

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
GM LORDSTOWN

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O.H. 1321

Geroge L. Desmett
Interview
By
Salvatore Aliberti
On
November 11, 1989

George Desmett

George Lee Desmett was born on August 27, 1924 in McCartney, Pennsylvania to Ashley and Florence Desmett. He attended school up until the 9th grade and then began to work in the coalmines in Pennsylvania. He enlisted in the U.S. Army in April 1943 during World War II, and served in Europe first with a transportation unit and later with a tank unit. He served primarily in France. He was discharged from the Army on January 19, 1946.

After World War II, he worked at a number of jobs before he landed his present job at the G.M. Fab plant at Lordstown, where he started working in 1970. He married his wife Mildred in 1956, and together, they had six children: Lee Ann, Cathryn, George, Janice, Gary, and Joan.

Aside from belonging to the Protestant Church, other organizations George belongs or has belonged to include the Lion's Club, the American Legion, and the V.F.W. Of all these, though, his greatest involvement has been with the V.F.W. He was Post Commander of V.F.W. Post 1055 in 1974-75 and in 1985-86. He was also once Commander of all of Portage County and later, in 1987-88, he was commander of the entire 8th District. The 8th District consists of 64 posts in the counties of Summit, Portage, Trumbull, and Mahoning with a total of about 12,782 members in all. It was during his time in office that the 8th District grew to so many members. He is now the State membership chairman for District 8.

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INTERVIEWEE: George L. Desmett

INTERVIEWER: Salvatore G.A. Aliberti

SUBJECT: World War II

DATE: November 11, 1989

SA: This is an interview with George Desmett, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project, by interviewer Salvatore Aliberti, at VFW Post 1055, in Ravenna, Ohio, on November 11, 1989, at 5:07 P.M. Ok Mr. Desmett describe the Circumstances under which you came to be in the army during World War II.

GD: Well I was drafted when I was eighteen, it would be 1943.

SA: Ok, in your opinion what was the general attitude in the country at that time towards serving in the Army, and going off to fight the Germans, or the Japanese?

GD: Well I think the majority of the guys was ready, willing, and able, they wanted to go. I know myself I couldn't wait until I was over there to get in. There was five of us boys in my family and we all served. My oldest brother was in the airborne, I was in the Army, I had a brother in the Air Force, and two in the Navy. My oldest brother and myself were the first two to go.

SA: You entered in 1943?

GD: 43'.

SA: By that time nearly part of the war, you know there was much hoopla about getting even with the Japs, the Germans, had this dissipated at all by 43' do you think?

GD: No.

SA: Let's see drafted into the Army, now did you choose the branch you ended up serving in within the Army?

GD: No, not really it was, at the time I got in we had our choice of branch of service to serve in. At the time I went in, a friend of mine was drafted at the same time, and he wanted me to go into Navy with him, and of course to this day I still don't know how to swim. I didn't want no part of the Navy so I told him no way, so he went in

the Navy and I went in the Army, and the ironic part of it is that I spent more time in the water than he did. It was funny the way it came out, but that's the way it was. And I took the Army with no choice of what they put me, they sent me to Fort Brague, North Carolina, in the field artillery training. We had thirteen weeks of basic, and left there and went to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, with the 69th Division. The only reason they sent us down there was we was attached for ration, and quarters until they had a ship ready to take us overseas. And I can't remember exactly how long I was there, it wasn't very long. Well I went in, in April we had thirteen weeks of basic, went down there, and we left Virginia on the U.S.S General Man in January early in January. And landed in North Africa.

SA: Ok going back to your training, what kind of Howitzer's were you trained for?

GD: 155.

SA: 155, so at this time this was strictly a toad Howitzer, there were no self-prepared?

GD: No this was a toad they called them primer, which is what we all hung around with.

SA: Now what was training like for you? At this time in the States?

GD: Well they really put you through the mill. We had all of you, naturally physical fitness type of affair. Throwing logs back and forth to each other, and I mean twelve foot long logs, and running, drills, and then we would take the Howitzer's out and see how fast we could, they called it Cavaneer's Hop, we would take the Howitzer's out and and see how fast we could get them into position and fire the first round.

SA: Describe, think of oh, describe a typical day of training back in the States, from the time you got up, until the time you went to bed. Describe what happens during a typical training day at this time?

GD: That's pretty hard for me to remember back, because I don't think there was any two days alike. We would maybe have to go on a twenty-mile hike, full gear, then we would have our firing, we would go out on the firing range, and this was for small arms, and then we would go out with the Howitzer's and set up and fire those. We would have to, the new guns that would come in, was all covered with Kosmerine, and we spent days and days washing that out, and getting ready to fire.

SA: Ok, what's Kosmerine now?

GD: It's a rust preventative, they used that especially on when they sent guns and equipment overseas it was protection from the salt water. So it wouldn't affect the metal. They would have the barrels chucked full of this stuff, and it was all over. It was a, like a heavy grease, the best way I can explain it.

SA: Ok so this was stuff you actually had to clean up before you'd be able to actually

fire ?

GD: Oh we would clean, and scrub and clean and scrub it wasn't one of the best days we had to do that.

SA: Typically what time in the morning did they usually wake you?

GD: I, hear again it's been so long ago, I think it was six o' clock.

SA: What time would you basically, when would you be on your own time?

GD: Well it's a lot different then than it is now. You really didn't have any of your own time, so to speak like they do today. Today it's more like a nine to five job, eight to four whatever you want to call it. After of course we had to pull guard duty, and K-P and all that kind of stuff in addition. We was off after supper and we would go to PX and have a beer.

SA: And what time was this?

GD: Oh sometime after five. We wasn't allowed off base unless you got a weekend pass or Saturday night pass, then we were allowed to go to town. But you had to be in at a certain time.

SA: Ok, so a typical day would be about twelve hours at least?

GD: Yes, I would say so.

SA: Ok, and during this training did your unit do a great deal of practice firing the Howitzer?

GD: Not as much as we wanted to, but we did quite a bit of it yes.

SA: Thinking back upon your experiences with the artillery, was the training adequate to prepare you for the war?

GD: I think so, but that's hard for me to answer, because like I told you after basic training was the last time I saw field artillery. I would up, I was sent overseas as a replacement an artillery replacement and

SA: and this would be in 1944?

GD: Yes, January of 44' we went to Africa, landed in Casablanca, from there we rode the forty and eights to, and I don't know if you know what a forty and eight is, but we rode that to Oran

SA: Describe forty and eights

GD: We have an organization, it's a fun organization, in the V.F.W. and it's called the forty and eight. What the forty and eight actually was was really a real little boxcar that could haul either 40 men or 8 horses, and the one that I rode on from Casablanca, I think the previous couple trips had the horses on, for obvious reasons. There was no seats you had to sit on the floor, the windows were just pulled down boards, but there was. And of course going across the desert there in the daytime was awful hot, it took us I think five days to go from Casablanca to Camp Lions Mountain for a week I think, and then we boarded ship for I didn't know at the time, the one I was on went to Italy, but when we left there the ship that I was on as far as you could see in either direction were ships. Half of the ship, so to speak, went to China Burma Indi Theatre, and the rest of us went on to Italy. I don't have the exact numbers.

SA: So from the time you landed in North Africa Bramul had basically been licked by that time?

GD: Well it had been yes; there was no fighting in Africa when I got there.

SA: When you were about to embark on your ship did any individual soldiers know oh we're going to the Pacific, oh and we're going to Europe?

GD: No, we had no idea where anyone was going. They didn't tell us.

SA: When did you finally find out?

GD: When we got to Naples. (laughing) When we got there they took a whole bunch of us, and like a told you before, and they truck you and we hauled ammunition and supplies to Angio. Mostly ammunition at first when they first landed at Angio. I think Angio Beach lasted for about three months before they pushed off the one. This is where I got my sea legs, because you couldn't drive between Naples and Angio. What they did was went around the Germans and landed in behind them, the beach there at Angio, and we loaded on the LST's and went up every night, and back the next morning, and got another load. We had..

SA: Describe an LST an for

GD: An LST is a landing ship's tank. The whole front end opens, and a ramp comes down and you drove on, and you had an elevator there and you would put your truck on the elevator and they would raise you up on the top deck, and then when they got that loaded then they would load the bottom. And then they would go up to the beach and unload the bottom and then you would come off the top.

SA: Ok, so about how many tanks and trucks could you haul in one of these things?

GD: Oh boy, I'd be afraid to guess, cause I know I wouldn't be right. Quite a few. I

would say, I really don't know, I know at least fifty.

SA: Can you talk about duty on the LST's?

GD: I had no duty on the LST's I was hauling ammunition and get on there at night and chain in down, and go to the beach head and get off and get our ammunition unloaded, and drive back down to the beach and drive on to the LST and go back to Naples, and go to the ammunition dump get loaded up again. We lived on our truck. We actually had a canvas bunk that we slept on. We ate right there, and where they assembly area, where all the trucks assembled before we loaded on the LST, which I think the right pronunciation is Bagnoli, Italy, it was right outside of Naples. They had a twenty-four hour kitchen, so any time we pulled in there day or night we could go in and get something to eat.

SA: When you were performing this duty did you have to have any special vehicle escorts, like tank destroyers or tanks?

GD: No we were on our own.

SA: What type of armor did truck convoys have?

GD: None

SA: Not even machine guns?

GD: Nope.

SA: Any particular heroine experiences you can remember being on board?

GD: Well they only thing, you see Angio Beach was about, and this might not be exact, was I think approximately ten square miles. It was off to the beach forty flat, and then you had a ridge of mountains around it, and that's where the Germans was. Well they had these guns all ready set up there, and we used to be able to time this one gun they had was Big Bertha, I think that's what we called it, and this projectile coming through the air actually sounded like a freight train, you could hear it. You know when you heard it, you wouldn't worry, it was fine. But we have had to set out in the harbor while they were shooting, it was, I wouldn't call it heroine, but he was set up on the dike maybe even, set on the fender of the truck and watch the shells explode out in the water around us. So he never came really close. They dugouts fox holes whatever you want to call them, we had an the beach there was thirty elaborate, by elaborate I mean that we had large holes with dirt over them, and we had our where you would have the entrance it was real narrow, and you turned one way or the other to the bigger part where you slept. So you could sit in there with a candle and read and no light would come out. And one of the things I remember mostly about that, me and a buddy of mine were laying in there reading and this was the night they pushed off to run. And they had pulled some big cruisers

up around the coast, and I'm seeing this, this is what it felt like to me. I think that every gun on the beach head, artillery piece, and tank, and all the big guns on the ships started firing at one time. The explosion was so great the dirt was coming down in the around us. It would light up like daylight in our hole. We looked at one another and were like what the heck is going on out there. So we got out and that's what it was. Shortly after that of course they didn't need our outfit to haul ammunition to the beach head, because there was no more beachhead there. And they took I don't how many of us, and sent us to an armor training school for two weeks. They posted, and this is the only time I volunteered for something and I'm glad I didn't get it. They had a notice on the bulletin board, for volunteers for rangers. Me and about four of my buddies signed up for it, and for whatever reason, thank god, they didn't pick any of us. Because that outfit was annihilated during (inaudible) So I had the armor training in two weeks and they flew us into Southern France, and I was with Company B in the 756-tank batallion.

SA: Ok at this time, what was your role on the tank?

GD: Oh assistant driver and bow gunner was one of the same job.

SA: What were the basic, what were the different crewmembers on board a Sherman Tank and what rank were they usually?

GD: The tank commander was usually a above sergeant

GD: I don't what the letters are we didn't have those designated numbers, you was a corporal, now they did have what they call technician ratings, your T-5 was a two stripes with a T, a corporal, your T-4 was a buck sergeant with a T, which was supposed to have been a rating for a oh like a specific job. In other words they couldn't take a T-4 or a T-5 and put him in charge, officially of a platoon or a group of men. You had to be above sergeant or something like that. But your sergeant, at time I served in tanks I was a PFC, our driver was also a PFC, our tank commander was a buck sergeant, I think our gunner was a corporal, and I'm not sure but I think the loader was also a PFC. So we wasn't to high on the rating list, you know.

SA: Describe the role of the assistant gunner, what did he do on board the M-4 Sherman?

GD: Assistant gunner we didn't have one.

SA: Ok the assistant driver?

GD: Ok, well if something were to happen to the driver and the tank was still operating then you had to be able to drive it. When you went into firefight, or whatever you want to call it, you operated what you call the bow gun, which was a thirty caliber machine gun that come out through the front circle and you used it. Against personal. And also when they run out of ammunition in the turrent, you had the supply under your seat, you would turn around and pass his ammunition up through

the turret to the gunner so he could load the gun.

SA: Ok, the coax the machine gun along side the main cannon.

GD: That was a 75 on the Sherman/

SA: That was also thirty caliber?

GD: Yes, and that was operated by the gunner, now that would side him, he used that a lot of times instead of using of 75. He had two weapons on the floor in front of him. One was his coax machine gun, and the other button was for the 75 and he hit them with his foot. When the loader loaded these shells the projectile into, well it was a shell, because it had a casing, into the breech of the 75, and he would tap the gunner on the shoulder, and then whenever he was ready to fire to fire, he would just hit that trigger and fire the 75.

SA: Ok, the trigger was on the floor?

GD: Yes it was on the floor in front of him, he operated it with his foot, his left foot. Both buttons it was just like a dimmer switch on your car, that's what it was.

SA: Now did the, how did you have to traverse the turn on the M-4 was it manual or did you have some sort of

GD: No it was powered.

SA: Now aside from the thirty caliber, there was what one machine gun on top?

GD: Not all of them, we didn't have on, I don't think any of the tanks I served in, did we have one mounted on the turret. But some of them did, and this was operated by the tank commander. None of the ones I served in had one. A lot of times those were fifty calibers.

SA: Ok, now each crewmember on board had radio set in their helmet or?

GD: Yes, to the point where the tank commander could communicate with you.

SA: Ok, so you received two weeks of training in the tank and, looking back did you feel this was adequate or the best they could do at the time?

GD: Well really both, I thought it was adequate and I think with the limited time it was a case where they needed you, and it was like on the job training. And you learned fast that way.

SA: Describe the sort of mission of the particular tank you were with?

GD: Well we went into Southern France, and up through what was called El Saslorane. Some days we would drive all day, never meet a German, maybe once or twice you would hit a pocket and you'd fire a few rounds and just keep going. We went up through there to Strasburg.

SA: Now thinking there about, you mentioned before that your tank wasn't part of a division it was a...

GD: battalion?

SA: Yes.

GD: We was a tank battalion period. It was commonly referred to in those days as a Bastered Tank Battalion. And that's what we were. We was just a battalion and they had, if a infantry division needed tanks they sent us. We fought with like I sat a lot of the time we were with 3rd infantry division. When the 109th came over, and was committed they sent us with them.

SA: The 109th was what?

GD: Infantry division. But most of the time we was with the 3rd infantry.

SA: Ok, so most missions you were used to support the infantry and the infantry actions?

GD: Right, we went up through like, I say we went into Strasburg and it was just prior to Christmas, about two or three weeks before Christmas of 44'. We more or less felt like we had it made. We wasn't doing nothing, the crouts was on one side of the Rhine, and we was on the other. We were just watching and neither one tried anything. At that particular time the 36th infantry division was in Southern France, it was the last American outfit in Southern France. They got clobbered. They was trying to take, what was called the, Cole Mar Pocket, it was a town called Cole Mar and they called us the Cole Mar Pocket, and the Crouts had it pretty well sewed up. They got really clobbered, so we got worried that we had to go down and relieve them. And they come up and relieved us. So they took our gravy job setting up at Strasburg, and we had to go down and take over their place. I remember that we, I had went out, that night with the crew, with a truck, and stocked ammunition, in the center of a town that we was going to attack the next day. So we wouldn't have to go too far for ammunition, when we ran out. I think it was on the 23rd of December, the Germans had road blocks set up, and we lost every tank in our company but four

SA: So the whole battalion had sixteen?

GD: Sixteen, yes. We lost all but four. And all that trying to get through there.

SA: Typically if a tank it's knocked out in World War II, does that mean that everyone in the crew dies, or?

GD: No, the fact that I'm sitting here will answer that question, because I was in one that got knocked out. And it burnt. None of us in that tank was killed, the driver like I told you a minute ago was hurt pretty bad, and I had heard conflicting stories on, to this day I don't know the truth. I heard that he had died later, and I had heard that he got alright, he was a guy from Chicago. I never heard from him, I've never heard from any of the guys.

SA: Could you describe in detail as you did previously how that particular engagement came about?

GD: Which one?

SA: When your tank was destroyed?

GD: It was a situation like I told you, we was moving, just going and going, and we was, it was real early in the morning, it was in late October, real cold, and I was in the fourth tank in line, there was four TD's lined up behind us, and our tank commander got out..

SA: Ok TD's are tank destroyers?

GD: Right,

SA: What did these things look like?

GD: They looked like a tank but they had an open top, they didn't have a turret. So that was a tank destroyer. I think they had, and I'm not sure, but I think they had a 105 Howitzer on them.

SA: Ok, but they didn't have a turret that they could traverse? It was in a fixed position?

GD: Yes, our tank commander came back and he said it was an infantry that had machine gunned us, up around that curve up there, about 150 yards down the road there is another curve. It's setting right in that corner, infantry battalion commander I think it was, told him. Our tank commander at that time was a lieutenant, and I'll never forget he had a habit of he would not send a tank where he didn't go in first until this time. A lieutenant can't argue too much with a colonel. So when the colonel told him there was a machine gun nest up there, that had the infantry pinned down, our Lt. said let's go up and take a look, and he said God Damn it! Lt. I told you there was a machine gun nest up there, that's what there. So like I said he couldn't argue with him. He came back and told us what

we had to do. He said we've got to go around that curve and fire five rounds of HE, for the Houlitz, and come back out. Now HE is high explosive.

SA: Ok, at this time there two types of shells; HE and armored piercing?

GD: There was HE, there was armored piercing, and there was APHE, Armored Piercing High Explosive, which was supposed to enter and then explode.

SA: So this is what you wanted to fire at a tank to make it explode?

GD: Right, you want that shell exploding inside the tank not out. We pulled around the curve and fired one round, and as it turned out it was a tank instead of machine gun nest. None of us seen it, but the infantry patrol was after them, that's what it was, and their first shell was apparently a high explosive, and it hit between the driver and I on the front slope plate, and blew a hole through the tank. And the driver got most of the metal shrapnel off the tank. The second shell apparently was an AP, because it went clear through our tank, it hit by the coactual went out the radio bulge in the back end, and the infantry told us they heard it going down through the woods after it went through our tank. The first shell set our tank on fire, and I couldn't get the driver out, we was pressed for the hatches, you know in those M-4's don't allow for too much room. And he was a big man.

SA: Ok, your talking about trying to get him out through the turrent.

GD: No, I couldn't get him out through the turrent, because they had that screen around there.

SA: Oh, ok.

GD: There's no way you can get out through the turrent. I tried to get out the hatch, the gun was not quite over mine, because we were shooting fairly straight down the road, and the tank was burning, they was machine-gunning us as we got out. I dove out and hid in a ditch, and called out to get help, because this guy was still in there. I met the tank commander and I told him, that Modoe was still in the tank, and it was burning, and that he was hit pretty bad. We started to turn around to go back, and he pulled me to the ground. Now the gunner, Purie, he was a Mexican I'll never forget, he was out laying in the ditch waiting on me, and he hollered come on this way. Well the baur the right from the ditch on the road, beside the road wasn't very high, but the further it went back the high it got, and as your trained in basic to call down the fire, which we had to do in those days. I looked sideways and I could see the tracer bullet going over his head, as they were machine gunning us. I told the tank commander what was going on, and I said let's go up and get him. And he said you keep going, he went back to the tank, now whether they had pulled out or whether they had a change of heart I don't know, I don't know why. But the driver come to and then the tank commander get up there he was crawling over the gun to get off, and fell into the tank commander's arms and he walked back

the way with him. He did get a lot of shrapnel and, I think maybe if that's possible some little thing that might have saved him was the amount of clothes we had to wear, because of the cold. How cold it was. And like I said I never heard, they took us all back to the others. That was where I got my cut at. I call it a scratch. We don't know what it come from, and I never did hear how he got.

SA: Ok so during the action the scrape on the back of the neck was the only wound you suffered?

GD: Yes. I'm very fortunate.

SA: Speaking of Tiger Tanks, now what was your feeling, and maybe the feelings of the typical American tank man about how our tanks compared with that of the Germans?

GD: Our tanks couldn't compare, the only way I think we might have had an edge, would have been maneuverability, because of them being so heavy and big. We could out maneuver them, but we couldn't out shoot them, because I think most of theirs had the 88, and 4 Sherman and 75, which was like using a water pistol compared to magnum. They had about the same effect. Unless you hit them with the tracks, or where the turret set down on the body.

SA: Did you feel the amount of armor that was used on the was adequate or was..

GD: No it wasn't adequate, it was what they were shooting at us. Had it been that I don't think that the first shell that hit us would have blown a hole through the front plate. I, and here again, are not sure, but I think the steel on the fronts was three-quarter inch thick. The steel on the bottom was, I don't know if it was quarter or half, but it was awful thin. So if you run over a mine you just about bought the farm. Because it would blow up through.

SA: Describe some of the things that you would take, or what the men would do in order to make their tanks more survivable against shells, and other types of hazards.

GD: Well, because of, the, and like I stated before, because of the fact that we were getting so many tanks knocked out just by hitting the front slopplate. We used to take an angle iron and weld it where the housing goes around, we'd strap it where the turn is, and then we'd fill sandbags, we'd take bags full of sand and lay them on it, up the front slopplate. And the problem with us, by the time we got knocked out, we had gotten orders to move out before we had ours finished and we only had sandbags up half way. And there shell hit right over the top the last bag we had, so had, it could have worked either way. Had we had our sandbags clear up and the knock a hole in there we may have been able to fire more rounds and gets out and maybe really kill some of them. As it turned out they hit us twice and of course we were set on fire the first one, the first one set us on fire, and so they just, we was like

a sitting duck. We was looking for a machine gun and I often visualize myself being in the position they were in. Man we were like sitting ducks, so hold up there in the middle of the road, stopped dead. You could be like that on the range shooting at a stationary target, you can't miss. I never had the opportunity again like that.

SA: So much for playing an offensive role (laughing). After, about how long was it before that you were out into a new tank after that?

GD: I don't know if it was the next day or the end of that week.

SA: Did they normally just give you a new tank or did they drag out some one that had been knocked before and repaired?

GD: No, it was a new tank or one that hadn't been knocked out.

SA: With a totally new crew or?

GD: Yes, down at the, when we went down to Cole Mar they Lt. who was our tank commander at that time got killed and so did our gunner Pee-wee got killed down there.

SA: Is there other aspects of life at war, when your out in the field, on your combat conditions, what did you normally eat during the day?

GD: We were pretty fortunate eating at times. We ate what they called tin and ring ring rations, and we had the facilities to haul around food on the back of the tank. We would stop at farmhouses and get anything, vegetables, and the tin and rings used to come with cans of bacon, cheese, and all that kind of stuff. We would save a lot of this stuff, and then every once in a while we would whip up a stew. Just threw all this stuff in a pot and cook it up and have a big stew. We ate a lot of sea rations, which was your crackers, it wasn't first class but we survived.

SA: Now is that what you ate all day or did any support section from your battalion provide you with a hot meal?

GD: Yeah, we used to get sometimes, well we got hot meals when we weren't out in action. We would get a hot meal then. (inaudible)

SA: Now you were talking about stopping, picking up fresh fruit and vegetables from farmhouses and such, was this friendly peasants or?

GD: Yes, yes it was.

SA: Now how about hygiene in general?

GD: Now when we were out in the field, there wasn't any (laughing). I have spent, let's

see I think the most was like about eight days in a tank, you don't bathe, you don't change clothes, and in that close quarters maybe it got rank at first but you got used to it after a while. It didn't bother you to be all in one area, no you didn't have any showers to go to.

SA: One thing I've noted with my work with the National Guard is that wherever our tanks go usually a port-a-potty's not far behind. What kind of toilet facilities did they have for?

GD: A bush (laughing).

SA: Is that the famous cat bear bush?

GD: Yeah, then there's use in a big wide area, then you had split trench. You used that whenever you could find a place to hide behind.

SA: Is there any sustained action of this hygiene that could be relatively poor?

GD: Nonexistent really.

SA: Nonexistent?

GD: Yes.

SA: You talked about being in Cole Mar, any other things happen, further things happen while you were there? With your new tank crew?

GD: No, not really, like I said they only real never racking was when we had to truck ammunition into a town we were going to attack the next day. And your trying to unload ammunition in the center of this town and not make any noise, and that's pretty hard to do. Unload ammunition from a tank.

SA: Ok so there you transferred back to trucks to get this ammunition in?

GD: Yeah, we hauled it in, on four bys they called them, two and a half ton trucks I think we had. We would go into a town unload and got the heck out of there.

SA: When you were on your tank did you move up at all in positions or did you just? Ok, you were saying throughout the war you basically served as assistant driver?

GD: Yes, I left the tank company, and went to a hospital and served there, and after that I,

they sent me to a truck outfit, we were stationed in Cherburg, France and we hauled tanks and engineer's heavy equipment. And we would haul into the Ham, Frankfurt, Germany. We never drove by convey, these trucks, there were two guys assigned to a truck, and we had a, it looked like a house on the back end

of them, our top speed was about thirty mile per hour. Because of them being so slow, and the loads we were hauling we never drove convoy. Maybe just one or two trucks would go by themselves. And go pick up a tank, and we would leave our company there, in Cherburg, France and go pick up a tank and head for like I said maybe Ham, of Frankfurt and it would take us two or three weeks to make the trip and come back. We would be at the company for a couple days and go get another one. Of course at that time, it was, the war in Europe was coming to a close and they started deploying the troops back through the Pacific. We then hauled troops from these various camps, I'm not sure you've heard of them, Camp Lucky Stripe, Camp Philip Morris, and all those to the docks to be transported back either to the states or through the states and to the Pacific.

SA: Going back, after you were, the Germans were beaten in Cole Mar where did you go from there?

GD: I left there and went to the hospital, and then I never went back to France again.

SA: Ok, so after that action you were out of the tank company?

GD: Yes.

SA: Any other, let's see, you were, the trucks that you were on were I guess what flat beds?

GD: No, no we they were hauling tanks, no they were it was a diamond-t cab over hurcules diesel, and we had a totally steel trailer that we loaded the tank on.

SA: Oh, ok I see, ok I was trying to picture you know just how this how concoction looked like.

GD: I was telling you we had, I think there was, twelve forward gears and three reverses. Some of those hills you had to, we were going so slow that, like say I was sitting in the other chair the other guy was driving, I would get out while he's driving, we were going that slow, and check the load, make sure the chains were still all right, and come around and get up in his side, and check the chains that way, and he would never stop.

SA: Then on, describe things you did up until, I guess VE-Day in Europe.

GD: The day, my buddy and I had driven tank in German, we were coming back through Poland, and we stopped at a U.S.O. to get washed up and get something to eat. We were sitting there drinking coffee, and eating donuts, I forget what it was, and one of the girls that worked there came over and asked us if we heard the news. We asked her what she was talking about, and she said the Germans surrendered. That's when we heard it, and our buddies said let's head for home. We went out and got in the truck and headed back to Cherburg. Of course, at that

point they didn't need us for a long time, so they put us in another truck, I think, which was semis, and we started picking up these guys, that were being shipped back home from these various camps. They were sending guys back home then on the point system, depending on how many points you had, how soon you left Europe for home. I don't remember what points I had, but when my turn came up, then I went. We left Lahard, France I think it was Christmas Eve, of 45'. We landed at Stanton Island, New York on January the fifth, and on January 10 I headed my little ruptured butt and my papers and I was ready to go home. When we left, that was, when we left Laharve, France was when the aircraft carrier, Wasp, left England, we got along side of them in New York, and the storm, there was a storm come up when we left, they got the worst of it. It was so bad it blew steel screens off the flight deck of the Wasp. We came home on a victory ship, called the Lehigh Victory. We were not on it very long until we rechristinaed it, Leap High, because everything was out of the water more than it was in the water. It was quite a ride.

SA: One thing I didn't mention earlier, you out in the field, spending a better part of the day in doing what one does during work time, during those odd moments, I guess when you had free time, what did you do for fun?

GD: There was no fun, we were on guard all the time, and it was a constant, especially when you were out there. You had to be on your guard all the time. When we were back away from the front we could go into town, this is one of the things I, one of the reason I said I never envied anybody that served in the Pacific, maybe this is the wrong attitude to take but, at least we had a place a town to go to that was half decent. If they hadn't been blown up by now. When we were going up through up through France, we went through Singlo, now that city was leveled, I mean it was completely leveled, but in Belgium, Brussels, (inaudible) most of those places were, Paris was never touched, in Italy Rome was declared an open city, there was no fighting in Rome and it was just, when we left Angio, and went into Rome, it was like going into a different world, and it was just like walking into a city back here in the States. Of course, it was how we were, there was nothing shut up.

SA: When you had free time what did GI's do for fun?

GD: Drink, (laughing) that was about the only thing we could do.

SA: No one took tours of museums huh?

GD: No, I didn't anyhow. Well, when I was in Italy I went to the Coliseum, I did go to see that which was quite a sight. Other than that I didn't do any sightseeing. I really never had that much time off. I had the opportunity, at one time, to take a leave and go to England, from over in France. I turned it down, I said when I leave here I want to go home, I don't want to go to England. So I never got my leave and I never went to England. I wasn't interested in England, there was nothing there I wanted to see. I do, might be interesting, when I was in a truck

outfit, I was scheduled to go on guard duty, and we had two chateaus, and I was in the one with the company CP, I was on the third floor, and they offshore day came up, I was getting ready to go on guard duty, and he said guess that your wanted on the phone. Even though he was a sergeant I said get the hell out of here. Nobody would ever call me, he said hey I'm serious. I thought he was just pulling my leg, and he said you wanted on the phone, so I, he sounded real serious, so I started downstairs with him, and I said who is it? He said I don't know, but it's sounds like a battalion commander, what did you do? And I said nothing, I don't think so. So anyhow, I'm all shook up, I go down to the office and pick up the phone, and I said this is Desmett speaking, the guy on the other end said this is Desmett too. It was my brother who was with the 17th Airborne Division. He had got a pass, and I said where in the hell are you? He told me he was at the Railroad Station, I said I'll be right down, and I said no I have to go on guard duty. (laughing) Sergeant said we'll be there to pick him up, so my brother and another guy's brother came at the same time. So the next morning Sgt., First Sgt., called us down to the boiler room, and he said to my brother and this other guy's brother, how long do you guys got? And they said three days. He gave us a trip ticket for a jeep, and said I don't want to see you guys for three days, and believe me he didn't. (laughing) We drove all over the place and had a good time, but it was funny to meet you r brother, you know it is a small world after all. I had, the last thing in my mind was meeting him over there. We had a good visit, the next I saw him was when we got home.

SA: Any other engagements I should mention besides the one where your tank was blown out?

GD: No, not really, like I said when we were going up through Southern France it was a steady go. Day hell, day long, because they were, the Germans, were getting out out of there, they were moving, and we'd hit a pocket and how many who knows and we'd fire a few rounds and keep going, nobody, I don't think anybody ever shot back. It was a no real major to do down there, other than the Cole Mar Pocket, now this was at the time of the Bulge, the Battle of the Bulge, and being the only tanks with this division, and the only, the last American outfit in Southern France, is the only thing kept them form taking us. Because had he taken us than this infantry division would have had no armor at all for their protection. That's the only that saved us from going with Batton. Because anything that had wheels he was taking at that time. I think that's the only thing that saved us from really, and by saying saved us, I really, really mean that. That was awful.

SA: Primarily the mission of your unit at this time was, since Normandy Invasion had already taken place basically to mop up enemy infantry wherever they may be.

GD: Yeah, see we went through Southern France, and like I said, we went in there on D plus eighteen I think, something like that. When we got off the plane, they flew us right to the front you might say, because when you got off the plane you could here the firing. They took us to the outfit, and you can erase this off the tape if you want to, but they took us in the company commander interviewed us and after I was

interviewed I went back outside and some of the guys, if you were there two days you had no pans you know, and they asked me what I was and I told them Assistant Driver and bow-gunner and they started laughing, and they said they're expendable as shit paper. (laughing) So I felt pretty good right then. (laughing) You know this is a good omen. Yeah, welcome to the crew. They were almost right.

SA: Thinking of all the things we discussed, anything else you would like to mention? About your service during the war? And you don't have to censor anything.

GD: Well, there was a Christmas that I will never forget. This is when we were down in Cole Mar, we were in, it was like a wine factory, and these people lived in it. They had their vats down in the basement, and we had rolled out our bunks under it. This guy had, I don't know if it was two or three daughters, I think it was two daughters, and I don't remember their ages. They were probably in their teens. Now this was at Christmas time, and we always, like I told you before, we had these rations and we candy bars, and all kind of stuff. So the village people, the kids and, especially the kids and the woman, had come there and were staying in the basement of this wine factory, I guess that's what you call it. And these girls decided to have a Christmas party this month. So they got us, we got all of our every candy and anything we could scrounge off the tank, we took them in, and there was something like forty, forty-six kids. So they had paper sacks and we split up everything and filled these bags with them. That night we were down in the basement, and we gave all the kids a bag, and sang Christmas Carols, and that was one time I was really homesick, I had to get out of there. I had to go outside by myself. It made you feel good to make them feel good. Imagine it was a long time since they had anything sweet. It made you feel good to help them, even though it was a small way.

SA: It must feel good, you mentioned during the time that you served did your unit, any that you served with have any contact with Allied Troops or these people that you knew about but you never saw them?

GD: Not that I know of no.

SA: Never saw any of the British or the French?

GD: A few French, yeah we saw some of them. Now over in Italy I saw, when we were hauling ammunition to the beachhead, this one outfit came in, they were from Africa I believe. Boy there were big guys, and they had their wives with them. Yeah, they wore it wasn't a standard uniform it was like a robe, you know whatever wraparound jobbies. I had hated to meet them in a dark alley.

SA: Now these were I guess British Colonial troops?

GD: I think they were yes.

SA: Now what was the attitude of the American soldiers toward these various allies? Did you feel certain guys weren't doing their part or?

GD: Well I think we had a tendency to (inaudible). One thing we used to say, even about the British, we used to say there would always be an England as long as there was a United States. They didn't appreciate that too much (laughing). They probably didn't like us anymore that we like some of them.

SA: How about the pre-French?

GD: We didn't have too much contact with them, they were pretty much a solitary, they didn't advertise their existence so to speak. It was always more like a cloak and dagger really, not out in the open.

SA: They were more engaged in guerrilla warfare?

GD: Yes, yes more of that type of thing. Sneak in at night and get them, and get back out of there. Jump off a bridge or something like that.

SA: Anything else you would like to talk about?

GD: Not that I can think of really.

SA: Ok one thing I should have asked at the very beginning, I think I always ask a little bit about your background, you know where you were born, your parents, and how many brothers and sisters you had, what you were doing previous to the war?

GD: Well I was born in a little town in McCartney, Pennsylvania. I think there was about twenty-five families and five coal tipples made up the town. I went to nine grades in school, grade school we had one teacher for all eight grades, and in order to get into high school you had to take a counting test to see if you were eligible to go high school, and I went to the ninth grade. I was one of those guys that was, to this day I've never finished a sorry thing in my life, that I didn't get an education. I quit and I wasn't quite sixteen at the time, and I went to my sister's house and was there for two days and my dad came. He said are you going to school? And I said no, then he said your going to work. So he took me in the coal mines, talking about the deep mines, not a strip one. Hard coal there reached twenty-six inches high. That's where I was working when I went to the service, the coal mines. When I got out of the service I went back into the coal mines again, worked for awhile, and had a few places cave in on me, and it kind of scared me out. I went from there, I worked for North American Re Factories a brick yard in Curwensville, Pennsylvania. Worked there for seven, eight years, something like that. Got laid off, at that time I belonged to the volunteer fire company, which I was made President of one year. And a gentlemen came in one day and asked me if I was working. And I told him no, he wanted to know if I would like to learn the mason trade, I said I would like to learn anything. So I went to work with him, and what little bit I know about mason work

I learned off of him, stonemason, and laying brick and rock. In 57' a job like that, we wasn't making too much money, it was just the two of us, and I had a family to raise, and of course when we didn't have work I couldn't sign up for Social Security cause we wasn't paying any. I had a brother that lived in Akron, and I came out here, and got a job working for Wellman Engineering Company in Akron. I worked there eleven years and they closed that down, and moved back to Cleveland. I had an opportunity to go with them but I wouldn't take it. Then I worked for a small fab shop here in Ravenna, and then I got a job started in 70' at General Motors. I have three sisters and four brothers, there is eight of us on our family.

SA: Ok, anything you would like to say about your experience during World War II?

GD: The only thing I can say was, I pray to God I never have to go through it again, I wouldn't want to go through it again, but I would take a million dollars for my experiences. I met a lot of nice guys, and as a general rule I served with, matter of fact I came home with a guy from Massachusetts, and every year at Christmas time we exchange Christmas cards and letters, and photographs, and so but that's the only one of the guys I've really been in touched with. I've been trying to get a hold of a guy from Wisconsin that came home with us at the same time, but I've never been fortunate enough to find out if he's still living matter of fact, or where he's at, or anything about him. Maybe someday I will, there is a few guys, I would like to make a trip back to some of the places that I've been to, to see what it is like now, except after that I have no desire to go back, because.. I would like to, one place in particular I would like to go to again is Amsel. I remember hauling the first body into that cemetery. I remember leaving there when as far as you could see was whit crosses. I would like to go back and see them. This was a twin city by the way. It was Amsel and Tunic together. Most of the other places, I wouldn't mind going back to Belgium again. My father was born in Belgium and I think he was either four or five when they come to this country. I was in Antwerp they had some real nice people over there, but like I say this was war. Brussels and Antwerp were cities like you see at home. It made things more bearable so to speak, when you did get a chance it wouldn't seem like you were out in the wilderness. It was more like some place back in the States. So it did take some of the pressure off.

SA: Thank you

GD: It has been a pleasure.

SA: Well you were mentioning at one time you were offered a purple heart?

GD: Yes, This is when we had the tank shelled out from under me. They took us back to the medics and I had this cut on the back of my neck, and he asked me if I wanted the Purple Heart. And I said hell no! The reason being that I didn't feel like I deserved it, because I saw so many guys that were literally blown apart. I don't mean killed, their arms, legs, that got the same medal, the Purple Heart. I would have felt guilty, I don't deserve the same medal that this guy got for a scratch on

my neck when he gave his arm or leg or both of them for the same medal. I couldn't do that. And like I said we got out on the point system and if you got a purple heart that was five points sooner that you were going to come home. Maybe it meant a month quicker on getting out of Europe. Had I known that, would I have accepted it? I don't think so, but I like to say maybe I would have. I don't think that would have changed my opinion of it. I don't feel even to this day that I deserved the Purple Heart.