took it to the supply sergeant. He was the one that would take the casualties personal stuff and send it back to the next of kin, and the rest of the stuff would be sent back to supply depots. I said, "Here's the stuff." He looked at me as though he could not believe what I was saying. He said, "It's going to be all right." I said, "Well, just in case."

We started moving up the road with some of the fifth infantry and we were kind of kidding around with one another. For a while, it did not seem too bad. Until we stopped. We got up to a place where I could overlook the river and I could look down to the small town called Openheim. It was about the only time in the whole war that I ever saw a scene that looked like what you always imagined a war to look like. A panorama where you could see a lot. You could see the river, you could see columns of troops moving down to the river, you could see flashes of gunfire and huge columns of black smoke coming up from the town, rising many hundreds of feet up in the air. You could hear some tanks alongside the roars, firing. In the meantime, during the night, our anti-aircraft had moved in and dug in there. They were all set getting ready for the attacks that the German planes would be making, because for days after that, they were lowering in on that bridgehead.

Anyway, we suddenly got stopped. It is a very uneasy thing. Getting stopped on a convoy on a road was always bad because you were always like a sitting duck for the enemy that has you under observation. I was particularly concerned about the planes. It got kind of quiet there for awhile, quiet enough that I could hear a kind of whispering sound far up in the air. I started looking up there. It was a bright, sunshining day in March and it had turned very warm, almost like summer. Looking up in that blue sky, I had finally detected a little, tiny, almost microscopic object far up there. Sort of whitish looking, translucent you might say, the way planes look when they are at high altitudes. Somehow they did not sound right and I mentioned it to this one fellow.

Some of the others piled down off of there and were standing along the side talking to some of the infantry and they were kidding back and forth. The infantry was kidding us about having our vehicles and we were riding and they were having to march. I said something about those planes up there and he said, "Those are ours, that's our protection, nosing around up there and keeping guard." I said, "I don't know. I have a funny feeling about those planes. I don't think they're ours." Finally, somebody called out that they could start going, but just about that time there was an alarm called out and I heard somebody

saying, "Hit the dirt!" Everybody started to scramble and hit the ditches. With the infantry on both sides of us in two columns and ourselves in the middle, there was not enough room in the ditches for everybody. But if something happened, you hit it anyway, even if you had to pile in there two or three deep.

Suddenly, a lot of firing began. I could not figure out what it was and I had momentarily forgot about the planes, but apparently the jet planes came down because what it sounded like was a terrific roaring, like escaping steam. None of us had ever heard a jet plane before, so we did not know what it was. It also sounded like heavy artillery, which could make a roaring, rushing sound. These, as I heard later, were those ME-262's. This roaring was so loud and it was so confusing, I kept looking around. I did not know whether some Germans had gotten up on the flanks up there, maybe with tanks or something.

With all the firing and this roaring noise, it finally got so loud, it was deafening. There were some crashing explosions as I turned, by that time I had turned and put my rifle against the back of this vehicle. I was going to flop over the side of this thing and roll into the ditch. But I was too late because I was at a squatting position first, when I was trying to find out what was going on, and as I stood up to turn, I felt myself hit. I pulled myself over the side of the thing and I fell in the road and crawled on my elbows because I could not feel anything from the waist down. I crawled into the ditch and as I started crawling over to these fellows, I tried to tell them that the back of the little trailer vehicle was full of ammunition and explosives and if they hit that, we were all done for. I opened my mouth and I could not say anything, so I kept crawling and crawling and the guys kept putting their hands on my shoulders and yelling, "Hey, stop, you're hit!" I said, "I know it." I was bleeding bad and I did not know that either. One of the men was able to run down the road and get one of our aid men because he had moved on with some more. Anyway, these fellows tried to stop the hemorrhage and they could not. He got back there and at least knew something about it. He had most of the equipment and did the best he could.

They had a hard time getting a vehicle to get me back because everything was moving forward, nothing going back. The aid station we had already passed was some ways back. They had to get me back there some way, so they finally started to tag some fellow coming up in a weapons carrier. They said that they had a fellow bleeding bad and we had to get him to the aid station or he was not going to make it. They finally convinced him and he turned around on this little narrow road and they slid me on it. By that time, though, I had lost a lot of blood, and I lost consciousness for awhile and then I would regain it, and then I would lose it again. I had fragmentary remembrances of various things back to the aid station.

That was really the end of the war for me, right there, although I did not know it because by the time I was able to be moved on a hospital train from the evac hospital, back to the base hospital in Commercy, France, the war was nearly ended. It did end when I was in the hospital. All I had to worry about, and that turned out not to be necessary, was the Pacific, because a lot of engineering units were being formed into special engineer brigades for D-Day and Japan.

The end of the war for me was on that road that day.

Like everybody, they used to have a saying, "There's only one way back from the

front, and that's the ride back on the stretcher." It was the only way, really that you ever got back. You either went back dead or wounded.

In the moments that I had some kind of consciousness, I kept thinking to myself, I did not realize that I had been hit that bad. When I felt it, it felt like a hot, stinging poker somebody had rammed into me just for an instant, and then all of it was numb. The pain does not start until later, and then it is excruciating. I thought, it finally happened. I am actually going back. For how long, I did not know, and I was glad, in a way. But in another way, I felt the usual guilt feelings. I hated to leave the other fellows. I would say most of them felt that way. There were two feelings, conflicting in a way. Glad to be going back and hoping that maybe that was the end of the war for me. But at the same time, sort of guilty for leaving the others, and wondering what was going to happen to them.

I can talk all night, I have got all kinds of escapades and terrifying experiences, knowing fear. You get that tight feeling in your stomach that gets to be such a regular thing that it is routine. Anybody that has experienced it knows it because it is those moments when there is something actually going on. You soon realize that you may only have seconds left. You never know with that stuff coming through the air, screaming, making all that noise. When one of them hits you and where it will hit you, that might be the end of everything for you. Right then and there, you may only have seconds. Maybe you have an hour, you never know. I would say that with most of them, somewhere along the line, they have reached that point where they really cannot handle it anymore. It is the stress of a kind that can break down the strongest. There were times when I wanted to do nothing more on this earth than run as far as I could run, as fast as I could run, anything to get away or hide, or something. I somehow could not do it, and I am sure the only reason that I did not was because I did not want to let down the others. I did not want to bring shame on the outfit. Plus, knowing if I did do that, I would have to remember it for the rest of my life. I do not think I could have done it because of that.

D. I have one last question. Were there any aspects of the war that you would not normally find in it ?

G. Except for there being no substitute for the personal experience, I would say that there have been some excellent descriptions of it, not only by those who participated in it, but by certain ones that made a deliberate study of it. At the time, what I have in mind in particular, is that group of the army that was headed by that General H. A. Marshall. Men under fire and the psychology of men in war, in combat, how they feel about it, their reaction, why they withhold against terrible odds and sometimes why they would break. All in all, I would say this has been pretty well covered. There is no doubt about it, it is a profound experience.

The first ones that I saw when I got up to the front, I saw a company that was coming out for a day or two to rest. I will never forget the horrible feeling that I had when I looked at those fellows and saw them going along the road there, plodding along like robots. Most of them must have been eighteen or nineteen years old, and yet there was something about them. They looked like old men. That has been written before and about the First World

War. I think the reason for that is that, in a concentrated way, in a short space in time, they are faced with something elemental, you might say. Their mortality, which they normally would not be faced with over a long period of time in peaceful life. They would not begin to think about mortality until maybe they were thirty or forty or something like that. Under those conditions, as I say, it has been described, it has been written. But there is no substitute for the actual experience. It is something you really cannot tell about in its entirety. It is only something you can remember. You never forget it. You are different from then on for having experienced that.

What happens with those young fellows, they are suddenly brought up against certain elemental facts, their mortality mostly, and it is no wonder that they age far beyond their time. Those eighteen- and nineteen-year-old kids, if they have been up on the line very long, are a lot different from what they were six months or a year before, that is if they have lasted that long. They are different, and that is why they are different, because they have been faced with eminent death, to say nothing of horrible conditions of living in the field, and the terrible weather and being soaking wet, bitter cold, anything you can mention in the way of weather. Some of the bad parts, as they say, are the waiting for the next action, wondering if this is the one you are going to get it in. That waiting, you are like a man waiting to go to the gallows. The more imagination you have, the worse it is, because you can imagine yourself getting it and how it will be, and you will wonder if you will live a few minutes or what. Young men faced with that, they soon change. And that, I think, is why they age far beyond their eighteen or nineteen years. They are more like a man fifty- or sixty-years-old that is getting near the end of his life. They would not have been that way until much later, but suddenly, under those conditions, they get that way.

I do not know, as I say, it is a hard thing to describe and there is no substitute for the experience. I know that, no matter how much you could read about it or how much someone could try and tell you about it, you still really cannot compensate for the lack of the experience of it. I should say, though, that, although it was an awful experience and I would not want to have to do it again, but since it did happen, I would not give it up for anything. I am really glad it happened, all the way down the line including the time I was wounded. Somehow, I suppose it is kind of a test of yourself. Men would like to know what they can do, how they will hold up under certain conditions. If they can do it, conduct themselves properly without being small or cowardly about it, there is a certain satisfaction. To me, as I look back, I know there were times that I said there was nothing more that I wanted to do than run, to just flee from it, to burrow into the ground and keep on digging, all the way to the other side. But I did not, and I am glad I did not.

End of Interview