

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II Veterans

Personal Experience

O. H. 1153

WILBUR ENSIGN

Interviewed

by

John M. Demetra

on

November 12, 1988

Wilbur D. Ensign

Wilbur D. Ensign was born on Youngstown's south side in 1920. He attended Woodrow Wilson High School and joined a National Guard unit in 1941.

The National Guard unit was turned over to the regular Army, sending Mr. Ensign to Europe with the 4th Armored Division. After having served in combat under the command of General Patton, he returned home in 1946 and started a career in the construction industry. He retired in 1984.

Mr. Ensign enjoys music and wood carving and is active in several organizations. He and his wife, Betty, have raised four sons in the Canfield area.

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INTERVIEWEE: WILBUR ENSIGN
INTERVIEWER: John M. Demetra
SUBJECT: World War II
DATE: November 12, 1988

D: This is an interview with Wilbur Ensign for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on World War II Veterans, by John Demetra, on November 12, 1988, at 10:30 a.m.

Mr. Ensign what can you tell me about growing up in the 1930's during the Depression?

E: Mostly what I remember is that we didn't go very many places and we always had food but it was plain. It wasn't anywhere near like that way we eat now. My father being around all the time, not being able to find any work. Which was pretty tough on him and made it tough on everybody.

D: Where had he worked before the crash?

E: He was a carpenter in construction. My family goes back nineteen generations in this country and all of them were in building, all the way down the line.

D: Oh, yeah.

E: I have four sons that are in building.

D: Oh, yeah. Kind of carried on the tradition huh?

E: When . . . I always wanted to be in building because my dad was and it just seemed like a good thing. My mother died quite young, she was only thirty-nine and that was

in 1939. So, her illness in the last three years of her life were quite impressive to me as a teenager. As far as the Depression is concerned, we didn't know any different. We just grew up in it. So, it didn't bother us. Everybody wore jackets that were issued by the government. So, we all looked alike.

D: Do you remember like soup kitchens and things like that?

E: Not really. We lived in town. We lived out in Brownlee Woods in the SouthEast corner of Youngstown. I remember going down and standing in line with a wagon downtown in Youngstown while my dad went out and checked with the union and the different construction companies in town. I would be in the line moving up so that when it came time for them to hand out the beans, or the flour, or whatever, I had the card and everything in case he didn't get back. Other than that, I remember gardens. Sheet and Tube had gardens over in the field over there and each one of the employees got a little plot.

D: Oh yeah!

E: I remember that very well. Everybody had gardens. Then we would home can. If you were lucky dad would get a couple days work up on a farm somewhere and then bring home food. He was paid in food. Almost a barter type thing. We had the milk company, they dealt with--my dad--the fellow said he had the milk, he had to get rid of it, and rather than dump it out, we could owe him. Then when things straightened up you could pay him. He did that. He did that for three or four years and most people paid him. It was really something.

D: People would pull together?

E: Yes, they did. A bunch of guys would get together and go down and cut wood down in the woods. That is what you would burn in the furnace. Most people's electricity was turned off. So, about dark everything shut down. It was bedtime. Really for. . . Clothes were all mended and that, but everybody's was. As a kid this really didn't impress me one way or the other. That is just the way it was.

D: When did you graduate high school?

E: In 1937.

D: What do you remember about going to high school?

E: Mainly we walked from Brownlee Woods to Wilson, which is about two and a half miles. Everybody did it and we didn't think anything of it. We went summer and winter. We didn't have too many social activities at school. At

that time they didn't have a football team and I wanted to play football bad. So, I played for an athletic club. We just padded our clothing. We didn't even have shoes. If you were lucky you would get a pair of your father's old work shoes and put cleats on them. If you weren't you just played with your shoe you had or bare-foot. We didn't really mix much in high school, we didn't have the social activities that they have now. Of course, Wilson was just a junior high and then when I came out of it they had changed into a full high school. We just didn't take part. . . We just lived within your little group. You didn't associate with all the rest of the kids in the class, and so on. You just had your own group that you associated with and they were all in about the same condition you were. So, you didn't feel alone. I first started working with wood at home and when I went to school, woodshop, and blue printing was what really turned me on. I loved it. Amazingly I loved English.

D: Oh yeah!

E: Yes. I loved my English classes.

D: Those are kind of diverging interests, aren't they?

E: Yes. I built furniture for the school teachers when I didn't have classes. . . In the shop over there. Really nothing real impressive about school. If I had even tried . . . Now I know if I had just tried it, probably could have went through on scholarships to write through college because it just came so easy that I blew it. That is what really happened.

D: Okay. So you graduated high school in 1937 but the war didn't start until 1941 or something. What did you do in that interim there?

E: Well, I first went to CCC, Civilian Conservation Corps. The only job, work conditions were terrible, hard to get--and the first one I got was working for a fellow that hauled coal. We would go down in the morning and I would shovel the coal on to the damn truck. Then he would drive the truck out to somebody's home and deliver it and you got a \$.10 a ton.

D: A \$.10 a ton?

E: Anyway, if we were lucky we would make a \$1 or so during the day and that was a lot of money.

D: A lot of hard work.

E: Hey, a \$1 would feed a family though.

D: Really?

E: Oh sure! My God, you could go over to Schwebel bakery and buy ten loaves of bread for a \$1. You could buy a good piece of meat for a \$1. Of course I was a kid, I was a teenager.

D: Living at home?

E: Yes. I was apprenticed in 1939 and I started to work then as an apprentice carpenter. I worked at Automatic Sprinkler in the carpenter shop. I worked for, I think, \$.45 an hour and worked sixteen hours a day. And was real happy to get it. Then I went outside in construction and I wound up . . . When I went into the service I was making a \$1.10 an hour and I was married and had two kids. And we lived very nicely, we saved money.

D: On a \$1.10 an hour?

E: On a \$1.10 an hour we saved money, yes. When I came home from the service, like I said we had two kids and I think our wages at that time--as a carpenter--were \$2.25 an hour and we done very well on it. I worked steady all my life. I went into supervision after about four years and we just had a very nice life style by living within my income. No problems what-so-ever.

D: Okay, so you got apprenticed in 1939 you said?

E: Yes.

D: And you were working as a carpenter and then the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

E: And I had been married.

D: In 1941?

E: I was married in 1940.

D: Okay.

E: Then I went into the Ohio Works and worked as a carpenter until my second child was born and then that is when I was drafted. I was in the National Guard and that is the part the let me out too. So, I didn't have to take training. I was down in Fort Knox for a little bit but just for orientation.

D: When did you join the National Guard?

E: In 1940.

D: Why did you do that?

- E: Oh, because I was married and I didn't want to go to the service and I felt that I should take part in something. A couple friends of mine and I went into the National Guard and I was in there until I went into the service.
- D: So then when the war actually broke out your National Guard unit was called up then?
- E: The National Guard unit was called up but they changed . . . They took some of us who were married and made the State Guard, the State Militia. So that it was a Guard unit that I was in. It was taken into the service, except for the married men. Then six months later I went into the regular Army.
- D: Six months later would put you in, what, middle of 1942 then?
- E: No, 1944. I was drafted then and went to Fort Knox, Kentucky and then on with training.
- D: Being as you had already been in the National Guard, induction was no big deal?
- E: Not really. When I went down to Fort Knox they made me a sergeant right away and put me in charge of a whole bunch of men; 165 of them. They made me a platoon sergeant because of my previous training. I did have to take armor training, which wasn't difficult.
- D: What was that like?
- E: Oh, learn how to get in and out of a tank fast. Some learn artillery, how to use a big cannon efficiently, estimating ranges, map reading, a little communications, but I had already had communications. They had map reading. So, it was reorientation for me. I think the biggest thing was to condition us physically to live on the K-rations, the emergency rations, because that is what we lived on. Like I said before, you couldn't eat bulk food and fire those cannons and then the constant motion in the tank was like being rattled around in barrel. You get sick. So, you just ate the K-rations. That took a while to condition you to that and learn how to live with men hungry or dissatisfied with your food more than anything.
- D: Because of the concussion of the gun?
- E: Yes. The reduction of bulk that you had. You just felt that you should eat twice as much as you did only you couldn't eat that concentrated stuff, or that much really. And then getting into physical shape. It is a long way from being a civilian to doing twenty mile

marches, sleeping outdoors, living outdoors.

D: What did you think when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor?

E: Well. . .

D: The reason I ask is that some people tell me that they think that President Roosevelt kind of contrived that whole set of circumstances to get into the European Theater. Some people really felt a lot of rage towards the Japanese, like it was a sneak attack.

E: I think I kind of felt how foolish they were.

D: The Japanese?

E: Yes. For a little island like that to attack the country like ours, they had to be on something; well, flaky. It doesn't make sense. It still doesn't to me. I just can't visualize a small country like that attacking a big country like ours, especially if they know our industrial power. That is about all I thought at the time. I thought the Japs were crazy. I never thought the Japs would give us a severe problem at all. I didn't want to go down there and fight in the jungles, but I didn't think there would be a problem.

D: What did you think of President Roosevelt? How he handled the Depression? How he handled the war?

E: Really, kind of hard to. . . I'll tell you he was about the greatest man alive at the time. As far as the Depression is concerned, even then I didn't blame that on him. I didn't blame it on Hoover either. It is just one of those things that had to happen. It is the same as . . . Your thinking back then was different than it is now because now I have a whole lifetime of experience and education. Hoover's name just meant you were poor. Cut it anyway you want, he got the blame for it. We had Hoover Cities which were tar paper shacks for the homeless down by the garbage dump or where ever. You had a lot of people on the road and on the river, hitchhiking a ride, trying to find work somewhere else. And why I don't know because if you can't find it in your locality, how are you going to find it in some strange land. Here you have connections and so on. Really, we thought Roosevelt was great because of the programs that he came out with; NRA. . .

D: WPA . . .

E: WPA. I don't know whether it was him or not but it was the Relief-Welfare that helped. The war really put us back in the running for everything.

- D: Okay, so now you are at Fort Knox, Kentucky, you have completed your armor training school, then what happens?
- E: Well, we took an abbreviated training because at that time they were using up Armor-tanks. . . Rommel was in Africa and they had quite a stir down there. They figured . . . Armor was just coming into its own and they realized that they were going to need so many more people in armor than they had because that was the big thing, mobile troops. So, they doubled up our training schedules and they really pumped the people through there. As soon as we finished I came home for one weekend and I won that by that shooting in a rifle match. I won the camp prize and that was a weekend home. Then, we came home for that one week and then I went to Fort Mead, Maryland, and then to Camp Forest in Georgia, and then up through Camp Shanks in New York. That took two weeks.
- D: Travel by train?
- E: Pardon.
- D: By train?
- E: Yes, by railroad train and by trucks from Mead, Maryland to Camp Shanks, New York. In Shanks, New York we were only there three days and then we got on a ship and went over to South Hampton, England. Right at England, at night, it was raining. I always tell everybody, "All the time I was in England, it was raining." It was, I was only there one night. (Laughter) We got off the ship into a warehouse, in the warehouse we got on trucks, from the trucks I stepped onto a tank. A guy put a helmet on me and he said, "We are going to move out in about five minutes. You got to watch the blue lights." Then he told me what our code call was. So, we got on LST and there we go over to Omaha beach. So, my stay in England was like sixteen hours.
- D: Go back to the crossing, do you remember what it was like?
- E: Oh, oh yes. It was just like. . . We were in the tanks. There was three tanks to a ship and as it hit the wave they would almost stop dead. They would go chug, chug, chug, bang, chug, chug, chug, bang. It was rough. You get sick, sea sick, but we were more or less got used to it because of our training. We didn't have all that junk in our bodies that a lot of people would have, who would have ate regular meals and that. Because water wasn't sloshing around and that, the training paid.
- D: How long did it take?

E: Well, we were like two days but the reason we were waiting that long around was waiting for your turn to go in.

D: Into Omaha beach?

E: Yes, Omaha beach yes.

D: Oh, okay. How about the crossing of the Atlantic?

E: Eleven days. The most boring time of my life. Going crazy, apprehensive, afraid of getting sunk, if you get sunk how can you swim.

D: It was a big convoy?

E: Cold. Yes, it was a big convoy. As far as you could see them, spread out maybe half a mile apart in every direction as far as I could see. The salt water is horrible. The food was lousy.

D: Was the ocean rough?

E: Pardon.

D: Was the ocean rough?

E: I don't remember really. It didn't bother me that much. I think I was light headed one time and a Navy guy said, "Eat some cold mashed potatoes and if you up chuck it, it will come up easy, if you don't up chuck it your sickness will go away." So, I ate it and I was alright, no problem.

D: Cold mashed potatoes.

E: Yes. It comes up easy, go down easy, and comes up easy. (Laughter) Being crowded in there again is the end. Somehow the urine smell, the smell of ammonia smell, or what they use for a disinfectant was through the whole ship; body odor. We went on a victory ship, Liberty I think, I forget, it was Liberty I think. I don't know the difference between them really but they were eighteen bunks high, one big room, eighteen bunks high. And there was a guy on top that got sick and everybody got sick. It was a mess. It was a mess, believe me. The toilets were terrible. It was just a bum way to go. You survived, that is the answer; keep warm, survive.

D: So, you landed in South Hampton and they gave you a tank and you are on Omaha beach huh?

E: Yes.

D: How long after D-day was this?

E: Well, probably . . . It is kind of hard for me to tell you. I would really have to look. I would say a couple of weeks and the reason I am saying that is because they had already broke out and were headed for St. Lo, which is down on peninsula. We joined the company somewhere along there and you couldn't tell where you were going to join the company, whether you were in first group. Maybe there is a 100 tanks in front of you, maybe there is only six, and you couldn't tell the difference unless somebody is shooting at you. If somebody shot at you, you shot back, and that is way we went through most of the war. Can you imagine an eighty-eight millimeter gun is probably four inches in diameter?

D: This is a German?

E: Yes, that is a German. American is .76 and .90 is a little bigger. Say about .76 is a three inch Navy gun. So, you are looking for something about four inches in diameter, like three and four miles away, in a woods. That isn't possible. How are you going to see it? You are going to see it when they start shooting. They aren't going to start shooting until you are up there and you are shootable. So that is why I was telling you about this perspiration from apprehension, fear. I was scared. Most the guys I know were scared. They were not to the point where they would panic. The only reason you kept going was because you told the driver, "Move out and go five miles an hour, or go down the road." This driver he thinks you know something he don't know, so he is going down the road five miles an hour. You are out there, you would wish your track would fall off or you would run out of gas but you've done all the preventative maintenance on so that it wouldn't happen because that is what you were trained to do. So then when the first shot was fired, you were really relieved, because you become so busy doing what you were trained to do by reflex. . . And that is this repetition, over and over and over again--you are up and attack and you are back out on the run, up and attack, back out on the run, you sit there, you take the breach block out of a cannon, you tear it all apart, you clean it, you put it back together again, you take it all apart--repetition; over and over again. So that when something did happen, you did get in action. Automatically you done this and you didn't have time to think about, "Boy, is it my turn? Are they going to get me this time? What was that?" You hear shell rattling off the tank from a small caliber. You hear them rattling off the tank, "Oh, they're shooting at us. We are that close. Are they going to get us?" You don't think that at all because you are so busy making sure they aren't close enough. If you're the loader you're making sure

that damn gun is working. You're making sure you got another belt of ammunition to throw in, you're making sure that when you're gunner fires a cannon you got another shell in it before he can holler and tell you what he wants. If you're the gunner, you're so busy trying to find whoever is shooting at you. If you're the tank commander, you're standing there with your head out trying to get a view of what is going on all over. Who knows, maybe he is shooting at the guy next to you. If you see him shoot, then you can shoot him. You can see the flags, and you shoot him. You're so busy that you don't have the time to be afraid or hungry. Your crotch is all wet. What happened? Well, you wet yourself, but you did it that is all. Your clothes are soaking and wet and it is zero weather. You perspired so much, but you don't realize.

D: Until after.

E: Until after, and that is when you get cold because you are going to live in those damn clothes for maybe a week. We moved all day long. At night is when we fueled up, and sometimes the infantry guys would have to carry those five gallon cans on their backs over to our tanks. Then, you would put the tin nozzle on them and pour 300 gallons of gas in that dumb thing.

D: Five gallons a piece?

E: Five gallons a piece in the dark without clinking a can. Ammunition to carry three at a time. They were about three inches in diameter and maybe thirty inches long. Three at a time on their back. I think there were over a hundred different kinds.

D: Armor piercing, high explosive?

E: And white phosphorous. They were in the floor of the tank where it rotates and there were plates that covered all those. If you wanted a shell, you were supposed to pick up the plates then pull out the shell, close the plates, and load the shell. Well, it didn't work that way, we threw the lids a way so you could snatch up a shell, throw it in there, and do it right now. We ate cold most of the time. We had sterno containers. Most of your life you didn't think much about home, you didn't think much about the enemy or forward gung ho or hype for our country and flag and all that. You didn't think of that. It was how am I going to keep warm, and I hope I don't chicken out in front of these other guys, and they are all thinking the same things. I wasn't real religious, but I kept thinking that the guy up there is going to look out for me. As far as praying or going through a whole rigamoroll, you didn't. I didn't, most guys didn't. We swore a lot, we smoked a lot. We

didn't even visit back and forth in tanks much, you know, from my tank to another tank. The tanks were your whole world. We had one enemy 88 shell that went right through the front of the tank, right through the driver, right under the loader's feet, and out through the back. It didn't blow until it was out through the back. It was armor piercing. We just blew a hole in it. Of course, that fixed that tank. Another one shot at the side of it, and a gas tank blew and some of us got out of it. This is the way it was. You got out, and you felt naked. Boy, you head for the closest tank. There wasn't room for you in it, but you could get up on the back, hang on to the back, and ride it out until somebody else needed a crewman.

D: These were Sherman tanks?

E: Yes, there were five men on each Sherman.

D: Did you think the Sherman tank was a good tank?

E: Oh, yes. We had no problem with that. We were a little disappointed with our guns. The tanks were brutes. We didn't know better until they kept coming out with innovation. When they first started, they had a five Chrysler engines in them. If they go out of sync just a little bit, that would over load the other ones and they would all blow out. So, they came out with a red seal continental 500 horse aircraft engine, and that worked on the desert very well. Then, they brought them up to Europe. We used them a good part of the way through France. I would say clear into Germany. Then, we started getting tanks powered by Ford 500 horse power engines. We could go forty miles an hour in them, and they had a bigger gun, ninety millimeter. That was the eighty-eight flat trajectory. You see, with the seventy-fives that we had on the M-4 tank, your shell, in order to get distance you had to arch it. Well, they wanted to hit the armor plate on the enemy tank, and it deflected. Where the lower trajectory you get, the more penetrating power you have. So, we were quite happy. Then, we were in the fields a lot and the tank weighed about thirty tons. Even though we put extension called grousers on the tracks to give more flotation, as soon as you got into the field what ever gear you were in, you would either have to stay in that or drop back. We didn't want to shift gears and have the tank stop. Then, you would have to go into first gear which is maybe two miles an hour. That is a pretty slow moving target. We had tanks all over the place. I went on a number of patrols trying to find enemy armor tanks, et cetera. What that consisted of was maybe three tanks, a couple of half tracks, and few trucks, and maybe a jeep. Mostly just the tanks and half tracks. We would run through little villages like Canfield or towns like

Canfield. If they started shooting at us, we would bug off. We would go toward Ellsworth or Austintown, and if they would shoot at us then we would just skip them and go between them. We would let the big guys come up here behind us and clean these towns up. We could report to them that we picked up fire here, and what kind of fire it was and so on. Really if you got bogged down on a field, you would only go one mile or two miles an hour, a guy could run up and throw a grenade in there and knock you out. So, we liked the big tanks, we liked the big motors.

D: What did you think about the British and Canadian equipment? Did you ever see any of their tanks?

E: The only ones we saw. . .The British were using ours. At different times the British guys would come and ride in our tanks with us for orientation. They were clean and neat and shaven. Even in combat they were. We were like animals. We shaved because we had bugs. We weren't there to be neat and clean. We were there to get along with it and get the hell home. There was a big difference. We ate our K-rations, and they said it was better food than they ate. Then, we went day and night, and they were used to settling in every night. We weren't with them that much. We had a guy in our tank for a week one time. You really didn't wear any rank. There were five men in our tank, and our tank commander was a buck sergeant. We knew who he was, and when he got it then I was the tank commander and everybody knew who I was. They knew my call letter, but the fellows in the tank right next to me wouldn't know who I was if they would see me. They would know my call numbers.

D: What did you think about the weapons you had to face like the German tanks? I understand the Germans had a thing called the Panzerfouust.

E: Yes, that is like a bazooka. I have crawled with another fellow across a field. We crawled because you couldn't shoot across. When they cleared the fields to plow and to raise their crops, they pile stones in a row like a fence row. Then, they have what we called monkey balls or Osage orange. do you know what that is by any chance?

D: Yes.

E: They planted at every windbreak which was in amongst all these stones, so you ended up with something you couldn't run a tank through. You couldn't get over it, you couldn't get through it. You would sneak through there with a bazooka, and your buddy would carry three shells. You would lay there, and when you got about one

hundred yards or so from a Kraut tank or gun position, you would give him the signal. You would aim the dumb thing, it is just like a piece of steel pipe. You would aim it, and he would slip the rocket in the tube and wire it and you would fire it. Then, he would get the other two in there as fast as he could. You would just hold the trigger depressed, and then you would bug out. When you laid there one hundred yards away from this dumb tank and watch your three shells bounce off of it and not explode or fizz like a fusee, you just left. I never saw one of their duds, a bazooka dud. Every one of theirs worked.

D: We had a lot of duds?

E: We had duds like you wouldn't believe in bazookas. We had a fifty caliber machine gun, and they had a twenty millimeter. They used smokeless powder a lot, but when we would shoot, you could see where every one of our tanks was. They used a flash fire. You would see a flash, and that would be somewhere within fifty feet because it flashed sideways, and smoke was colored. That was. . . We appreciated that. That really gave us a sense that "Boy, I hope they're shooting at somebody else, not me." The hand weapons, I used a German Lugar. I bet you I fired a crate of ammunition through it, and I am talking about five thousand rounds. I gave it to an armor one time when I was back at the tank pool, and I said try that. He locked it in his brace and fired it. He said it was like new. The Army forty five, the ones we were supposed to carry, you would put one hundred rounds through them. . . Well, I wouldn't want to stand there and let you shoot at me, but I would say at fifty feet forget it. you couldn't hit the side of a barn with it. They had an anti-tank gun that was about like our thirty-seven millimeter. That is probably an inch and a half in diameter. the muzzle velocity of 38,000 per minute, I don't really really remember. It was fast though. It was thirty-eight thousand feet per second or something like that. That meant a flat trajectory and therefore more piercing power. I never used one, but I know you could mount them almost tight down onto the ground. Dig them in almost tight to the ground. They kicked back, but you could control that pretty well. Being close to the ground, and you are trying to spot them from a mile away, you can see what I'm talking about. It was mounted on ten inch wagon wheels. One man would take that and three rounds of ammunition and go out in the middle of a damn field. Only he wouldn't go straight out, he would wiggle wobble around because if you were up high, you could look down and see the bent grass and that. He might go out there and lay there all night, maybe he would lay there half the next day. When he hears tanks and trucks around, he fires three shots and surrenders. It happened. You

could knock out a tank with that little gun. He used camouflage like a shelter half over him and then he would surrender. That is where we got kind of a bad name because we didn't like to take prisoners at all. Most of the time we did not see a town. If we could hit it. . . If we had to go through it, maybe it was a small town. They have many small towns over there, maybe fifteen or twenty houses at a crossroad, and you would have to go through the town which is three city blocks long. You could bust through there or stop when coming within gun range of that. Enemy tanks would drive through a house and stick his cannon out through a window, they would blow your ass off before you ever knew there was anything there. That is what I'm telling you, you went until you were shot at. If the shot came from the town, you call in artillery, dive bombers, they had the air force over us all the time, and you could call right from your tank. You call the right numbers and give the coordinates. They might come over and get peeled off through it and say "Oh, you got a tank in that white house. We don't see anything, so it must be anti-tank guns." If it was anti-tank guns then you would call artillery and they would bust the town up, and then you would bust through it. Or if it was a little larger and you could get around it, then if there was a lot of fire power coming out here. . . The way you told that is by how many tanks you lost. If you lost your first seven or eight tanks, you figure this is a hard town. You would bypass it and just isolate it. Then when they got around to it, the artillery would bust it out. Then, the dive bombers would hit and then the infantry went to it. We weren't supposed to be in town. We were defenseless to anything close. All we did was get the Armor.

D: Get the German tanks.

E: Yes, to have the Germans expose themselves to us. Like I said, when it came February, it was cold. Keeping warm was tough. We had infantry riding the back of our tanks. There were usually anywhere from five to ten guys depending on how big the squad was and how many of them got killed. If we went into a town, they would be all out and they would walk the town. If there was any firing, they would bail out and then we would have to pick them up again. At night they would dig their fox holes in a perimeter around our tanks in case somebody came sneaking up. So, you didn't even get out of the tank at night other than to service it. Everybody knew when they were getting out if they had to take a leak, you better tell everybody because the next thing that moved you shot it and you were dead. I think that our officers were all people like us. I don't recall anybody having a discipline problem or a problem with the officers in reverse, you know having somebody that was

over bearing or that you hated. I don't recall that at all. They were right in the tanks right with us. We didn't bad mouth them at all. Most of the time we called them by a code name. We had a captain or company commander and his real name was Pancake so of course we called him Flapjack. Everybody had a nickname or code name. Like I said, we swore a lot.

D: What was your code name?

E: Mine? Ens, E-N-S. Everyone wanted a name that was clear. Our radios weren't good. I have been a quarter mile away from another tank because there was too much interference, too much static. I also picked one up maybe ten miles away. . .And the enemy would use your code name and your code calls. Most of the time we dispersed so much swearing that it got to be kind of a game where everybody tried to think up new swear words. The Germans would even though they said them, they would use them out of context just a little. We would catch them most of the time, and we really enjoyed their radio programs they played for us. I don't think anybody would think of switching loyalties or anything else, but we enjoyed the music. it was our dance band music and the news of home. Wife is doing okay. She is dating that other guy, and whatever his name was. Where they got this information you didn't know. When I was in, one of my boys was going to have an operation on his ear. For instance, this didn't happen, "Hey Wilbur, I was just talking to Betty they other day, and Billy is going to have his ear operated on." I mean things like this, and they would come up with this. I'll give you a guys name and he'll tell you all about this. Anyway, we never accepted orders from anybody other than the ones we knew, and we could tell by the way the guy swore and by the way he said things. Like I said, our radios weren't good anyhow, we would have liked to have better communications.

D: Did you ever come across the local people. the civilians like the French or the Belgians?

E: Oh, yes.

D: How did they treat you?

E: Like they were our best friends, and we were. They couldn't believe the way a normal American lived. They thought we were all full of crap. Like we think everybody from Texas is a big bullshitter, they thought we were all bullshitters. They couldn't possibly imagine me as a carpenter living in a home like this, or having a new automobile with a new motor and only a year or so old, or being able to walk into a store and buy anything you want. They couldn't believe that. We dealt mostly

with rural people, small town people. Here are people living in a house that is maybe 1200 years old, and the step going into the house has been rotated and it is on its third time because it is worn so deeply. In the hallway going down the stone floor you can actually see the depression. These people have been there. There is no way that they could ever own land because it is all owned, and it is all family owned and passed down. Rural people ate very plain. They thought the world of Hitler, and I can see why. He brought electricity and transportation to every village.

D: These are German people?

E: Yes. It did it in France too. He built the Autobahn which was a fantastic work. It is a turnpike, freeway. How it was built and so on by blood or whose blood is beside the point. It was built. The grades aren't real steep, the burm are trimmed just like your front lawn. The people could raise a little cash crop and get it to market. They could have electric lights so you could see after dark without a candle. Boy, this was a big thing. He brought prosperity to Germany and to the rural areas of France. They didn't resent us, they were scared of us. They thought that we were more like barbarians. They were very surprised at the education we had, and that we did have some manners although different than theirs. Really, I never met a Nazi. They were all hard working driving people that the government took over and look at it. You look at it real hard, and you are doing what this government says, and that is what most of them were doing. They were existing and making a better living, so that they could raise there kids better and so their kids could have more advantages than they had. That's what they were doing. I could see that even in them. I had no problem with the German people or with the German army. Those guys are shooting us. Once they threw down their guns as far as I was concerned, why kick them around, they were doing what I was doing? That SS, boy were they something different.

D: You ran across them?

E: Yes, we weren't very nice to them. Most of them. . .If you seen it was SS, you shot him. Even before he could surrender, you shot him. Even if you were almost sure he was going to surrender, you shot him anyway because of the things that they had done to not only soldiers but civilians. They were really dedicated, they were really different.

D: You saw some of the German atrocities?

E: Pardon.

D: No, you saw some of the things that the SS had done, the atrocities?

E: Oh, yes. When they left the town, maybe a German troop backed off. The SS as Special Troops would come in and booby trap a rocking chair, an oven, the refrigerator, the cupboard doors, the doors going into the bedroom, the toilet seat, and nobody knew where all the booby traps were. Even after we went through, these people didn't know. Hell, they would get blown all over the place with just little quarter pound charges. That was the worst thing to me, and a lot of these were their own people. We respected the German soldiers because they used some pretty good camouflage stunts. Then, you would have guys that were. . . You would think, "Boy, you sure wouldn't want to be doing that." They would leave snipers, two or three guys, and so they would hold us up for. . . You didn't know how many were there. They would hold you up by using three shells, and then they would bug out if they could. If they couldn't, they would try to surrender, but a lot of times they didn't make that. Right now, if you came up and you saw these guys out in the field standing there with their hands on their heads, you would pass them, but if you saw them pop out of a hole and you had just gotten fired at from that direction, you would blow them away. I think one of the. . . Toward the warm weather, we got a lot more daylight air raids on the enemy. I have seen aircraft from horizon to horizon, you know, in all four directions by the hour. It is unbelievable. There are shivers running up and down your spines. Over the sounds of the tanks you could hear the aircraft, and it is a vibrating thing. I don't know how anybody could live though a raid of that type, but they did. We had real good coverage, as far as I know. . . The whole difficulty is that I can't tell you what organization was where and who was next to it. We were in Canfield headed to Akron and toward Toledo, and maybe over there in Austintown is another division headed that way, and down here is another one headed that way. I couldn't tell you that. All I can tell you is from my position where I was going. I was going down this road until somebody told me to turn and go down another road. Anything I saw that moved I shot. That is simple orders. If they shot back or if they shot at me too much, go around them. To stay in the same direction not to go over to the next road, not to go over to Austintown. We had scout planes, and he would say, "There is not a road for a mile to your right, so maybe you can go to Kirk road, and then cut back." Just whatever they told me.

D: Did you take part in the Battle of the Bulge?

E: Right after that. Our division was further South. I think it took forty-eight hours for us to get up here. By the time we got up here, it had been alleviated by other elements of our division, so we didn't have to fight there. That was kind of a bum deal. There were numerous professional veteran soldiers against green troops. I didn't know that till after the war. The thing is if we would have known what we know now. . . We were trying to find what they called the Twentieth Panzer Division, which is a German crack division. Supposedly it was inflated in size, and our fourth Armor Division. . . The third Army was commanded by Patton, but our fourth Armor division was supposed to be a crack American outfit. We were trying to pull the twentieth German division into battle. We would get a vehicle now and a vehicle again which I couldn't identify because I wasn't that close to it. We shot him that is all we knew. Somebody would say something that would come down from one of our officers that we got two or we got one of them from the markings on them. What we didn't know was that there was almost no Twentieth Poncer division. We didn't find that out until the war was over. It was a good propaganda leak if you will. The division didn't hardly exist. In fact, no division hardly existed after about the first tree weeks on the continent. They were all so busted up and shattered. Our aircraft dominated the skies. Anything that moved got shot up. They just didn't have the equipment that we thought they did. That didn't change the danger, you know, we didn't know that.

D: Did you ever see Patton?

E: I saw him twice. Once we were at the top of a hill. We had went over the hill and started across the level and lost eight tanks, so we backed up to the top of the hill. We were going to go around, or bypass, or call in artillery, or something. He came up in a jeep, and wanted to know what the problem was. He was standing, and I was up on top of the tank, and he was standing right next to the tank talking to my commanding officer. He said, " Look down there. There is eight tanks burning." Then he said, "Look back there. There is about 500 tanks still going." He got back in his jeep and said, "Let's go." Down the hill he went, first, him in a jeep. I don't know what happened to him there. Then, I saw him once in town or something. He was fantastic, he did it I guess.

D: He was a good commander in your opinion?

E: See, there you go. My opinion is tainted by what I've read since. I find that my opinion now is that he is one of the most able commanders that was ever in the Army. He was fantastic. He did what had to be done. I

think he was crazy, I mean mentally unstable, but he was a military man. He believed in reincarnation, you know. He believed, for instance, in Crete or somewhere Montgomery was going one way, and he took a short cut because that is the way the crusaders went or something and made it and was in this town before the British Army got there.

D: In Sicily maybe?

E: Maybe, wherever. The man was flaky. He just couldn't understand battle fatigue. I wish I would run into him now, I would tell him about it.

D: During the Battle of the Bulge, these SS that you mentioned earlier were committing these. . . Rather than taking prisoners, they would use a machine gun on any American prisoners. One location in particular in Mulmoudy. Did you hear about things like this?

E: Oh, yes. We were under the understanding not to take it personally because they have no way to get you back to Germany, and we were moving through there. I know a fellow that was a POW, but he wouldn't talk to you. Most of the time they would agitate prisoners or try to make you break. They just didn't have the facilities for handling prisoners. Where it went from there I really couldn't tell you. I know that we have seen American soldiers along the road dead, and we were the first ones along the road. I have seen these guys scattered along the road, no ammunition, no guns. What happened I don't know, I never got into it. I am assuming from what I have read that if you got to weak and you couldn't make it, they shot you. If you fell out of a march, they shot you. This one fellow I do know personally was a POW, and I know that they walked them for something like ten days and nights and just fed them a raw potato or something every once in a while. The weak didn't make it, and the strong did. He won't talk about it to this day. I know that happened.

D: Do you think that things like that happened similarly on the American side?

E: Yes, I know they did. We weren't really a disciplined bunch of people. One time when we ran into a whole bunch of regular army people, their supplies had been cut off and they ran out of ammunition and food and everything else. They had surrendered. We had come down the road and here is a whole bunch of white flags, and there were maybe 500 guys that had surrendered. they stacked their guns, and we would just drive right by them. That is up to somebody behind us to take care of them, so I didn't see this first hand. I have seen them in cages which is rolls of barbed wire out in the

middle of a field somewhere running around an acre or two. Stick a couple half tracks around here with guns on the top and maybe fifteen or twenty men, soldiers. I don't know how those guys got fed or whether they got fed, their toilet facilities. I didn't know anything about that until after the war, and I know some of that after the war. I stood up in front of a bunch. . . I was only a corporal, but rank didn't mean anything then. The position you were in is what meant something. All officers had their things to do. For instance, we had a camp that there were Polish DP's in. These DP's, whether they had been forced labor or whether they had been down working in the plants for the money, I don't know that. I know that there were men. Whether they had been conscripted into the regular Army into the German Army, I don't know that, but I do know that they were a mixture of uniform and civilian clothing. There again we don't know anything, you wear what you can get. I saw them in a camp, and we took the camp. I stood up, I couldn't talk Polish and I couldn't talk German very well, and I told them that as long as they did what they were told it would be fine. Anybody that steps out of that camp would get shot. Shot you say "sheeson," and shit you say "Shison." I said "shison." They would get shit if they stepped out of camp. (Laughter) My interpreter was a ten year old girl who spoke English better than I did. She laughed so hard she cried.

We had Jewish people when we liberated their camps. They wanted loose, they didn't want no supervision. They wanted out period. They would stay in the camp, they would rule themselves, they would feed themselves, but they wanted the freedom of the country side. We looked the other way a couple times because the camp they were in was pretty sad. We told them the restriction is that during the daytime no one left camp, and anybody who moves at night gets shot. Now, you know that. We would tell the elders. They usually had a committee in the Jewish camps, and we would tell the elders that. We would also tell them at 10:00 tonight from 10:00 to 12:00 there isn't going to be anybody on this certain area. We didn't know what went on, but their camp improved much. We knew what they would do, they go out and get clothes, food, whatever, bed linens and so on. You couldn't blame them. Around Munich there were thirteen prison camps. I'm am saying within fifteen minutes of downtown. These people, you talked to them, they lived right there. The camp is a quarter of a mile down there just a couple fields from their house. Yes, they knew that they were prisoners when they seen them marching by or see them being trucked by. Didn't you ever notice the smell? I said, "Well, sure. It was a prison camp, maybe they weren't burying their waste properly or something. Maybe they were burning old clothing or something." They really were innocent.

D: They didn't realize all the killing?

E: I don't know that. Did we realize what was happening to the Japs in California? You know, in those internment camps?

D: That is a good question.

E: I know now. Thirty years later the government made a big settlement on a lot of Japanese people out there.

D: That was just recently, I think.

E: They did it again recently. If you read some of the things that went on out there, we are not white and innocent either.

D: I guess Dachou was right near Munich, wasn't it?

E: They had different camps for different purposes. All of the concentration camps weren't exterminators. The ovens are still there. The number of people. . .It is beyond your comprehension because I was there and it was beyond mine. The number of people that passed through there were gassed or killed one way or another by insemination or whatever then burnt or cremated. We can't adapt to that. That is beyond us, we can't believe that, and you are standing there looking at it.

D: You've seen that?

E: I've seen that. I've seen bodies in the trenches that I don't know how many layers there were, but I've seen the trenches ten foot deep. I've seen layers of bodies on the bottom partly covered. I've seen the trenches almost full with bodies, and I just couldn't believe it.

D: How long were the trenches?

E: Oh, about 300 yards. I can't. . .As I was standing there, I was standing in the tank actually, I seen this and my mind rejected it. It didn't make me ill. I didn't puke or anything, I just couldn't believe it. I couldn't accept it. I seen this one camp, there were three other fellows and I. We were supposed to pinpoint it. Our aircraft knew were it was, but we were supposed to go up there and see what kind of activity went on at night. So, we would sneak up in the bushes or whatever with no guns, just knives, because a gun makes noise. I could tell an American gun as far as I could hear it. You took a knife, and if you got in trouble and the knife could get you out of it, all right. You say, "Well, at night this is going to be pretty tough to find." They said, "No, you'll smell it. You keep going

until the smell starts to fade, and then go toward it." That is how we found the camp. Oh, God. That is a smell of burning flesh. I can smell it right now, and that don't leave you. I'll have nightmares tonight just talking about this. You see these guys that are skeletons that are on their feet and most of the camps we came to in tanks anyway. . . Say if we knew there was a camp in Austintown, then we would send four tanks over there. When they came up, the Germans would take off because they couldn't handle it, they weren't ready. They knew that it was over. The prisoners would. . . Sometimes they were so weak all they would do is stand there. You would talk to them and they would just stand there. You couldn't give them anything to eat because that is the worst thing you could do. They had to come back to food gradually. There were people right behind us maybe an hour or couple of hours, a special force that was just for handling these things. The interim between when we got up there. . . It would take you ten minutes to get to Austintown in a tank. Wonder if we got held up somewhere because somebody had a gun, and then down here because another gun, so it might take us two hours. So, there is a period of time. . . We might just zip over there in five minutes, but they couldn't figure that. So, this group that was to take care of the prisoners is back maybe ten miles from us, so there is an hour before they get up there. Boy, it was tough handling those people for an hour. A lot of them were so emotionally upset that they just sit and cried. You tried to talk to them, and you couldn't even talk to them. Not all of them. Some of them, hell, they handled it different than others. I would say that everybody that was in a prisoner of war camp for very long has a lifetime problem.

D: You entered a lot of these camps?

E: Most of the time we came up by the gate and we would post the tanks around it. I did not go into camp. . . I've been in them, but after the fighting. At the time that wasn't my job. My job was to secure it. As soon as these other troops come up, then we would move out and join our outfit. After, I seen animal treated better than some of them. Not all of them, but some of them.

D: These were mostly the camps for the Jews?

E: Yes, they were terrible. Prisoner camps for American soldiers were mostly clean. Kind of barrén and stark, but clean. In any institution you will get that ammonia smell or cleaning salt smell. They had not as much food as. . . See, German people don't eat like we do. Cabbage soup is a good deal for them. You just throw a little hunk of meat in it and it is a Sunday meal. We had more

meat in one sitting than an average family. One of my sons married a German girl, and his mother-in-law said, "You Americans are crazy. Meat once a week is enough." I don't know too much about the actual treatment. . . I know that in the Jewish camps the prisoners themselves were better organized than Polish or any of the other nationalities, French or any of them. They had the elders, and they listened to them. I personally talked to a woman, and I think there were five men who were the elders of the camp. There were women in this camp, too. This woman had her PhD. out of a college on the East coast somewhere. She was American educated. She said, "Oh, you won't have a problem with this camp." We went a good bit after we got past Nurnberg, a good bit of it was just a ride, apprehensive. You never knew what was ahead of you. You always expected that the German Army was ahead of us. We were clear down in Czechoslovakia when the war was over. Roosevelt dying was a big shock to everybody. Everybody felt bad about that because he was our president, not because we knew anything about politics or the man himself or anything, but he was our president, a figure.

D: What did you think of Truman?

E: Nothing really. Eisenhower and Bradley we thought were the greatest. Patton we thought was crazy, all of us. Everybody was agreed on the fact that Patton was a mental case. Fortunately he was on our side, and a leader. Montgomery we thought was flaky. Not English soldiers, but their leader. That wasn't true at all, but those are the things you get in your head. There again you knew your little area. When you hear of somebody who was a foot soldier, or somebody like me, and they are telling you about well this division was here and this division was here and we did this and they did that, well they read it somewhere. There is no way you could know where each division was at what time unless you read it. Half the time I don't think they knew where they were.

D: So, you ended up near Czechoslovakia when the war was declared over.

E: They told us the war was over and we were by a little Slovaks village. So, a couple of us went over there and we told them the war was over. The only language most of us could talk was a little bit of German and English. Almost all these I don't care who they are, if they have had any education at all, they know two or three languages. Finally we found some woman who was eighty-five or so. She had lived in this country and went back there to die. She had been there ten years, and she hadn't died yet. Jesus Christ, she was healthier than we were. She said that these people would not talk

German, and this is like Germany is right across the street. Boy, how can we communicate?

D: They knew German, but wouldn't talk it?

E: Yes. They would pretend that they didn't understand it. If you spoke to them in German, they just hated it. Why I don't know. We weren't there too long. One of the things that won us over to them, a couple of us took jeep and we rounded up. . .The Germans had a lot of small horses, they were bigger than ponies, but smaller than full-size horses. They used them to pull their wagons and their guns and everything. Well, we rounded up a whole bunch of them and took them over to the village, and gave them away. One, we told her about hamburger, we did this by sign language. Incidentally, we were cleaning for the first time in months because we went into a little lake there. This was in April. We went and swam in a little pond and washed up. That was the first bath I had in at least six months. We were telling this one woman about hamburgers. "Oh, Yes," she said. The guy came in and said, "Bring your gun and come with me." I said, "What the hell." I got a couple guys. I got a forty-five pistol. He is walking towards the barn and he is gesturing not to be afraid that there is nothing to be afraid of. We stepped in the barn and here is this white horse standing there and his guts are trailing on the ground. He had been shot. He said, "Please finish him." So, I blew the horse away. So, the next night the woman comes with a hamburger, and it is the god damned horse. Boy, did we get sick. You seen ten guys puking there guts out. Now, why? It was good. All we could see was those guts hanging out of that damn big old plate of hamburger. She felt bad. That was fun. Eisenhower we thought was God's right hand man, really. Bradley had the brains that Eisenhower didn't, we thought. That is the way we felt about it generally. We abandoned all of our equipment in Czechoslovakia. We were up by this little village when the Russians walked over. We had big tarps about thirty foot square. Everything that was in the tank, we stripped out. The guns we broke them down and put them on the tarp, and everybody had to put everything in a certain place. The Russians came over and checked it all out and took it over. All our equipment. We didn't have personal belongings, we lost them too easily. We had the clothes on our backs, and the souvenirs if you had any. We got on trucks and we came up to Regensburg. Then, they split us up. I went to Muelhausen. It was about half way between Nurnberg and Regensburg and our division headquarters were not far away, but mainly what they let us do was just fall apart. Just let it all hang out, and try to get our sanity back. I wasn't there long because they kept breaking off in groups of twenty-five and then they would break that down. Then, they would

mix you with a whole bunch of other guys to get you apart. Really because we were flaky. Little things. Your temper was short, we drank too much, we ate too much. If I would have been there very much longer, I would have been an alcoholic, I think. We never heard of pills. If we had them, we would have probably been on them. I think of the missed opportunities that I had because I could have had transportation to anywhere in Germany, anytime. I could have went anywhere. Switzerland, I was in Switzerland. I was in Austria. I could have really done a tour.

D: Site seeing and all?

E: I didn't. I missed. All I was interested in was getting my ass home.

D: You had enough points to get home at this time?

E: Yes. So did a million other guys though. When they finally picked me up along with others, they took us from this temporary camp that we were in up to a transportation camp. The cigarette camps. You had it made when you got in a cigarette camp. The had Philip Morris and Lucky Strike. One was up by Paris. With no problem at all I could have toured Paris first class. We got accommodations for the liberation of Paris. Our tanks were the first ones in there. Paris was mine, I just never got there. I was too interested in getting home. I was afraid of getting out of line and getting out of sequence. We lived in tents. It was either dust about that thick or oozy mud about that thick. Rain like hell. Then, that is when Eisenhower became president. you didn't know it, but that is when he did because he came up to that camp and he was appalled at the conditions we were living under. He said the only thing he could think of to say to us, and he was on the PA system through the whole camp. He said the only thing he could think of was would we hot bunk, two men to a bunk. That would get us home. double up on the ship, one meal a day. Boy, you should have heard them guys. I moved within a week from there clear down to Marseille, France. Then, we doubled up. Two men to a bunk, and you just took turns. That is how we got home. There again, if I hadn't have been married, I probably would have stayed there. I think I would have went for military government. The way it was, was I was married and I went home. I was happy to be home.

D: So, you got on the boat and came home then?

E: Yes, it took fifteen days from Marseille, France to Virginia Beach.

D: So, you didn't come by the Statue of Liberty then?

E: Oh, no. We went past it when we left out of New York city. We went passed at night. We weren't even aware of the fact that we were moving.

D: Did you see any Negro troops when you were over in Europe?

E: Yes, they had a tank destroyer battalion that was all black. I seen them, but I didn't see them in action. The action was maybe in Boardman and Austintown and whether they had been there and were going back, I don't recall except that they were all black. A fighter pilot was shot down, he was black, and we picked him up. I don't ever recall seeing any colored mixed in with a tank group. Now, maybe they were, but I didn't see any. I was familiar with both my company and my battalion. I didn't see any.

D: Was there much black market activity?

E: Oh, my yes. As soon as the war was over. . .You have to realize that there were a lot of women that were homeless. As soon as the war was over, I recall being on an outpost, and the women would come through there and they would sleep with you for a cigarette. I mean one cigarette. Then, the fellows found out, hell, they would give them a pack because we got ours free. You would give a pack. Well Christ, we had cartons of cigarette stacked up, truck loads of them. Then, the fellows found out that hey, these are money. cigarettes were the biggest thing in the black market. You could buy anything with them.

D: Trade with the German people over there. . .

E: German people.

D: GI's?

E: Oh, no. German people. You had the cigarettes and boy did they want them. Boy, them guys would do anything. You see people walking down the streets, and you would flip a butt out there and they would go ape shit trying to get it.

END OF INTERVIEW