YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War 2--Combat Veterans

Personal Experience

O.H. 987

WILLIAM H. SHANK

Interviewed

by

Mark Dittmer

on

December 3, 1978

WILLIAM SHANK

William H. Shank Jr. was born to Mr. and Mrs. William H. and Grace Shank on October 23, 1916, in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. He was raised in Warren, Ohio and graduated during the height of the Great Depression from Warren G. Harding H.S., in Warren, Ohio, in 1934. After graduation, Shank considered himself lucky to have a position as a messenger boy for the postal telegraph in Warren and Youngstown. From 1936-37, Shank left the area to work at the Pennsylvania Hotel in New York City, but returned to Warren in 1938 to take a position as a Produce Manager for the A & P Supermarket.

In March of 1942, Shank was drafted into the U.S. Army. During World War II, he served in the 101st Airborne Division, as a radio communications operator and paratrooper. The 101st Division was one of the first divisions to land in the invasion of Normandy.

After the war, Shank returned to Warren, to take a position with the Burbank Van Sorage Co., from 1946 to the present. He and his wife, Jean, still reside in Warren and are the parents of four children; Gary, Timothy, Patricia, and Betsy Shank. Mr. Shank takes an active interest in Warren community affairs and for years has served as City Safety Director. In 1975, he was awarded Man of the Year in Warren, Ohio. He belongs to various

social affiliations, which include the Masons, Elks, VFW American Legion, BSA, Rotary, and the Children's Rehabilitation Center. Shank has a keen interest in contact sports and politics. He will run for Warren City mayor in 1979 on the Republican ticket.

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INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM H. SHANK

INTERVIEWER: Mark Dittmer

SUBJECT: paratrooping, radio communication, 101st Airborne Division, Normandy, background prior to the war, training period, missions

DATE: December 3, 1978

D: This is an interview with Mr. William Shank for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the World War II Combat Veterans Project, by Mark Dittmer, in Warren, Ohio, on December 3, 1987, at 2:45 p.m.

Okay, the first thing I'd like you to do, Mr. Shank, is more or less try and place yourself prior to 1941. More or less, give me an explanation of what you were doing at this time. [Tell me] what you thought of the war in Europe prior to United States' involvement.

S: I graduated from high school in 1934 in what was not the height, but certainly the last stages of, the Depression, the so-called Great Depression. After I graduated, I went to work for the postal telegraph as a messenger boy, which was a great job to have in those days. I worked there for some time and then went to Youngstown as an operator. I left the telegraph office and went to New York in 1936 or 1937, somewhere around in there. I worked at the Pennsylvania Hotel as an elevator operator. I came back to Warren and was working at the A & P Supermarket, which was on Elm Road, as a produce assistant, a produce manager. I had been in several stores.

I was always interested in current events pretty much. Some of the high times of that particular time was talking to a friend of mine, Charles Sidels. We spent many hours in discussion of the pros and the cons of whether or not we were going to get involved in the conflict which was going on in Europe at that time. For some reason, I don't remember what my feeling was at that time, except that we would eventually have to [be involved]. This, of course, was prior to Pearl Harbor. I thought, in some way, we would be involved in the war, and that we would all be called on to serve. I suppose the feelings at that time were one of "Let go," gung ho, patriotism waiting to be called perhaps, but [we were] still willing and anxious to get going.

D: Let's more or less go into the war now. What were you doing on December 7, [1941].

S: December 7 was Pearl harbor Day. When I heard the news of Pearl Harbor, I was with my father, who had been widowed some time before. We were having dinner at a restaurant down on High Street, in Warren. They had interrupted a program--I forgot what that program was--to bring the news that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I guess my feeling then, like anyone else's was, "What in Heaven's name is a little country like Japan doing attacking our great forces and our big Navy and all that kind of thing?" My initial reaction was that it was a ludicrous kind of a situation, that this country [Japan] would dare to do anything to the United States of that kind.

D: Okay. From that standpoint, were you called up immediately?

S: No. See, that was 1941. It was not until March of 1942 that I entered the service.

D: Can you recall anything of what the area was doing to build up for the war?

S: No. I know we were all glued to the radio sets in those days when President Roosevelt was making his Fireside Chats. I guess some of my contemporaries at the time. . . . Most of our conversation revolved around whether we were going to enlist or whether we should wait to be drafted. We had discussions of which was the best kind of service to get into, not whether to go into the service or not, but which service to go into. Some of my friends of course, many of them volunteered for one reason or another. Others, because of work commitments or whatever they happened to be, waited to be drafted. I had chosen to wait to be drafted.

D: Okay. When you were drafted, what branch did you go into? Can you recall the day you were called up?

S: It was in March. I just can't remember the exact day. I was drafted into the Army and was ordered, of course, to report down to the armory, down here on High Street. Then, we were taken up to Lake Erie. We were taken to Lake Erie someplace for outfitting, and so on, at our first camp, before we were assigned to another camp. Because of having been drafted and going into the Army, I was sorry that I hadn't. . . . I was not sorry, but maybe I had some regrets that I did not volunteer to go into the Air Force. The Air Force, of course, was more glamorous than the slogging foot soldier ever would have been.

D: Okay. What was the training period like, and what camps did you go to?

S: I can't remember the name of the camp in Cleveland. Everybody [there] went from this area. That one, of course, was just the induction type station where you got the clothing and so on. We were sent from there to a camp in Louisiana, called Camp Clayburn, and we were assigned into what was the 82nd Infantry Division. I recall the very miserable, long train ride going down to the camp and getting set up and getting your living equipment. We lived in tents there. The floors were wooden, of course, with the outside shell being canvas. [They were] canvas tents.

D: Well, what were your likes and dislikes about the camp? Can you recall some incidents?

S: The area eventually became kind of a miserable one, with the mud and that kind of thing after severe rains. Generally, I didn't have any great many dislikes. The food was good. I had very few dislikes.

D: Talking about the training period, can you recall what a typical day was like during this?

S: Well, after the basic training, the physical conditioning which really had to do more with learning how to march, [do] right flanks and left flanks, and moving bodies of men somewhere. After that initial training, I was assigned to the signal corp, which meant our job was communications. I was assigned as a line man to lay telephone lines. So, the first thing we had to do was to learn how to climb telephone poles with the gas and equipment of that kind on, and learn about telephone equipment. A typical day would be to, of course, have reveille and our breakfast. Usually, the first thing, of course, was conditioning. Then, we would

have about an hour of classroom work or field work on the equipment itself, how it is operated and so on. Then, we'd go into the training area and climb up and down the telephone poles and learn how to do that kind of thing. Afternoon was pretty much the same situation, we head back to the tents, had our evening chow, then go down to the PX and sit around and "BS."

D: Now, you did most of this training down in. . . .

S: This was down in Camp Clayburn, Louisiana. That was my initial start.

D: Okay. And from there, where did you go?

S: I mentioned to you initially that I was in the 82nd Airborne Division. In our company, we had platoons. Like I told you, we were learning how to string wire and lay telephone lines. The other was the radio platoon. I wanted to get into the radio platoon and learn how to operate radios, Morse Code, and that kind of thing. So, I got transferred into that platoon. After we had started training on the radios, the daily schedule would be anywhere from three to four hours a day just sitting in a classroom with headphones copying Morse Code, learning how to copy code, and sending radio messages. And about that time, [it] was when the Government decided on the parachute divisions. So, as you know, the 82nd Airborne was split in two. They took the 82nd Airborne Division and the 101st Airborne Division. Some of us stayed in the 82nd, and some of us were transferred to the 101st Airborne Division. At that point, our training was about the same, only . . . except, in addition to that training, of course, we had other training. I was in a glider batallion. I had training on gliders and that kind of thing. So, from Camp Clayburn, then, we went to Fort Bragg and had additional training there. The Fort Bragg area was like Maxton Air Force Base for our glider training.

D: What do you mean by glider training?

S: These were gliders that were hauled back of the old work horse of the Air Force and of our division, which was the C-47 airplane. A glider held, I suppose, about a total of twenty men. They could handle jeeps and artillery and that kind of equipment. It was as much training for us as it was for the pilots of the gliders, as well as the pilots of the aircraft that pulled the gliders. So, we rode the gliders around, not long. We probably circled the field. The pilots practiced in releasing the glider from the tow line, then landing. Our job was to get out of the glider as quickly as possible with equipment [on], and set for simulated combat positions and that kind of thing.

D: Did you learn to jump at this time?

S: No, I was just in the glider training, and I got sick every dog-gone time we went up in those gliders. Of course, you can understand, if you've flown at all . . . on the glider that's hauled in back of a C-47, the air stream was constantly going up and down or sideways or something like that. It was never straight, level flying. A lot of guys got sick. I got sick every time I went up in one.

D: Was it just air pressure?

S: Just air sickness, yes. I tried everything that they told you [to do] to keep from getting sick, but I always did. After I vomited, it felt pretty good. You learn to do your job. From Fort Bragg, we went to England.

D: And, were you shipped over by ship, or. . . ?

S: Yes, we went by ship. It was the SS Strathenaver.

D: Did you have any trouble getting over there?

S: Oh yes, we had all kinds of trouble getting over there. The Strathenaver was a British boat, a passenger ship. I can't remember the number of troops that were on it, but like all troop ships at that time, they were jammed. We left New York in a convoy.

D: Do you remember the date?

S: No, not exactly. It was around September 7. It was right after, I think, Labor Day.

D: This is in 1943?

S: 1943, yes.

D: Okay.

S: The route that this convoy was going, was up toward Newfoundland, in that area. That was a pretty common route for convoys at the time, but our ship developed trouble, had to leave the convoy, and go into St. John's, Newfoundland. And so, when we left the convoy, because I was a radio operator, I had a real comfortable time on the boat, because we helped the Navy people with detection and standing watch and that kind of thing. We had better food, because we had the Navy food, and some better quarters.

I remember leaving that convoy. We had one escort which was a British Corvette escort, escort us up into St. John's, Newfoundland. In those days, that place was called Torpedo Alley, because they sunk a lot of ships off of St. John's, Newfoundland. They were a little concerned until we got into St. John's for repairs.

We were there about ten days, I think. [We] had to stay on the ship. We got off once a day to exercise through the town. It was a bleak area, as I recall, and there was a base up in Newfoundland, someplace. I've forgotten what the name of it was, but we weren't near that base. We just hiked up the mountains and back down on the boat in the crowded conditions. So everybody spent their time griping, playing cards, talking, reading, anything to wile away the hours.

So finally, the boat was repaired, and we started out of the harbor. Going out of the harbor, the boat scraped bottom and had to go back in for another ten days. Well, we were fit to be tied. I was going to say mutinous almost, but it was not that bad. So, another ten days. . . .

After that, the boat came out, [and we] went back to Halifax. We got off of that boat [and] onto another ship, which was a United States ship. [We] joined another convoy and finally got across the Atlantic. From the time my wife last heard from me about leaving until I was able to write to her, was a little over thirty days in the transit from going across the ocean. So, she was a little concerned in knowing what happened.

But, we had no close incidents. We saw submarines while we were going over, enemy subs and so on, but none had ever attacked our convoy. Although there were always kinds of rumors and stories, "We were attacked last night, and three ships were sunk in the convoy."

D: So, you more or less got to Britain during the high point of the fire bombing and all this?

S: No, [it was] a little bit before the buzz bombs [that] you're thinking about. I was training in England while the buzz bombs started coming. It was in England where I went to jump school. I had reasons for going to parachute school. I don't know if it had any historical value, but it was a personal kind of thing. At this time, I had advanced. I was Master Sergeant, and I had my own platoon. In the platoon, I had paratroopers, and I also had glidermen, which I was. Well, in those days when they were training paratroopers, they taught them that they had no peer. A paratrooper, once

he was a paratrooper, why, nobody was any better than he was. He was the greatest guy on earth. You could tell by their dress and their walk and all that kind of thing. So, I was having a little discipline problem, even though I had the rank. Guys would be giving orders--training orders of course--to paratroopers. They would say, "Well, what do you know? You never jumped out of an airplane." So, I said, "I'll fix that," and I went to parachute school.

D: Where was this located in Britain?

S: We were in a place called Newbury Burks, which was about twenty miles outside of London. I had to travel from there to go to parachute school. I've forgotten where that was exactly, where the parachute school was located. It wasn't too far away. The training wasn't nearly what it was in the States, of course. We just learned how to jump out of an aircraft and to take our five jumps. But everyone said, "You've got to be out of your mind to go to parachute school now, because we're going to have an invasion coming up." Maybe so, but it turned out what happened in the invasion, that the smartest thing was to be out of the gliders, because the casualty was so high in the gliders compared to the paratroopers.

D: Well, I've never jumped or anything, but what was it like to jump for the first time?

S: Well, that we're now thinking about jumping out of an aircraft; when I'm flying someplace on business, it's difficult to believe that I ever jumped out of one. In war times, you get conditioned to these things, a lot of times. That's the way it is. Yes, "That's the mission," or "That's what I'm doing. That's what I'm supposed to do, and it wasn't too bad." The easiest jump in the world is the first jump, because you don't know what's coming. You have five practice jumps before you're qualified. After the first jump, then you start thinking of all the things that could happen. You think about the chute not opening. Maybe on the first jump, the only thing you think about is the chute not opening, but on the others, you think about getting tangled up in the shroud lines, or breaking your leg when you hit the ground. You think about the wind taking you to the tail of the aircraft, any number of things that you start thinking about could happen. But, the first jump was the easiest jump. It's a great feeling. Of course, I often wish that I had an opportunity to jump from greater heights like the sport parachutists do today, because we were trained to jump from about fifteen hundred to two thousand feet. The object, of course, of a paratrooper, was to get as many people on the ground as close together as possible, so

the higher up you jumped, the more scattered the jumpers would be when they landed. So, we jumped from anywhere from fifteen to eighteen hundred feet most of the time. So, you don't have a heck of a lot of time to admire the scenery as you're coming down, but it's a great experience, and I've enjoyed those quiet jumps when they weren't combat jumps.

D: When did your unit leave for mainland Europe? Was this during the D-Day?

S: Oh, yes.

D: Well, you might as well go into a good documentary on that. (laughter)

S: We left England on June 5, actually. D-Day was the morning of June 6, as you know. I remember one incident at the airport, as we were getting into the airplanes. . . . General Eisenhower came around to our particular unit. Of course, he visited all of them--not all of them--but, many of them. I was lucky that he came to our plane. We all, of course, stood at attention as he came down the line of us, and I can remember his words to me. He said, "Where are you from?"--nothing unusual certainly, but he said, "Where are you from, soldier?" I said, "From Ohio, Sir." And he said, "How do you feel? Are you scared?" And, I said, "Yes, Sir." He said, "So are we."

I can't remember the take off time, but I know I landed in France at 1:30 in the morning on June 6.

D: So, you jumped at night?

S: [We] jumped at night, yes.

D: By this time, had the whole American fleet flown over to England?

S: No, the only thing that was ahead of us was the pathfinders. Now, the pathfinders were those who marked out the airfields and so on. Then, in our particular division, of course, we had the front line troops. That's the guys, the batallions who fought in the front lines. As far as the fighting was concerned, their job was that of doughboy or rifleman or whatever they happened to be. Our section had to do with these people, so we were not the first wave in. I don't know. I think the pathfinders got there [at] about 11:00 or something like that, and maybe some of these other troops. . . . About the same time, of course, there were paratroopers landing all over the area.

D: Did you feel more comfortable jumping at night or during the day?

S: Well, I had never had a night jump at that time. There were a lot of concerns. We were concerned about jumping at night. We were concerned about the enemy. We were concerned about fire. We were concerned after we were on the ground and all the rest of it. But, it was one of the most beautiful jumps I had. We were all very much uptight of course, in the aircraft. And, as we got near France, the flack started to come up many of the . . . at least in our flight, or at least our pilot--whether it was because they had no experience in flack--they started to climb. Also, it broke formation, so we were scattered all over France; the whole 101st, as well as the 82nd, which probably helped us in a way. But, I landed no where near where I was supposed to. When I jumped, my aircraft was climbing instead of going on a level flight. . . . I tumbled onto another guy ahead of me, who was a major. I tumbled onto his chute. I can remember thinking, "I'm on top of his chute. His chute is open. What's my chute going to do? Is it going to open or not?" I rolled down over the side of his chute, and finally I felt the tug and mine opened. I said it was a beautiful jump, because if you can imagine a wild fireworks display all over a large area with you looking down on it from above, why, you could understand the beauty.

D: Well, the Germans knew you were coming in?

S: Well, the aircraft was there. Looking down, it was hard to realize that those tracer bullets or tracer light that we could see coming up, were bullets and could kill you. But, seeing those tracers going all over the sky and the big guns that were also firing, why, it was kind of a thrilling sight in a sense. It was hard to realize that these things were there to kill you.

D: How much equipment were you carrying?

S: Oh, Lord. I forgot what the weight of the paratrooper is, but I had a backpack on, which had rations enough for five days. I had a map case, a forty-five revolver, a carbine, gas mask, a knife strapped to my boots, [and a] helmet. I guess that was about all I had, which was enough. Of course, we were jumping with M-1 rifles, but we had carbines at the time.

D: Okay. Now, when you landed, was it hard to get organized?

S: Yes. We never did get organized, really. If you remember any of the history of that time, one of the signals that we had was the little cricket that we used. It was just a metal thing that kids had for years, which was to signal that we were friendly. I landed in an apple orchard with my chute caught on an apple tree, part way up. But, it was a small tree, so I was able to get out fairly easily and get on the ground. Seemingly, no one was near me anyplace. I was in this orchard all by myself. It was quiet. All you could hear were the planes overhead and some of the firing. Then, I heard something, and I cricked my cricket or snapped my cricket, and there was a snap back, so at least there were two of us. But, it was no one I knew. He was from another plane, and we weren't supposed to be there together at all. We were supposed to have our own group which was together. So, we tried to determine where we were from using our flashlight and our maps. We couldn't. We just started walking, and pretty soon, we ran into another fellow, and another fellow, and pretty soon, within an hour and a half, I suppose, we had fifteen or twenty guys, all of whom were from different units scattered from all over.

I was the highest ranking one for a while and was in charge. Pretty soon, there was a major we picked up someplace along the line, and he got in charge. Finally, there was a lieutenant colonel from someplace, and he was in charge. So now, our big objective was to find out where we were, and try to make our way to the places we were supposed to be. Now, our assignment at that time was to land not too far inland really, and our division was to secure several of the causeways that were coming from the beach back onto land, so that the next morning they would have those secured when they brought the equipment in on D-Day. As it turned out, we didn't get back there for five days, we were so far inland.

D: When you got back to your unit after the five days, what specific missions were you supposed to be going into at this time? Were you well aware of what was going on?

S: We were [aware], because we were the center of communications for the division. My job was division radio officer at this time, so I was responsible for radio communications for the 101st Airborne Division, from there down and from there back. We had developed in our training period, a large SCR-199, which was a radio that could establish from our division, communications back to England without relaying them through the ships. This was portable, and we designed it so it could be landed by glider. We had three of them that were to land by glider that night. Two of them cracked

up, and we finally had one. We were supposed to give the message back to S.H.A.E.F. Headquarters about the landing and how we were doing. So, that was our mission, to establish communications.

When I got back to my unit, the captain was just putting in a report for me being missing in action. Somebody else already had my job. As I said, I was a Master Sergeant. So, he had been sergeant, and I thought he was disappointed that I got back all right. From then on, our job was to keep the communications ready for the division, going as they were coming in and securing the beachhead the next morning. That night, of course, the paratroopers. . . . But, a lot of the troops, as you know, came in the next day, D-Day.

D: Okay, from that point in Normandy, where did you move into?

S: From that point in Normandy, we moved up the Carentan Peninsula, to Carentan. That was where we were stationed first. [We moved in] just short moves really, because there weren't any breakouts at that time. And, once the headquarters were pretty much set, as far as this invasion was concerned, our job was just to maintain those communications and control the lines. We were only there [for] about three weeks, I think, and then they took us back to England to prepare for the next mission. We were paratroopers, and we were supposed to secure things ahead of them. Once those were established, we would jump and so on. Our aircraft was one of those. . . . Well, of course, the aircraft was back in England, but we went back to England to prepare for the next mission. So altogether, we were in France at that time for about three weeks, I think.

D: After that point, did the Germans stop hitting Britain and more or less concentrate on France, by that point?

S: No. Well of course, they were pretty dog-gone busy once the invasion had gone. But prior to D-Day, I had watched the buzz bombs coming to London and watch them land, which was not a real frightening thing. You could hear them coming, and you could see them at quite a distance. They were relatively slow things, and as long as you could hear them, you were safe, because they didn't come down until the motor turned off. As long as they were motor-ran, we knew they were flying. When the motor turned off, then they had to come down. So, as long as you could hear them . . . I remember watching them come toward me standing in Trafalar Square, in London. Another fellow and I, we were watching them come over, and none ever got near to where we were. They all went on the outskirts of

London. But, back in England then, we were relatively free of night bombing after the troops landed on the coast as I recall, or daylight bombing, either one. By that time, the RAF [Royal Air Force] had already pretty well broken the back of the Luftwaffe.

D: Back in England, what were you preparing for after the invasion?

S: Well, of course, we didn't know it at the time, [but] we were given many code names for things that we were preparing for. Now, when we established communications and preparing the communications, which was my main job: you had a code name for what the operation would be, and you changed code names for the people involved, the divisions and their headquarters and different corps. Then, you had to set up radio signals, call letters for all these different places, and they were different all the time. You had to keep changing them, so it was a lot of paper work involved in that kind of a thing.

So, at the time, we didn't know what we were doing. Well, the first thing we had to do was establish a . . . which was, I thought, interesting. [It was] lot of communication traffic with the radio that was set up somewhere else in the area north of where we were. I didn't know where I was. I later learned it was opposite Kalley. So, we had all these messages to send, and the messages were such as they were in code, but they were clear enough that you could know what they had to do with a lot of traffic going on. There was a lot of activity [and] that kind of a thing. So at the time, we thought that there was something going on up there, and that maybe they were going to have another invasion, or something across the straits, right at the narrow point. As it turned out, the only thing up there with all these messages going to and from them, was another radio. The idea of that was to let the Germans think that there was another invasion coming across from the Kalley area. And, all these messages were just fakes. Evidently, it succeeded, because of the traffic and other things that they did then. The Germans did think. . . . If you remember, Hitler kept the tanks and a couple divisions up there trying to repel an invasion in the area.

D: Being in communications, I have one question: a lot of times, they used this on the Japanese, a lot of forces used Indians. For communication, they used a Cherokee language or different Indian languages, because it was a lot easier to communicate [and] the Germans couldn't decipher Indian speech or anything. Did they ever used to use it over there?

S: Not to my knowledge, no. [There was] nothing of that kind. Of course, most of our messages were going to the batallions out in the field, and a lot of it was voice communications, which was in the clear. Probably something like you are talking about would have been used between army headquarters or divisions where different armies would be. But, I had no experience with that at all.

D: Lets go into your second mission.

S: You asked what we were training for really, and we didn't really know. As I said, they were just missions. We would fly. We would make some practice jumps. We'd keep conditioned and that sort of thing, and keep the troops in good physical condition. Then, when the Normandy breakout came and Patton started to break through from the Hedge rows, we knew then that we had been training to help in that thing. But, it was so successful, the breakout, that they didn't need us then. Then, we kept getting different missions all the time, as time went on. If you recall the war, Patton broke out of the Normandy Hedge rows, went out the Brittany Peninsula, and also turned east. [He] turned further east and went up through France. Like lightening, the tanks went. So, we discovered later that we were preparing for missions, but he overran the positions before we ever got there. I remember, one time, General Maxwell Taylor, who was our division general, came down, called us all together in a big hangar, and announced--we had been at the airport ready to go in this particular case--that we weren't going on the mission because they didn't need us, because General Patton had overcame or had reached the objective without us. He didn't need us, and he said, "But, don't worry. I'm down there at S.H.A.E.F. headquarters. I'm going to get us a mission." We all said, "Boo. Don't do us any favors." (laughter) But, Maxwell Taylor was quite an aggressive general. [He was] the kind of a general you want when you're in combat, that's for sure. He was quite a guy.

D: Are there any specific incidents or missions that stick out in your mind after this?

S: Well, I only had two combat missions and that was this D-Day, combat jumps, and the other was in Holland, which was again, on a beautiful September afternoon. This was a day jump. Our mission then, was to. . . . If you remember right, the British were to go up the highway over into Anaheim, and the 82nd Airborne Division and the 101st Airborne Division were to jump along this highway that was carrying the troops up through Anaheim where they could make the turnover into Germany. So, our job was to secure the bridges in around

Eindhoven and Zorn and that kind of thing. There were so many of them [bridges], because up through the Dutch Country and the Netherlands, are many canals and that kind of thing. So, our mission was to secure these bridges. We jumped on a beautiful Sunday afternoon into Holland, in a large field. It was very quiet, a very uneventful jump with nobody firing at you. It was just like a pleasant Sunday afternoon outing. It got worse a little later on, but that particular jump was just great. And that jump, we were where we were supposed to be, and the pilots did a great job of delivering the troopers to where they were supposed to go. So then, we bivouacked and found the place we were supposed to be and continued to clear the Germans out of that area so that Montgomery could run up to Anaheim and do the things he was supposed to do. It didn't quite work out the way they wanted it to, but it was great.

D: At this time, did you notice the conflicts between persons like Montgomery and Patton?

S: Yes. What we knew is what we read in the Stars and Stripes, which was the newspaper for the service men. You could tell from the stories that you read that there was "bad blood" between--not bad blood, but I mean there were differences of opinion certainly, and reaching out for what they sincerely each thought was the best way to go. But, we knew how vital it was, this particular roadway going up. Now, the British were in the lead in that, and we realized how important it was for them to get up this highway as quickly as possible and reach Anaheim where the British paratroopers were jumping. We found that the British tanks were sitting along the side of the road, having tea and that kind of thing. We felt that they just weren't doing the job that they should have done. Whether that was valid or not, I don't know. I mean, it could have been that they were being held up because of something else up further, so while they were waiting, they had a spot of tea. You know how the British are with tea.

D: Did you more or less snicker at this?

S: Yes, sure, we said, "Why don't you get up where you're supposed to go?" Of course, we weren't going anyplace, we were just guarding this road, keeping the Germans from both sides of the road.

D: Where was this located at?

S: This was in Holland, in the Netherlands.

D: How did, more or less, the people react in this area [that] saw you coming down?

S: They were very friendly, very great, fine, cooperative. The Dutch people were very cooperative. I, myself, was not in any large towns to get mass reaction or anything. This was mostly farmland and very small farming towns, where the people were very friendly, very cooperative.

D: Okay, at this point, you said it started to get worse?

S: Well, I said it didn't always stay that way. We had some problems with the Germans concentrating. One of our problems was, of course, not knowing who the enemy was in a sense that some of the enemy was surrendering and others were trying to fight. It was a really confusing time for the Germans as well as for some of us. We were in a few, what we called fire fights at the time, but nothing of any great. . . .

D: Now, in international law, when you jump, are they allowed to shoot at you when you're coming down?

S: Oh, yes.

D: They're allowed to?

S: Yes, yes. That particular Sunday where I landed and jumped, there was no enemy fire at all. I think we had really taken them by surprise in that jump.

D: What are fire fights?

S: Fire fights are when you just exchanged rifle fire.

D: By this time, what stage of the war was it?

S: This was just before the breakthrough.

D: Before Bastogne?

S: Before Bastogne. Before the Germans broke through. It was a time when they thought they were going to end the war, because of being able to go up to Anaheim, turn over into Germany and cut off all those troops in those countries. But, it didn't work out that way, because they repulsed at Anaheim, as you remember. So, things became static where we were. So again, we were pulled back out of Holland and brought back into France, into Marmelon. We were again going into--well, they call it into reserve at least waiting to say, "All right, here we've got two elite airborne divisions. What are we going to do with them?" So, we were static there for quite a while before Bastogne happened.

D: When you went into this reserve time, were you more or less permitted to go out into the area in France?

S: Oh yes, yes. We were still in training, getting our equipment in shape and that kind of thing, but it was more like a daily job and it was free, because the part where we were in there was no--at that time, France had been liberated, of course. So, we were free and you'd go anywhere you wanted to. You couldn't get away, that's the thing.

D: You never saw any instances of Vichy, France at all?

S: No, I never did.

D: How long did this period last where you were just idle?

S: Yes, I thought you were going to ask me of that idle period. I don't know how long that lasted, to tell you the truth. I remember when we got back from Holland when the breakthrough actually started, it appeared to be a month or two that we were back there.

D: Did you practice at all during this time?

S: No, we had no jumps at all at that time. There were all kinds of wild rumors of what we were going to do. I think really, the armed forces didn't know what to do with the parachute divisions at that time. Unless they were thinking in the background to ready them for it, but this time they knew the war was pretty much over with. Maybe [they were] thinking of using us for the invasion of Japan. No, we saw them back to Vichy France--we saw them during the war, and of course, we weren't much interested about the political situation. We didn't know much about the political situation at this time. We kept on our own political situation at home, through the Stars and Stripes. It was a rather, I'd say, comfortable time. It was relatively comfortable. We did not have particularly comfortable quarters, but it was pretty decent.

D: At this time, were you well informed of what was going on in Italy?

S: Yes, pretty much, through the Stars and Stripes.

D: How we were converging on. . . ?

S: Converging on a breakthrough, right.

D: Were you amazed at all of, more or less, how the Germans were able to hold this off?

S: No, at this time, we weren't amazed, because everything was going pretty well.

D: Did you anticipate a Bastogne?

S: No, absolutely not. We didn't have any anticipation or forewarning of that at all. And, this is where the amazement really came into those of us who were there. How they could mount such an attack and throw us so much off guard. As I say, we, in the field, couldn't understand it, because when you saw the prisoners that were taken in Holland and the desertion, even equipment that the Germans had abandoned and that kind of thing, you felt that "We've got them on the run. It's just a matter of catching up with them." Then, they have a thing like the breakthrough happen; it was kind of a thing we didn't quite understand.

D: When you were in France working in communications, did you ever have to decipher German communications?

S: No. If some of their operators copied code, of course, they wouldn't know whether they were copying German code. This was in Morse Code, of course. They wouldn't know if it was German or our own station, after they got a fix on them, but if they copied it, it was all turned over to G-2. If there was something strange that the operator thought he was getting, why, he'd copy it and give it to G-2. But, it was even everything or nothing at all.

D: Okay, at this point where the war seemed to get worse, what did your unit do?

S: Oh, I told you we were in Bastogne--not Bastogne, I mean Mormelon, France, in this static position. We had heard orders from General Maxwell Taylor that he had a surprise for us which was going to happen on, I think, Thanksgiving Day. It was supposed to be a big surprise. We wondered what kind of surprise he got for us, probably some combat mission someplace, somewhere. It turned out it was a surprise, because we went up to Bastogne. But, that wasn't what he had planned. He had planned, somehow or another, to get some football players from the 101st division and the 82nd division, and they had been practicing while we were back there. It seems there was going to be a big football game between the 82nd division and the 101st airborne division. I think it was going to be in Paris. It was going to be quite a game. Well, the Germans botched that altogether. I remember being in this little town. I recall it was a Saturday. It could have been a Friday, but I think it was a Saturday afternoon, and I went into one of these little French stores. I had bought my wife French clothing. I say French clothing;

it happened to be some French lingerie that I was going to send home to her. I came back to the camp, and everyone was listening to a radio. The newscasters were talking about the breakthrough in Normandy, and we wondered where. We didn't know exactly where it was or anything of that kind. So, we listened off and on to this news and didn't pay that much attention to it, except some of our troops someplace were having some trouble. We thought this was quite a ways from where we were, so it didn't seem to be effecting us. About eleven o'clock that night, we got orders to move, and so we moved. As far as supplies, you just went to the supply room and got supplies. You told the guy what you needed, and if he had it, you got it. Whether you had--normally, you have to sign for this and turn one in to get it. We had all the supplies and loaded us all in two and a half ton trucks, and we started up the highway. We did not know where we were going. Now, I'm sure the commanders and that sort of thing did, but I mean, there just wasn't enough time to brief all the troops in what was going on and where we were going.

Going up the road this night, we had to stop many times. As we stopped, there was a lot of traffic going back the way we came. We saw big seventy-five millimeter guns going back that way, tanks going back that way, and other equipment going back that way. We were going up the other way. We thought something was very much wrong, because we were going up that direction. So, sometime early in the morning, we bivouacked, which happened to be outside of Bastogne, but we still didn't know where we were. And, during that time, it was just temporary. We were supposed to get two or three hours sleep. During that time, why, the Germans had captured our medical unit; the evacuation hospital. It was one of those things you see on "M*A*S*H". They captured that so our medical supplies were all gone. So then early in the morning, we drove on into Bastogne. We quartered in a compound which, strangely enough, had been a military school years before, for the Belgians. The next day sometime, we found out that we were at the town of Bastogne. Of course then, Bastogne was not famous for anything. It was just a town with a bunch of crossroads in it. Of course, our mission was to hold these crossroads. So, there we were.

We didn't think too much about it, because you. . . . Unfortunately, what's happening, you don't know what's happening until later on [when] somebody tells you. Or, you know what happened. But, at that particular time, there was such a state of change and flux and conflicting orders and conflicting rumors, that you didn't know really what was happening.

D: Did you end up getting into the thick of things?

S: Yes, as a matter of fact, I was near the. . . . Thick of things, no, because again, we were communications. We were in this compound, which was about the center of Bastogne. But, of course, they shelled that. The whole area was shelled. We were under fire, but there was no hand to hand combat with any Germans. But, I was in the area when the Germans sent the group in to ask for our surrender. At that time, General Taylor was back here in Washington and our commander was General McCullough. I was near him when he received them or when they were taken into his quarters. I saw them go in, and I saw them come out. I later learned that they had demanded our surrender.

One of our prime concerns at that time was the weather. That was because we couldn't get our aircraft over. So, I had jeeps with radios in them. I had ground radios which were trying to make contact.

D: Is this November and December by this time?

S: Yes, I said we were supposed to have this football game on Thanksgiving Day. So, we were trying to establish communications and that kind of thing.

D: Now your unit didn't surrender, did it?

S: No, no. We weren't one of the few to surrender. We were real confused. Everything was confused.

D: Was morale low at that time?

S: Well, it was a mighty uncomfortable time from the standpoint of weather conditions. [It was] cold and miserable. [We had] no food [and] no medical supplies. Morale wasn't low, though. It wasn't--I wonder what they would call it. I mean, by this time, you've done so much griping, it was just some more things to gripe about. We were concerned whether we were going to get out of that place, I know that. And, morale was pretty good, I would say.

D: Okay, after the battle, this is, more or less, the turning point of the war?

S: Yes.

D: Did you stay for the rest of the war, or did you go on into Germany?

S: After Bastogne, we then went on into Germany. We were pretty much in a follow up situation from that point on. Our forward troops would go through towns and take them or capture them, and then we'd come in and set up

headquarters there. We pretty much followed division headquarters at that time. We would set up the division headquarters, which was back from the front line headquarters, and keep communications going.

D: Did you go into any large cities in Germany?

S: Yes, I was in Cologne, and Aachen, which was fairly large, and Detmold. Then, we were finally sent down into Berchtesgadren. I was in Berchtesgaden, which wasn't a large city. I was in Munich around the Berchtesgaden area. In fact, that's where we were when the war ended, in the Berchtesgaden. We were almost under a rest situation at that time.

D: What was your opinion of Germany at this time?

S: Oh, I loved it. Yes, [I] liked it very much down around Berchtesgaden. Do you mean, the physical Germany or the people?

D: No, where you were. Was it a lot different than France?

S: Yes. As a matter of fact, I think most of us. . . . Well, I can't speak for anybody but myself. I guess I liked Germany better than I liked France. And, I think you always have the admiration for the activity of the German people. You could shell a town and go through and come back through the next day later, and they were out sweeping up the rubble and that kind of thing. In France, they weren't quite so anxious. I went back through towns in France where rebels were laying there months later, weeks later. They [Germans] just seemed to have more activity toward getting everything back in order again than the French people did.

D: Do you think this is because Germany was more like America than France was?

S: Yes, I suppose. Some of the traits we have here, I think, we probably inherited more from the German tradition than we did from the French, from the Northern province. I suppose being where Germany is, as compared to where France is, the type of climate and that kind of thing has something to do with the activity.

D: Did you sympathize at all with the German people at this time?

S: No, I never have, and I still don't. I think it's a cop-out to say that they didn't know what went on in Germany. I don't believe that at all. They allowed it

to go on. I can sympathize with those who say, "Well there's nothing I could have done about it. I would have lost my own life. I had to shut up and do nothing." I suppose that's something of human weaknesses or whatever, but I can't believe that the people in Germany did not know what was happening in concentration camps and that kind of thing. They had to know.

D: Were you aware of what was going on in the camps at all, even though you were in communications?

S: No, not until we actually saw the evidence after they had been liberated.

D: Do you think there's reason for. . . . [Was] the cover-up more or less due to the propaganda in World War I? [Was] not knowing what was going on there because of the building up during World War I, [because] of the atrocities that were supposedly committed? This happens, and the people didn't believe it?

S: You mean they wanted so hard not to believe it that they actually didn't believe it?

D: Right.

S: Psychologically, I suppose that could be true.

D: Were you in disbelief when you first found out?

S: Yes, really, I was. Yes, I couldn't quite bring myself to believe that those things happened on a large scale. Of course, even today, if you think about Germany exterminating six million Jews, it just seems fantastic to think about them having done that kind of thing. But yes, I was. Actually, I was a bit astonished.

D: Okay, at the end of the war, you were brought home at this time? You didn't go out to the Pacific?

S: No, that's when our big VE-Day in Europe occurred. And our concern came, because we were paratroopers, when we were going to Japan. We were sure that we would be in on the invasion. Our only concern was whether we were going to go to Japan via the States or direct from over there. Our biggest hope was that we would go to Japan via the States. That's what we expected we would be doing until the day of the atomic bomb, which made us. . . .

D: Did this happen before you came back?

S: Yes.

D: Do you have any additional comments that you'd like to make about the war that stick out in your mind?

S: I don't know what to comment on. It was a great experience for us at that time. Probably, as you talk to other people, [you'll find that] at least it was a popular war. I know I have some clippings out of newspapers at the time. One night, I was showing them to my daughters, and we were going over the ads in the paper. If you've seen any of those of that time, [they said,] "We're going to finish the dirty Japs," and [they] were portraying them as ugly, horrible people. [They had] a hate kind of thing. And, it's hard for my daughters to realize that there were those kinds of ads in the paper. You can't just recreate those times. That's why it's probably hard for my generation to sympathize with those Vietnam people who did not fight in Vietnam. We have to equate one war with what we were through. Everybody wanted to do their part. Everybody wanted to go to the service, and the saddest guy in the world was one who was medically unsound and couldn't go into the service. I mean, he felt like he was shirking his duty, really. I know my good friend had some allergies that he couldn't be in the service, and he was just unhappy as he could be during the whole war. He just felt that this is happening, and "I'm not being part of it," even though he had an important defense job, which was important, too. As historians now say, that probably was the last popular war that we ever had.

Looking back on those parts of it generally, overall, I'd say that I've enjoyed my service, and I got a lot out of it. Of course, when the good Lord made our minds, He made them in a way that we are able to forget all the bad things and remember the good things. I have to school myself to remember how miserable I was when we weren't able to change clothes for five days, and we had shoes on that were wet. They'd get dry, then wet, and you couldn't take [them] off. It was bitterly cold. We were frozen up in Bastogne and that kind of thing. But, most things kind of slip away, and you forget about them. It was a great time in our history.

D: Thank you.

S: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW