

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Bernard Bates

Conducted by Deb Barrett

January 26, 2008

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This interview is being conducted on January 26, 2008 with Mr. Bernard Bates at the Indian Prairie Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Mr. Bates was born on August 22, 1920 in Springfield, Illinois. He is a retired company representative for the Allen Manufacturing Company in Hartford, Connecticut. Also with us today are Bernie's wife, Roberta, and Don Burque, another volunteer on this project. Mr. Bates has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.

Entering the Service, Induction, Basic Training

Bernie, where were you living when you entered the service? What was your life like at that time?

I was living in Chicago, working at the Lindbergh Steel Treating Company. When the war started I tried to enlist, as many, many young men did. I was told that I was an essential worker – heat treating and metals; you don't manufacture anything without heat treating the metal to do the work – that I was deferred at my company, that they would tell me when I should go into the Army. They then asked me to go to St. Louis where they were setting up a heat treating plant to heat treat dies to manufacture .30 and .50 caliber ammunition. I said I would go there. When I got there we set up the furnaces that were going to be used to do the heat treating of the metals. Then we trained men who were 4F to do this work, and then it wasn't until approximately April, 1944 when I was told that the job was finished, that I could go into the service. I had to wait for them to tell me when, and I waited until June. They called me and said to report to Ft. Sheridan, and I did. I was taken into the Army.

When did you first try to enlist?

That would have been approximately in February, 1942.

So you waited over two years to go in.

Yes. Yes.

So, 1942 – you were 22 years old when you tried to enlist, and you didn't go in until you were 24?

Actually it was 1943 – it would have been 1943 in August.

And when you tried to enlist, you tried to enlist in the Army.

Yes.

Why did you choose the Army?

I wanted the Army. I thought – I won't use the word 'adventure,' although that was in my mind. But I wanted the adventure – I wanted to know what it was like to fight a war. And my country. I was very patriotic. I wanted to fight, my country needed me, and I realized even then that a war as big as this one was – as little as I knew about it – that we could lose it. Later on I began to understand how close we came to losing the war, so I was glad to fight for my country. I was glad to go in. Plus, I wanted an adventure.

Like many young men.

Yes. Like many young men.

And where were you inducted?

In Ft. Sheridan.

In Chicago.

Yes.

What was your induction like? What happened?

Well, we were taken in – many, many young men with us. You took off your clothes, put them in a box, gave them an address to ship them back to my mother and father.

All your civilian clothes?

All my civilian clothes. I don't think we had actually taken the oath yet – been inducted yet. We were given Army clothes to put on. Sometime later we were actually inducted – given the oath.

As a group.

As a group.

How many were in your group?

Oh, I don't know. Probably about a hundred; at least a hundred. I think the next day we were on a train. We didn't know where we were going. We arrived at Ft. Riley, Kansas. That was the first we knew where we were going.

Did your family know you were going?

No.

Were you able to contact them after you got there?

Yes. At Ft. Riley, Kansas we were then started on our series of injections – shots for everything.

What did they give you shots for? Vaccinations? What else?

Vaccinations. And I never knew what they were for.

Tetanus shot probably?

Tetanus, but I never knew what else. They never even asked.

They just lined you up and gave you the shots. (All chuckle)

They lined us up, “Bend over and pick that guy up off the floor who fainted.” That happened.

So you had a new set of Army clothes. All your personal belongings had been sent home. You’d been vaccinated. Ft. Riley is where you did your basic training, then?

Yes.

You were in barracks?

Yes.

What were the barracks like?

Two-story barracks with approximately 100 men; about 50 on each floor – double bunks.

Were you on the top or the bottom?

I happened to go in and get a bottom bunk. Then Sergeant came in and said something like, “Okay, I’m your Sergeant. You’re in Ft. Riley, Kansas. Give your heart to God because your ass belongs to me!” (All chuckle) In those days, that’s true. An officer came in and said they were looking for men to be in the cavalry. He looked at me and said, “You’d make a good jockey.” I said I don’t want the cavalry, I want the mechanized. He said, “You’re going to be sorry. If you stay on cavalry here you’ll be on parade. If you stay here you’ll be used for parades. If you go into mechanized, six months from now you’re going to have your mouth down in the mud somewhere and there’s going to be bullets over your head. You’ll wish you stayed here.” It was true.

He wasn’t kidding.

We took our four months basic at Ft. Riley.

What was your basic like? What did you do? What was the typical day?

We started out learning, of course, the various weapons. The M-1 rifle at that time – field strip it until you could do it in the dark. The carbine, the .45 caliber sidearm, then into the various vehicles – what the Germans called the ‘greyhound;’ the M8 armored car, which is a six-wheeler, six-wheel drive which was very fast, good for reconnaissance. I learned to drive a half-track – the most difficult vehicle I ever tried to drive.

Why was it the most difficult?

Because it had tracks in the rear and wheels in the front, so when you tried to turn it either way, the track was pushing you forward and you were trying to turn it to the left or to the right. It had a double-clutch; you could either down-shift or up-shift. I volunteered for everything you could volunteer for in the Army, which was against everything I had been told a volunteer should do. (Everyone chuckles) I figured my life depended on it – the more I knew the better I’d be.

So what kinds of things did you volunteer for?

I volunteered for night duty to practice to go out at night and capture a prisoner from the {indistinct}, which we did. It was a very hard thing to do. You had to learn with a squad of four men to go out at night and find a lone sentry as you would do in combat. The only weapon you had was a bayonet knife.

[Tape seems to stop and start again.]

..... that speaks German. You’d tell the German sentry very quietly you had a bayonet knife, speak very softly to him and back him away, and you had a prisoner unless somebody else heard you.

[Mr. Burque: Another German sentry heard you?]

We did accomplish that. We learned to do that. We did accomplish that when we were overseas in actual combat.

So they taught you real skills in all these volunteer things. They gave you skills that you really needed later on.

Yes. Yes.

So they built your confidence.

Yes. We were able to do that – it was a very difficult operation. We were able to do it, and we were able to bring that captured sentry back and send him back to our headquarters where they questioned him.

Now how did they teach you how to do that type of capture on night duty – because you were still in boot camp, right? So, I mean, were there other soldiers who were posing as German guards that you got to practice on?

Yes.

And so they knew that somebody was going to try this.

Yes. We had a Lieutenant who had been in combat and had been herded back to our camp. He was with us and taught us these moves. And he was the one who went through basic training with us and taught us what we would need to know to survive, and all of the exercises that he could, and that was one of them – to capture a prisoner at night. He would go with us and capture our sentry who was posing as a German guard. He didn't know we were coming.

He did not know.

No. We didn't know where he was. We had to find him, sneak up on him with no noise, and when we were out in combat – anything that would make a noise, you took off. We had only a bayonet knife we wore on our belt, and that's what we used.

It sounds like this Lieutenant was very thorough in training you.

Yes, he was.

Do you remember his name?

No, I don't. The only thing I remember about him – he had the coldest blue eyes I ever looked into. He never smiled. He told us in plain four-letter words what we were up against if we were going. Some people didn't make it there, even in the training.

Do you know some people who washed out during training?

Oh, yes. I don't know their names.

How did they wash out, or why?

Concentration – they couldn't concentrate. Even in those exercises, if you lost your concentration and forgot what you were going to do, you'd goof it. If one man failed, you all failed. So we learned. This Lieutenant took us out into a large grassy area outside of our barracks, and almost every day we would go there and practice taking down another man in hand-to-hand fighting and killing them. And the Lieutenant was there, and if you didn't throw him hard enough he'd come over and show you how on you! (Everyone chuckles) He was thorough. He was great.

So was your sense of adventure changing?

No. Honestly, I'd begun to understand a little bit of what you had to do. He told us, for example, the first time you hear you're being shot at over there you're going to freeze.

He said, don't do that. He said, I don't care where you are, hit the ground; if you're ten feet up, hit the ground. Don't stand there. We practiced that. We practiced all the moves in dirty fighting – like kick a man in the knee, in the balls, in the ribs, in the face. He said, that's what they'll do to you. It's great that we learned it. I'm probably here – I am here because I learned it.

So as a young man you went into the military to serve your country, and you also went with the idea that this was going to be some kind of adventure.

That's right.

And it sounds like it was turning out to be more of an adventure than you anticipated.

Right. We practiced all that. And of course we went to the rifle range. I had become expert with the M-1. We fired tommy-guns. We got into the armored vehicles and fired the .37mm turret tank; .50 caliber machine gun on a free-mount around the turret. A .50 caliber is a mean weapon. It will go through almost an inch of armor plate. If you could get the ammunition brought up to you – the gunner in either a tank or a four-wheel armored car – is a four-man operation. There was a driver – I drove – there was an assistant driver, a radio man, a .30 caliber bow gun, two men in the turret – one was the turret commander and the other was the gunner, .37mm and .50 caliber. When you were in a firefight you had to have ammunition. The .50 caliber machine gun would spit out approximately 250 rounds per minute. And the boxes of ammunition we carried were only 100 rounds per box – weighed around 43 pounds. Usually if we were moving forward, at the head of our company we had a jeep pulling a trailer with ammunition. If we got into a firefight we trained one man to grab a box of ammo, start for the armored vehicle. A second man would take it and run up to the armored vehicle while the first man was going back for another box. The second man handed the box to a man on the back of the armored vehicle behind the turret, and he handed that over to the man in the turret, who handed it to the gunner, took the empty box out, put this in and started to breach it.

So it was a real team effort.

Yes, a team effort. If one man failed you were in trouble.

You said you were the driver?

I was the driver. If you got into a firefight, and saw that sometimes you triggered an ambush. And maybe a vehicle on your left gets knocked out and there's no gunner. And I couldn't go anywhere, so I'd go and be the gunner. I'd grab onto either a .30 caliber – I knew how to operate that, .30 caliber or .50.

Something you remembered from the war, not from the training?

Jumping forward to a firefight in the war: I watched men who were real heroes but were never mentioned as a hero. A man I watched a .50 caliber machine gun up there with shrapnel and bullets flying everywhere. And all he needed was ammo, and he stood up there, and I don't know how many men of the German force coming toward us – 50 or 100, I don't know – he was a hero, but he was never recognized. There were many people like that in the war. There were situations like that. The man who was supposed to keep that ammunition going up there, he didn't look like he was going to run and we told him we'd shoot him.

Because his role was so critical.

He kept bringing up the ammo. We called in Air Force in on that particular – usually we tried to get the Air Force to come in. And they came in. They were great. After that it was a matter of cleaning up.

(The interview pauses briefly.)

Let's go back to your training at Ft. Riley. You talked about this Lieutenant who was very thorough in the training that he gave you, and these were things that you really needed. Were there any other instructors that you had there that really made an impression on you?

Yes. Our barracks Sergeant ...

The one who made that wonderful statement when you got there? (Everyone chuckles.)

Yes. He was great. He was very thorough. Of course, we had to learn to march in cadence. There were always these little ditties that we sang as we marched. I wish I could remember some of those.

(Mrs. Bates: Come on, you can cough it up.) (Everyone chuckles.)

They're probably embedded deep in your brain.

We had the cavalry song, of course – I don't think you want to hear me sing that one. (everyone chuckles). We had the cavalry song which told the world what we thought of the Air Corps and the Marines (everyone chuckles).

I think every branch had that – those types of songs. What did you have to do around the barracks? What were the rules in the barracks themselves?

The rules in the barracks were that we kept the barracks clean; we kept the foot locker exactly as it was supposed to be...

What was that?

Everything in place. If you had an inspection and the Lieutenant came through for inspection and there was one item out of place you might have to lay down and do 50 push ups, or go out and pick up cigarette butts off the grounds – everybody smoked in those days; there were always cigarette butts to be picked up.

Did you get KP duty?

Yes, but I never did, I didn't because I volunteered for every type of what would be combat duty.

So maybe those guys who thought you were crazy for volunteering were out picking up cigarette butts or doing KP. (Everyone chuckles.)

Everything {indistinct} volunteers, a night mission. One of the men was driving. I usually was picked as a driver, both in the States and overseas. I had the best night vision of anyone.

So that would be a real advantage. And they found that while you were in training?

Yes.

How did they find that? Just through the exercises?

Several people driving the jeeps and armored vehicles at night. The drivers would run into things. And I never did. So eventually I ended up driving the lead vehicle of every mission both here and overseas – I drove the lead armored vehicle, whether we were in a platoon or a company.

What was your downtime like when you were at Ft. Riley? Did you have a chance to communicate with your family? Could you get packages from them?

I did not. I won't go into that, but I did not.

From friends?

No. There's little downtime. And like I say, I volunteered for everything.

So you were out busy with the volunteering.

Yes.

What were your meals like?

The food in the Army was very good, I thought.

You all went together to meals?

Oh, yes, in the barracks.

Marched?

Yes, in line. The food was good, even what they used to call “shit on a shingle.” (everyone chuckles) I found that to be very good – dried beef and gravy on toast.

What were your breakfasts like?

Breakfast, you had anything. You had scrambled eggs. They were powdered, of course. But ordinarily it was scrambled eggs, pancakes, bacon or sausages. Again, I found it to be very good. I had no complaints.

Dinners?

For dinner you could have anything – might be ham, pork chops, dried beef and gravy (everyone chuckles).

How much time did you get to eat?

Fast – get in and out. Get in and eat; someone had to get into the table after you.

Fifteen minutes?

Maximum. Get out and get ready for another mission.

So you didn't dine, you ate! (Ms. Barrett chuckles)

You ate, that's right. All the meals were the same.

And everybody had to come together and leave together?

Yes. In line you went in, in line you were dumped into your mess kit, you went to a table, you found a place, you ate, you came out and washed your mess kit, went back into the barracks and got ready for another mission or duty of some kind.

Did you have any classroom training while you were there?

Yes. The classroom training consisted of field stripping weapons, recognizing air craft – silhouettes, that kind of thing.

How long were you at Ft. Riley?

Four months.

So from June, 1944?

Yes. Left in October for the ten day land route.

To?

I went to visit my folks in Springfield, Illinois.

So you had a ten day leave.

Yes. And friends in St. Louis, and then on to Camp Polk, Louisiana. I had about two weeks of jungle training. I thought we were going to the Pacific. Went to El Paso – Fort Bliss – for anti-aircraft firing; .30 and .50 caliber machine guns.

For how long?

I think that was about seven days.

So just some really quick training. What sort of things did they teach you in the jungle training at Camp Polk?

Mainly how to survive. We never actually did it. We were taught what worms and bugs we could eat if we had to, how to pick a plant if you did not know if the plant was poisonous and you were really starving – you took a very small bite of it and if it didn't make you sick you took a bigger bite; if that didn't make you sick, then you would eat the flower of the plant.

Were there any differences in tactics, like warfare tactics, if you were in the jungle as opposed to an open field?

We never really got into that. Mostly it was to go out into a swampy area and learn how to pick a high spot to sleep or stay, what you might eat in really dire circumstances, what you might not eat. We were only there a maximum of ten days and then over to Fort Bliss. And then we were on a train to New Jersey, to New York, onto the Queen Mary and ...

So it was the Queen Mary that you took. So it was being used for military transport.

Yes. We had 18,000 troops on the Queen Mary.

Wow! And what were your accommodations like then? Most people think of the Queen Mary as a luxury ship! I'm sure it wasn't quite so luxurious when you were on it.

A single stateroom had 15 canvas bunks.

On the floor, or were they hanging like they do on Navy ships?

They hung. There were one, two, three, four, five on one wall; one, two, three, four, five on another wall, and the same on the third wall. You slid in.

There wasn't a lot of room! You couldn't sit up and read.

On the very upper deck were the WACS quarters, and there was a guard on every stairway up there (everyone chuckles).

(Mrs. Bates: I wonder why!)

How many WACS were on the ship?

I don't know. I never heard. We just knew they were there and to keep the hell out of there. Stay the hell out of there.

(Mr. Burque: So you knew at that point you were going to Europe.)

Yes.

(Mr. Burque: During the training at Fort Bliss and Camp Polk, did you know it was Europe you were going to, or could have been ...)

Could have been the south Pacific. We didn't know. We knew we were down there for what they called jungle training, but that's all. We didn't know what direction we were going.

When did you find out where you were going?

On the train in New Jersey – we didn't even know on the train.

Was it a troop train?

Yes, it was a troop train. It was loaded – sleeping in the aisles.

How long did it take the troop train to get up there?

Days. I don't remember. We were sidetracked for other trains. We sometimes got one meal a day. It was terrible.

You mean the food was terrible, or just the whole trip?

The food was terrible and the whole trip was terrible.

How did you spend the time?

Just sitting or laying. There was nothing to do.

Did you read? Were there poker games?

Poker games, read, yes. To get back to basic training just for a brief moment. Probably the worst time in basic training was at the end. We had a 25 mile hike, full pack, M-1 rifle which weighed 10 pounds, one canteen of water. At that time it was around 90^o. Everything is dusty there. You marched at 5 miles an hour. A 25 mile hike you completed in about five hours. You were hot. You had a five minute break every hour, drink a little bit of your one canteen because that was all you had. It was kind of a strip – if you didn't make that you were out.

Sort of like a final test.

Yes. At the end of that 25 mile hike was a kind of cliff – not a real steep cliff, but about a 45^o rocky, gravelly, with a rope ladder. And you had to climb that with all your material, and when you got to the top, the Sergeant met you there as somebody might have met you in combat and wrestled with you and tried to take your gun away (everyone chuckles). I remember some of the men who didn't make it. You had to wrestle with the Sergeant and he tried to take your gun away, which was a no-no.

Was this your barracks Sergeant?

Yes.

So some people might have enjoyed getting a chance at him! (Everyone chuckles)

And you wrestled with him for some length of time. But nobody could take your weapon away. He didn't take mine away! Oh, boy. We wrestled. I punched him, and he was a big man. Anyhow, that's what you had to do. That was kind of a last test.

And when he didn't take your gun away, did he just stop at some point and say: okay, you just passed?

At some point, yes, and to go back take a shower, get some water and get ready for the next place you were going.

He must have had some day, too, with all these men wrestling him!

He stood it. He was a big man. A real nice guy, really. A good Sergeant.

So that was back when you were at Ft. Riley.

Yes. And after that ...

You went to Camp Polk.

Camp Polk, by the way, the nearest town was Leesville, Louisiana. Leesville, Louisiana, was a kind of “go back 100 years” kind of town. The streets were mud, the sidewalks were boards. Every second door was a saloon. It was a strictly Army town. In my book I write that it was so bad that when the snakes crawled across the street they hung their head in shame. It was bigoted. I don’t have the words to tell you what an asshole of the world it was. Terrible. I went in there one night with some other GI’s from Camp Polk. I got off the bus, started walking down the wood sidewalk – I think there were four of us – and there were some other GI’s coming toward us. They’d been there and were about half drunk, and they weren’t going to get off of the sidewalk. And one of us said we weren’t going to get off of the sidewalk. I said, wait a minute. I was probably the oldest man there. They were 18, 19, 20. I said, wait a minute. There’s not going to be any fight here. I said, you’re GI’s and we’re GI’s. So we went this way and they went that way. And we walked into a bar and ordered a beer. And there was a white bartender beating the hell out of a black man behind the bar. For nothing. Just beating the hell out of him. And I set my beer down, got a bus and went back to the barracks. A nice place to be, the barracks. I never went back into Leesville again.

What was it like when you went to Fort Bliss?

At Fort Bliss we never got out of the barracks. I’ll take that back – we went into El Paso one time. About the same thing – it was a mining town. We went there, went into a saloon somewhere, had a beer – the usual: smoking and drinking. There was always a sense with all these men that a fight could erupt at any time. I went back to the barracks there. It was a better place. They warned us not to try to go across the border. It was a good warning. I turned around and went back to the barracks. There was nothing to do except go to a tavern and have a drink and possibly get into a fight. It wasn’t worth it. And I could fight!

And I think you proved that with your Sergeant! (Ms. Barrett chuckles)

I gave it up. I stayed in the barracks. We went for anti-aircraft firing, both the .30 caliber and the .50 caliber. Fort Bliss – we were there in late November, early December.

So at least you weren’t there during the hottest time of the year.

At night it got very cold. We never had enough blankets. We almost froze. And in the daytime you got on your clothes and went to the range. When the sun came out you were taking your clothes off. At night you go to bed wearing all your clothes to stay warm. That was Fort Bliss.

So from Fort Bliss you took the troop train to New Jersey, New York?

To New Jersey – a staging area; a camp. New Jersey was a staging area and from there to New York and onto the Queen Mary.

Shipping Out

So you took the Queen Mary. It sailed across. Where did you sail to?

In Scotland.

How long did the trip take?

The trip took seven or eight days. The Queen Mary went way south first – very hot. Then the next thing we knew we were very cold. It zigzagged because it did not have an escort. The Queen Mary was very fast. It could out-run a submarine.

It did not have any kind of escort, so you were zigzagging to avoid submarines.

And then after that, I remember it was more moderate. Because the Queen Mary, the first day there I went up on the promenade deck, which was all boarded in of course because of the lights. I think we had two blankets, and I stayed there the rest of the trip. Because the rest of the people down in the stateroom were seasick.

Did you get seasick at all?

No. I loved it.

Had you been on a ship before?

No. And the ship was going like this, rocking me to sleep (everyone chuckles).

It was like being rocked to sleep for you!

The second night there – we only got two meals a day; because of the trouble with getting all the people fed. You had to go down the stairs straight through where I guess was a hall, down the stairs to the kitchen. And the second night there they had pork chops and something. Just the smell of it – you tried to go down those stairs and people were throwing up everywhere. I went down and got my meal and took it back up to the promenade deck. I think I ate and ate my buddy's too – he was sick. But I stayed up there the rest of the trip – nice, clean air.

Did you have any responsibilities while you were on that trip? Or was it just get through the trip?

Get through the trip. You could gamble with dice or cards. You could play cards all the time.

Did you win anything?

No. No. I did know the odds on dice. A friend of mine didn't know them. For example, if you rolled a 10, the odds were four to one. He rolled 10 and didn't know, and some guy sitting there said, "Hey, I bet you don't get it." He bet even money, but he didn't take it. He didn't know what he was doing. Anyway, I played dice and cards. That's all there was to do. Wait for a meal. I think it was eight days. We got off at Glasgow, Scotland – somewhere in Scotland. We came back down on trains somewhere through Scotland, we crossed England, down to London, I believe, or Liverpool, where we crossed the Channel. We got on troop ships – what did we call them; landing craft personnel – and we stayed on those three days on the final crossing. That was an experience.

Before we turned the tape over you were talking about going down through Scotland, into England and then getting on landing craft.

Yes, and crossed the Channel into Marseilles, France. Then on what they called the "40 + 8", the most intrepid railroad cars – the French called them the "40 + 8" which meant they could hold 40 men and 8 horses. And we crowded into there, one K-ration.

What was in the K-ration?

The K-ration we had was what they called meat and cheese. When you opened up the little can there was one with cheese and one with something and bacon – breakfast or lunch or dinner; I never knew which (everyone chuckles). They all were bad. And you had a real hard cracker – hard tack cracker, this little can of dog food, hard tack crackers, a pack of four cigarettes, a little pack of toilet tissue and a little plastic liner – one of my most prized possessions when we actually got into combat.

I bet!

I think there was a small piece of hard tack chocolate that was supposed to be very nutritious. You almost needed a knife to cut it. That was my K-ration.

And that would last you – it was for two meals?

That was one meal. Sometimes you got one a day. You never got three. We were on that railroad car at least three or four days. You would stop occasionally and you were supposed to get off for a "pit" call. And several of us would, if you really had to do #2, the train never stopped at the right time. And men would be trying to do that and the train would take off. You had to do it at sometime. And when you were in combat it was even worse. You never got to go. I had people ask me what was the worst experience I ever had in combat. I said, Well, looking for a time to have a "bm." How do you get off of a tank and do that?

So what happened to those men who missed the train?

Some of them did. Some of them missed it. Some would be running and make it, and others would be out there and the train took off. I don't know what happened to them. I guess they somehow got taken in. We weren't really in a combat zone at that time. We were going across France to get to the fighting area.

(Mr. Burque: France had been liberated by then?)

Yes. It was in December, 1944.

When you were going through France, heading to where you were heading, what did you see? Could you see the results of the occupation? Or did it look pretty ...

Our doors were closed. There were cracks we could see out of, but there was really not much we could see. The doors were closed and you were in there.

Like a cattle car, then.

Yes. The French called them "40 + 8" – 40 men and 8 horses. They were old, decrepit, old type of boxcars which were nothing like we had here. So finally you got to where you were going to get off and you were gathered into enough men that you were going to go in and be replacements for your recon squadron.

Mission Assignments

And where did you get off?

I really don't know. It was somewhere in France, before you get into Belgium. I don't remember the name of the town or any location. I got off, and we were gathered into groups, preparatory to replacing men in a recon squadron. A recon squadron was A, B, C, Company D Troop and Headquarters Company. A Company or a Troop was approximately 250 men. There were generally four platoons – first, second and third platoon and headquarters. A platoon was approximately 35 to 40 men, four jeeps and three armored vehicles. At that time they were armored cars. So we were gathered in, and whatever replacements a platoon needed we were sent in, and somebody said you were now with D Troop, 41st cavalry squadron, 3rd platoon. We need a driver, we need a gunner, we need this and that, and you were recommended as a driver so you're going to be the driver, and you're going to be the gunner. And they filled in the platoon with replacements. You were filling in for men who were killed or wounded. One of the things I remember the first night we got there, it was raining. We got out with the clothes we had on and were wet through immediately, as we were for the next six months – we were always wet; everything we had on. And we were up and having an artillery duel – incoming shells, you could hear them, and the outgoing shells, probably 105 to 155 mm. And the Colonel in charge of the whole squadron was a beautiful man. He had a huge purple birthmark right on his face. He got up on his jeep and he gave us a speech. He told us we were in combat, we were going to be going forward and said we would sleep there tonight and he asked if there were any questions. One man asked where we were

going to sleep. He said, “Where you are.” This man said, “Sir, I only have one blanket.” This Colonel said, “Soldier, look at the men on each side of you. He has one blanket. Tomorrow he may not be there and you may have two blankets.” And that was that (chuckles). We were assigned to our platoons, we slept in place that night – if you could call it sleeping – and we were off on a recon mission to go out and find out where the enemy was. We went forward in jeeps and unmarked vehicles a short distance, and we parked the vehicles and camouflaged them as well as we could with pine branches and anything we could get. Some men were left there to guard the vehicles, and some set out as guards on the perimeter, and eight men were sent forward as a squad to try to determine how close we were to enemy troops, how thick they would be – how many they would be – try to locate the enemy troops, come back, get in the vehicles and drive back and take that information to our Company Commander. That was being done in other reconnaissance squadrons up and down the whole front. An army doesn’t move without reconnaissance.

And so you were one of these reconnaissance people.

Yes.

What was your first mission like? What did you find? What did you report back?

The first mission was that we found evidence of German troops. We found where people dropped – which was a no-no; you were never supposed to drop anything, never throw a can down. The German troops had. We found evidence that they had been there. There was a stray cigarette butt; there was a can of rations of some kind someone had dropped. They were fresh. The can looked fresh. We went forward very cautiously and could see more shadows than troops in the distance, and there were many of them. So we turned around immediately and returned. We were not sent out to fight. We were lightly armed and lightly armored.

Right. You were just to gather information.

Yes. We fought only when we had to.

How did you feel on that first reconnaissance mission? Were you scared? Nervous?

Strange, nervous and great! I did it.

You had your adventure (everyone chuckles) – finding information and taking it back. On these reconnaissance missions, did you ever end up fighting?

Oh, yes. At times we would be going forward on reconnaissance and possibly leading our complete company, and run into – both the Germans and us, if we could, if we knew the Germans were moving in one direction, or the Germans suspected we were moving in one direction, they would lay out an ambush zone we would trigger and they would move. When you triggered that zone, they would be at a certain distance with either

mortars or artillery would know how much powder it would take to lob that shell into a certain zone. And when we triggered it, all of a sudden we were getting shelled. So we would go ahead – we wanted to go ahead a certain distance, then stop and spread out and go on reconnaissance. And we would trigger this ambush. And all of a sudden we would be having mortar shells coming in. Mortar shells are terrible.

Because of shrapnel?

Yes. Shrapnel going in all directions from a mortar shell. Then it would all come in on you in that zone, and you could be buried. You couldn't go. And then here would come the German infantry and tanks at you over the rise, this little rise, and you might be in trees or you might be in a little meadow. They'd set this ambush area on you. That's what I'm talking about that you had to fight, and all your training, and if anybody failed it was big trouble. I watched a man stay there and work a weapon to protect everybody else. {indistinct} as you go. Men were falling and German troops coming at you. Sometimes they had what they called a "tiger tank," with an 88mm high velocity long rifle. And you either presented such a front that you actually stopped them, and you could regroup and get the hell out of there or whatever you wanted to do. You stopped them or maybe turned them around. Like I say, the .50 caliber and .30 caliber all had tracers, and our gunners were very good. And this one man, like I say, we were in a very difficult situation where we triggered an ambush. He stayed up on that .50 caliber. I don't know how many men he put down – 50, 100, 200 – he was up there and we had the ammunition going to him. And I had jumped out. In this case a jeep next to me took a shell. The .30 caliber was still there and I jumped out onto that and was adding what I could. There was another armored vehicle off to my right laying down fire. We laid down so much that we actually turned them around.

That must have felt pretty good.

Oh, yeah. [The tape stops and starts again.] Yes. We did so well that we turned them back from this ambush. But the cost was high. We had to try to wait for our medics to come up and had to listen to the screams of the wounded.

What happened with the men who were killed? Were their bodies taken back? Were they buried?

Their bodies were taken back. We never really knew which were dead and which were wounded. They were all taken back. We knew some were dead, but we never knew for sure which were wounded and which died – they were just taken back. We then sent out some guards up front. We sent the armored vehicles that were left forward to make sure we didn't get ambushed again. We waited for medics and headquarters to come up and collect the dead and the wounded. That was one of the worst times – listening to the screams of the wounded and we couldn't do anything for them. The screams of the wounded of the Germans we had put down.

Now, I'm assuming they had somebody coming to pick up their men.

No.

No?

Not at that time. They left. At that time. They were just there.

So what did the US medics do? Did they do anything with them? Did they take them prisoner? Did they just leave them?

We tried to get enough men to come forward from headquarters of our company to take care of our dead and wounded, and the German dead and wounded – what they could. It was a very difficult task to get enough medics. We didn't have enough medics to come forward. There were men holding their entrails in – we had no bandages. The mortars just tear holes, terrible holes. We did what we could. But we had to send armored vehicles forward to make sure that we didn't get a repeat. Then wait for all of the men we needed, because we needed ammunition, food by that time – you could carry only so much ammunition – gas for the vehicles. Everything.

And this was in – where were you at this point?

Well, I don't know. We were somewhere in Germany, but I never knew. We used overlay maps – air maps. They showed you mountain trails, roads, rivers.

So they showed you the geography and that's how you navigated.

Yes.

The terrain?

The terrain and elevation – and where you didn't want to take an armored vehicle, where you could go off a cliff. You had to study those thoroughly and work your way. Many times we went over the land and you might find a logging trail or something like that. But always forward. You tried to locate where the Germans were and where they were going. It was difficult. On occasion I would be going down a mountain trail up ahead in the trees, and I'd see a shadow and there shouldn't be a shadow there. I'd turn that tank around and get away from there – probably an ambush. Like I say, I had probably the best vision, and I had the best reaction.

So you were always in the lead vehicle.

I always drove the lead vehicle. I got us out of a lot of trouble like that. I did it because I could. Anyhow. That was how we tried to go across country. We tried to stay off of roads because that was where they'd expect you to be. So that's kind of what we did. On occasion, like an ambush, we replenished everything, got replacements and took off again.

And did it some more. Did you have any kind of break at any point where you were able to get some relaxation?

Only when we went so far that we were ahead of supplies; our squadron was ahead of supplies – we didn't have them. We had to wait for gasoline and ammunition. And our vehicles needed a maintenance break. Maybe twelve hours; one time we got a 24 hour break. I got a two-day break one time. We had advanced – our platoon alone, of 32 men, had advanced and we were surrounded, we were completely surrounded by German troops which were trying to retreat but they were around us. We stopped. We couldn't go anywhere. We go on and there was an old bombed out house and stable – part of the roof was gone. We were out of K-rations, almost out of ammunition. We set out guards, using that old bombed-out house as a headquarters. I found one can of C-rations somebody had missed. It was rusty, but I ate it. Two hours later I'm throwing up. I had food poisoning. Probably the rusted can had a pinhole. I remember the Sergeant dragged me – I was making so much noise and it was at night. The Sergeant dragged me under a pine tree. Next thing you know he dragged me into this house, kind of wrapped me in straw. At that time liquid was coming out of every opening and got on my clothes. He did what we were taught – he laid me on my side so I wouldn't choke on my own ...

Right. Wrapping you in the straw was a good thing to do.

I remember I could speak but I couldn't move – I was paralyzed from the food poisoning. I kept asking for water. There wasn't much water around. They gave me all the water they had. There were cases of German white wine and they gave me that. It went right through me. I laid there two days and our medics finally came through. By that time I had pneumonia and they took me back to the field hospital. Now this story of mine is not unusual – it's just me in this case.

Where was the field hospital?

I don't know. I did not recognize where we were. By this time, this was about March, we were in Germany – we crossed the line.

So you were in Germany with the field hospital, too.

Yes, where the field hospital was set up. I remember they mentioned to me I was coughing. The doctor came in and said I had pneumonia and I had food poisoning and they put me on sulfa at that time – it was the big thing – sulfa and codeine. I was there five days, and I was up and walking around. They said I was healthy and I was sent back to my unit (everyone chuckles).

It's a miracle. As soon as you can move, you're going!

I told that to this professor from Stanford University who interviewed me out in New York. The guy said, “You had pneumonia for five days? You would have died!” I said, “Well, I’m here!” (Everyone chuckles)

So you were sent back to your unit.

Back to my unit. The next day we were out on another mission. It was raining. I had dry clothes on but I was wet by then. You were wet all the time because it was wool clothing, and wool holds your body heat. Cotton dries. Also, we started out with two wool undershirts, two wool shirts, two wool sweaters and a field jacket, two wool underpants, two wool pair of body boots. If somebody died or left something behind, we had another wool sweater, another wool shirt. I wound up with eight layers of wool clothing on – all wet – but you stayed warm because it kept your body heat. Every time you went like this and went back, he’d say, hold it (everyone chuckles), cold, wet. But anyhow, I had eight layers.

How long were you in Europe?

Well, I want to back up just for a moment. My platoon never had a Lieutenant. Every platoon is supposed to have a Lieutenant as a commander – Second Lieutenant. He writes you up for bravery, he writes your records, he keeps your records. Our Lieutenant, the second day he was with the platoon, made a mistake. His wife had sent him a pair of light tan leather driving gloves. Somebody had told him not to wear those, but he did. He was in the turret of my lead vehicle. He came up out of the turret, grabbed the top of it with those light tan driving gloves ...

Very visible.

It was like two flashlights. We never got another Lieutenant. All that time our platoon – we were a bastard platoon; actually we were a bastard company altogether.

So who took over?

We had a Sergeant – a three-striper, buck Sergeant. I was a technician fifth with two stripes. I had a corporal who spoke German. We ran the whole damn platoon for the rest of the war. And I was always mad that nobody ever got us another Lieutenant.

(Mrs. Bates: There was no one to write you up.)

No one to write us up.

No recognition for what you did.

I was a technician fifth, and the Sergeant was – he should have been a six-striper, I should have been a five-striper. Nothing. Nobody was there to write us up. We ran that platoon all the way through. We gave the orders, went out and got prisoners at night, ran

the whole thing with a three-striper, a technician – technician meant you could do anything: drive, put on bandages, anything. I got back fortunately. My first day joining in the battle where they had a Lieutenant and mentioned what I was going to do and I didn't have any rank, any grade. This Second Lieutenant was going to drive this gun. I said I couldn't do anything. He said I needed a technician fifth – you have to – and whatever happened, I got back I was technician fifth; the next day he got killed. We never had an officer the rest of the time.

So how long did you run like this without an officer?

From the end of the Battle of the Bulge, which would have been the end of January, through February – through the rest of France – through March, down into the Rhine. When the big push came and everybody pushed to the Rhine. We went 48 hours, 52 miles. We cleaned out little farm villages, some hand-to-hand fighting. We did everything. We made it to the Rhine with no officers. We crossed the Rhine. We crossed Germany and down into Austria, and we were south of Linz, Austria, when we opened up this ... A concentration camp was not just one large camp. A concentration camp was like a wheel with Gusen and camps all around. We opened up one camp. I don't know what the Gusen was.

This was 19...

1945; April of 1945.

And you were still without any commander.

Still without any kind of commander. And doing a good job of it, too. And we opened up this gate, let the medics in, called for more medics and officers enough to go in. And there were bodies everywhere, and prisoners coming toward us. That's where this photographer assigned to this eleventh armored division, was there with the 41st squadron, took those pictures.

Why don't you tell us about those pictures so we have it on our record here.

We went in. We saw guards running and we killed some of them – we told them to halt. We shot some. We talked to some of the inmates who were coming toward us. Some of them were walking on stumps of their legs. They told us just briefly what had happened to them. We got some of the guards stopped, and then we were calling on more and more men behind us from our squadron – more medics – more men coming in to eventually bring in the medics and bring in food, and to start a stream in there to take care of them. The Army photographer was taking pictures of all this. I have some of the pictures. Most of them were on the history of the 11th armored division also. They got out a complete book of all this.

You said some of the pictures you showed us were examples where people were being experimented on for different things – for endurance as well as ...

How would they – if you cut their legs off above the knees, how would they learn to walk; on the stub with their thigh, or how would they learn to make pads to go on them; how could they survive. Others were cut off below the knee, at the ankle, to see how long they could survive like that. Some of them did. This one man I talked to was able to get a brief minute with; legs caught off above the knees. He spoke six languages – a very intelligent man – but he was not in the regime with Hitler. He spoke English, French, German, Polish, Russian – six languages all together. Anyhow, we had to leave. We had enough people coming in from our squadron, bringing in food and medics. And we had to leave. We had to go on another mission. Our platoon pulled out, and we were going down a mountain trail – a rocky mountain trail – and somehow we triggered something, an ambush I guess. Anyhow, there were German troops somewhere behind us laying in fire on our vehicles. At that time I was driving an M-8 armored car, and shot out all of – the engine was in the rear and I had no control of it at all; no brakes, no steering. I think it was a shell crater in the road, and I went out through the driver’s hatch out onto some rocky ...

You climbed out, or you were blown out?

I was blown out. The vehicle went into a hole. I saw something in front of me, too. It went into this shell crater, I believe, and the vehicle stopped and I didn’t. I was thrown out through the driver’s hatch, lit on some rock, I guess. I fractured I don’t know how many bones, eventually a vertebrae. Anyhow, I came to. They were putting me into a body cast at a field hospital. This would have been around April – the 26th, 27th, 28th – the war ended on May 6. So I was in a body cast, and they took me back. Well, I remember the man who put the cast on me said, “If I don’t put this cast on you, later on you’re going to have a lot of pain in your spine, and it’s possible if I do put the cast on, as it dries and its trying to hold you in place, you’re going to be in so much pain you’re going to wish I’d shot you.” He was right. The men who went back with me in the ambulance – and eventually they took me back into a hospital in France; they thought I was going to need surgery. In the ambulance they said I screamed all the way in the ambulance until I passed out. Then I stopped screaming. Then we went in an Army plane and back to the hospital. And then, some days later, they took the cast off and eventually decided that surgery would not be of any value. So in a few days I went back – the war had ended – I went back into Austria and joined up with my 41st cavalry squadron, and a platoon. And at that time they were – the war was over and they were shifting everybody. They were reorganizing. A lot of men were ready to go home and other men were staying. The 41st cavalry squadron, they made another squadron, that was the 25th or something. We don’t know. But anyhow, I think I was forced to come home for three or four months. We went into Regensburg, Germany, as a billeting area.

This is after the war is over. How did the local people respond to you?

Well, some did and some didn’t. We became an army of occupation. If you were patrolling the streets of Regensburg you’d have military rules to pass on. The people that wanted to be nice about it were nice, and if they wanted to be tough, we treated them

tough. We were an army of occupation. If we ran into somebody on the street after curfew and we told them to leave, they better leave. That's what we had to do. We had to be tougher than they were. And it's not our nature to do that. We're not tough that way. We didn't want to kill anybody. But you had to be. Anyhow, I did the same thing there. I volunteered. I didn't want to sit in the barracks. I volunteered for everything that came up. If they wanted somebody go bring in the mail, I said I'd go bring in the mail. So eventually, in a couple of months, we now had a company commander. He came up one day and ...Oh. We were sent out – the same Sergeant and I – with our platoon to surround a house where it was suspected there was black-marketeering. And we went out and surrounded the house. And we went in, found two or three men who were AWOL who were black-marketeering. They would go to railroads, find the warehouses, open them up and steal the food.

You kind of caught two birds with one stone. Because they were black-marketing and they were also AWOL.

So the company commander came to me one day – we had done that two or three times – and he said, “Would you like to be an Army investigator? You'd have to sign up for about another year to be an Army investigator. We'll send you to school for a couple of weeks.” I said, “That's what I've been doing.” He said it hadn't been official. I said “yes” and became an Army investigator. I had a buddy of mine who I met in the last days of the war. His name is James Butterick – we called him “Cowboy.” He grew up in an orphanage. He probably learned to fight before he learned to crawl. We became Army investigators. We were put in a motor pool as a cover. We'd ask questions of all the drivers. We'd ask where they got the cigarettes, where'd they get the bottle of brandy. And they'd tell us and we'd add all this up, and come up with a place where they'd get that. And we'd take a platoon, surround it, get on the bullhorn and tell them to come out and they would. Usually they were AWOL.

So usually it was American soldiers?

Yes. So, this “Cowboy,” of all things, the company commander didn't know what to do with him. I think he had done hard time in a barracks for beating up on somebody. And I said, “I'll take him.” He would younger than me. I put him on as my – he went everywhere with me as my bodyguard; no matter where I went he was my backup. Boy, he was a good backup. I never worried. Cowboy. I loved him. Anyhow, I became an Army investigator. I did that kind of work – asked questions, drove a truck and ordered supplies, asked questions of the other drivers, gathered this information, and that's where the Army got their information for things like black-marketing.

So you did that for about a year.

Actually, I started probably in July or August of 1945, went through into 1946, and had a happening that ... I can't tell you about it. [Interview stops and starts again.]

... about going into the bar, and he ...

Cowboy was with me at all times. The truck drivers set up as a bar and had a dance floor and all. So we went there one night, and as I went in the door I noticed five or six other GI's in a jeep, and they were laughing and talking, and they had a bottle with them. So I went on in. There was a young lady sitting at this bar – this club of ours – and I was going to ask her for a dance, and one of these GI's came in the door and started talking to her. And pretty soon he asked her to go outside, and she said 'no.' He took her by the arm and she said 'no,' and he started dragging her across the floor to the door, and she said she didn't want to go outside. He hit her, knocked her down. I went over to him and put him out; put him down. We picked her up. Cowboy's girlfriend was there, and we took her back to our barracks, and to our room. She was bleeding badly in the face. And Cowboy's girlfriend undressed her, put her in a tub of water, and got her some blankets and dried her off and put her on the bed. I had a mission. I had to drive on, and Cowboy was with me. When we came back she was still at the barracks and told us that she worked at company headquarters. She looked better – she had scars on her face – but she looked much better. And, of course, in time after that her and I became very friendly and if things would have worked right I probably would have stayed in Germany and we would have got married. I would have brought her back to the United States. She had class. She really had class. She spoke several languages and was well educated. And, anyhow, in a few weeks she came to me and said she heard this story about the Hitler youth gang – there was quite a gang around there. And we knew where they hung out, in an old bombed out building. She said they were planning to take grenades and throw grenades in every window of the barracks where the truck drivers slept.

So they were still trying, even though the war was over, they were trying to re-energize and take back.

Oh, yeah. They were 14, 15, 16 and they had no fear. And they had been trained in the Hitler youth. So she told us this. We watched this old bombed out building for a while with binoculars, and saw them going in there day and night. So I took a platoon there one night, went down, surrounded it, had lights and bullhorn and all. We took them out and shackled them, brought them back and turned them over to a part of the Army who took them over. Next day they were in a barbed wire stockade – all of them. So things went on all right for a couple of weeks, and this young lady – Lydia – went to work one morning and never got home. So we rounded up some more of the Hitler youth gang, and when we got through with them they told us what had happened. They told us the names of the men who had taken her, kidnapped her, tortured her and she died. We rounded them up, the ones who had been in on it, and gave them justice right there. We showed them what torture like that must have been. We wanted them to scream, like Lydia. And they did. But we gave them justice. And I decided to go home. I went to the commanding officer and told him what had happened and that I wanted to go home. He said, okay. He wrote up the orders. He didn't fight my wanting to go home. He said, first thing you have to take off that .45. I did. I felt naked – it was the first time I had been without that weapon for I don't know how many months, many years. I took it off and I felt like I was lost.

Going Home and Returning to Civilian Life

It had become so much a part of you. When was this – what year, what month?

This would have been probably the last of April, 1946. I was on the pipeline then. You moved so many miles each day. And I wound up at Bremerhaven port of Germany the last of May, and got on the ship and got home on a liberty ship.

On a liberty ship?

Yes. I went over on the Queen Mary and came home on a liberty ship. Great change!

Where did you go home from?

From Bremerhaven.

And you went straight across to New York?

Yes, New York. We got off, and they said ... We were on the ship one day with no food. The merchant marine had left and we didn't get orders to go, so there was nobody there to cook for us (everybody chuckles) – no breakfast, no dinner, no supper – and the next morning we got off the ship and they said the Red Cross had coffee and doughnuts for us. And you know what I could picture was a glass of milk. I hadn't had a glass of milk other than powdered milk. And I said to myself, the Red Cross must have milk. This is the United States. I went up and they asked if I'd have coffee, and I said I wanted milk. They gave me powdered milk! Was I disappointed. Anyhow, we went back to the staging area in New Jersey – Fort Dix in New Jersey. And then on a train – a troop train again ...

Were you discharged at Fort Dix?

No. You had to go back to wherever you were inducted; that's where you were discharged.

So you were discharged at Ft. Sheridan.

I went on a troop train again – crowded, no food half the time – back to Ft. Sheridan, discharged.

Was the mood on the train different than when you were heading out?

Not really. Rather somber. We were on the troop train for a lot of days. In fact, they had sleeping cars, but if you wanted to sleep you had to get into a bunk with another man (everybody chuckles). I slept on the floor. I chose that. On the floor was better than a lot of places I had slept. So I got back to Ft. Sheridan eventually and was discharged. I went into Chicago that night and got drunk.

Now, when you got home, did you go home to your family home?

I went home to Springfield.

But you were still in Chicago. Okay.

I was still in Chicago and got drunk that night. I wound up in a hotel somewhere and sobered up and never went back. Why I got drunk I'll never know. It was crazy. Silly. I went down to Springfield to see my mother and father.

Did they know you were back in the States?

No.

So you just showed up.

I surprised them. At that time they had the "52-20 Club." You got \$20 a week for 52 weeks while you looked for a job. You've got to remember there were millions of men coming home looking for a job. It was very difficult. I remember going down to sign up for the \$20 a week. I went into this huge, crowded room full of people –man. I couldn't move. I'm used to being outside. This was so crowded. I was in there and all of a sudden the walls started closing in and I fainted.

You were claustrophobic.

I woke up and I was lying across the hood of the car (chuckles). I finally went back in and signed up for the club. I went down to see my father. He was working for a Chevrolet garage all his life. I told him what happened. He told me other men had told him the same thing – just all of a sudden couldn't take it. I almost got into a fight. Some kid came in whom I had known years ago. He asked where I'd been and I told him I just got out of the Army. "Oh, you must be tough. Well, I'm a lot bigger." And he started pushing me around. I asked him nicely to get away and leave me alone. My father was watching this. I didn't want to fight. From what I learned to fight in the Army I thought I could have taken him down and really hurt him. But I told him to get away and he kept coming back. Finally I went over to my father and asked if he had a wrench of some kind. The kid came back and I said, "If you come near me again I'll lay your head open." He left. My father said don't go downtown. You're going to get into a fight. You're going to run into a lot of this. You got your discharge button, and a lot of men are going to say, "I didn't go into the Army, and why did you go – you're a damn fool." Well, the first night I was there I didn't take his word, and I wish I had. I went downtown into a bar, had a beer, and the first thing you know somebody was there who I used to know, and he says to me, "I don't want to hear your damn war stories." I think I said something to him like, "You're not going to, and if you don't get out of my way I'm going to beat your ass." I didn't go downtown anymore. I went back home and heard about the GI Bill of Rights. And I knew I had to be educated – I had eight years of school. I had my father

hook up a used car for me. I had enough money – you never got paid overseas – I had enough to get by. I think I got discharged with \$1,500 or \$2,000 – something like that. My father finally got a hold of a 1941 Plymouth in good shape. I bought it, took it right back up to Chicago, signed up for the GI Bill of Rights, went to the Allied School of Mechanical Trades for nine months.

Do you remember where that was?

Yes. It was on Michigan Avenue, near Twelfth Street. It's not there now. It was later absorbed by another school somewhere out west of there. It's not called the same. But they started you in – because you never had math; you had fractions and decimals which we had forgotten. So they gave you all the classes. They started you in simple arithmetic, took you up slowly one class, hands-on machining, drafting. I went there five hours a night and five hours on Saturday, and I worked eight hours a day. For \$20 a week I would have been starving, so I had to make more than that. So I worked, went to school ...

Where were you living when you were doing this?

Well, the only place you could find then, you could go through every building but you couldn't find a sleeping room. A friend of mine who had a tavern out on Milwaukee Avenue called the Florentine Inn – near Niles, Illinois. I went out to see him again, way out there. It wasn't far from where I worked. And he said he knew a lady over there who was a good mother, had a home with an attic. Maybe she would rent the attic to you to sleep in. She did. The other night I woke up and remembered her name – it was Kitty Kalil. She lived there with her mother. Her mother was old and invalid. She rented me her attic, no heat, no air conditioning, just blankets. But it was a place to sleep -- \$4 a week. I shared the bath downstairs. I stayed there all this time that I worked and went to this Allied School of Mechanical Trades. I got a job at {Spor?} Washing Machine in Cicero running their heat treating department at the great sum of \$1.75 an hour. I worked in the heat treating department for all the time I was going to the Allied School – nine months – through the next summer, 1947. Then I signed up at IIT, Illinois Institute of Technology. By that time I'd had enough math that they let me into mechanical engineering. So I signed up for mechanical engineering and metallurgy. I had to have both. I had had night school when I lived in Chicago before – lectures only on metallurgy. _I knew something about what happened to metal. Anyhow, I signed up for that. I went down there for the first couple of months. I saw an ad in the paper for an assistant tool engineer at a tool manufacturing company on Jackson and Green in Chicago – Allison Tool and Machinery I think it was called. And I went down and was hired as an assistant to the tool engineer, and I could now do the work while I was studying. I went from \$1.75 an hour to \$1.00 an hour, but I wanted that job. Boy that wasn't even hamburger and bean money! (chuckles) But I took it. And boy, I learned. What they were teaching me in the school I was putting to work. I was making master blueprints for twist drills and so forth, and it was great training. I worked down there through – not too long – through the end of 1947, I guess. The owner of Allison Tools had been a dollar a year man in Washington, D.C. And he knew everybody. And he

could go out and buy surplus twist drills, surplus cutting tools, for ten cents on the dollar – they had them all wrapped up in the original grease and the whole thing. They had so many of them they didn't know what to do with them. So he went out and he bought all of these. He took the fifth floor of the building and made it all into storage for all these tools that were coming in. He set up a grinder and ground off the name, maybe it was National, so I ground that off and restamped them with his name. Why would he manufacture them when it was so easy not to (everyone chuckles). It wasn't unusual. Things like that happen. So, anyhow, my brother worked at Hancock Insurance Company. They were looking for somebody to run their debits – just to collect insurance {indistinct}. He took me down there. I failed every aptitude test they gave me, but they needed me, so the manager took the aptitude test, filled it out and he hired me (everyone chuckles). I went out collecting. I hated the job. I stayed on that job a while. I made one of the greatest mistakes of my life. I went to look up an old friend of mine who lived in Niles. He was German. Before the war he used to speak of the United States as “Jew-nited States.” He and his family came here from Germany to get away from Hitler because he didn't want to be in the Army. And I got kind of well acquainted with him, us and our girls would go out and dance. And I talked to him once in a while and said, “Please don't do that. I don't like that. You're putting down my country.” And he got pretty mad – the United States and the Jews are running the country and all. So I made the mistake. I looked up my old girlfriend who was married and she said, “Go see Wally Griese. He's really rabid. They put him in the Navy, but they wouldn't let him leave the base.

Really.

He was in the Navy, but he could not be out on a ship or anywhere they couldn't watch him. I went to see him – the biggest mistake of my life. I almost got killed. I went to see him, and he was out in his front yard. His brother was there and his father. He said something immediately about the Army. I said I'm not in the Army. He said he didn't want to hear my war stories. I said I wasn't going to tell him. He started cussing out the United States again. I asked him in a nice way not to do it. I said, “Your family came over here to get away from the Germans. This is your country now.” He just kept saying, “God damn the Jew-nited States.” I got mad and told him off. I wanted to get out of there. All of a sudden I noticed he was between me and my car. He had his hands in his pocket and his brother had this big smile. His father was up on the porch. I'm saying I wanted to get in my car, but he's standing between me and my car. And he's cussing me out and the United States. And all of a sudden he comes toward me, and I had nowhere to go. He hit me in the chest with something on his hands that cut my chest.

Brass knuckles?

I don't know. Something that cut me. I saw metal, but I don't know what it was. He was so mad he was spitting. All of a sudden I'm back in the Army and I'm remembering everything, and I'm thinking this guy's going to kill me. And he's punching me, and I'm punching him, and I'm trying to look for an opening. I was in a bear hug and he bit my ear and tried to gouge my eye. I knew I was bleeding.

So what did his father and brother do – just watch?

His brother was smiling. When I left his brother was still standing there smiling. I was afraid they were all going to get in and kill me. And his father was up on the porch. By this time, when I left, his neighbor had come out. And all of a sudden he's got me in a bear hug. And I remember he bit my ear and was trying to gouge me. I remembered the Army and I foreheaded him. I saw stars, I heard thunder, and I thought I was going to fall down. He did. And that's when I got him. I kicked him in the knees, in the balls and the stomach. He threw up all over. He went screaming. I kicked him in the face and he stopped screaming. I heard his father saying, "I call the police, I call the police, you'll be arrested." And I'm looking for my car, and I've got blood in my eyes. I got into my car and I left. There used to be a gas station where Elston joined Milwaukee. Every gas station in those days had an outside faucet. I laid down under it washing. I laid there with cool water running in my face. A guy came out of the station and said, "God, you look like you're dead." I got in the car and went back. By that time the only thing – the room I had where I was living was on Franks Avenue. I want to go back there and look that up. Franks Avenue paralleled Milwaukee for one block. You couldn't get to it unless you went around to Grosse Point Road and came in that way. It was all hidden by trees, and you couldn't even see the house. I drove back there, get in my car. The guy had the police – the father had the police looking for me. And I went up to my room and recuperated. I went to work. I mentioned when I was there that I was working at this {Spoor?} Washing Machine. That was one of my mistakes. I mentioned that before I found out I couldn't get out of there. Monday morning I went back to work, and the superintendent came to get me and said the Niles police were there and they were looking for me. I told him what had happened, and he went back and called the Cicero police, and the Cicero police said they weren't taking me anywhere – they were Niles police. The Niles police said they had a warrant. I told what had happened and they said they'd be back. The Cicero police escorted me out that night part-way home. And I think that Wednesday the Niles police came back again with a warrant for assault with intent to kill or something like that. So, anyhow ...

Did the superintendent call the Cicero police again?

Yes. And they said this is Cicero, you're not taking him anywhere. There was a hearing on it in Niles. I was asked to go in to the hearing. They had called in witnesses – the neighbors. The neighbor ladies were out and they called the witnesses. And the neighbor ladies said they heard all of it. They said he didn't start it. He had to fight. The father said his son was in the hospital and didn't know when he'd be out, that he needed face reconstruction because I had kicked him. So I didn't hear anymore. That was the end of it. But he understood there would be no witnesses against me, and I never heard from him again. But flash forward to 1968. I'm with a friend of mine from Allen Manufacturing. We're in a restaurant in Franklin Park, about to finish the meal. The guy's sitting across the booth, and he looked at me and said, "There's a man standing over there looking at you and smiling for ten minutes. Do you know who he is?" I said, no, but whoever he is let's get out of here. And I turned around and looked, and it's

Alfred Griese, Wally's brother, who smiled all through this fight. He's standing there smiling at me. He said, "Remember me?" I said, "Yes." I said to my friend, let's get out of here. I didn't want to fight him. He said, "Remember me?" I said, "I remember you." He said, "Of all things, I had a heart attack." I said, "Yeah?" He said, "My mother used to feed us lard sandwiches. (everybody laughs)" I'm saying, "That's too bad. Let's get out of here." I never saw him again.

So you're life kind of got back on track. You worked, married ...

After that I was working down, well after this, I got to this insurance company which I didn't like. I finally got a call from someone who knew me – I had worked at this tool company. They wanted me to move to Minnesota. They were starting a company, manufacturing cutting tools. And they wanted me to set up the heat treating department, train somebody to run it, {indistinct}, and then I'd go out on the road as a salesman for them. And I said fine, I'd do that. So we moved – my wife and I – sold our house and moved. I was married by then. Oh, I bought a saloon in the meantime.

Right – your mistake! (Everybody chuckles.)

When you see cops and robbers in Chicago, you're being redundant – they're one and the same.

Yeah, I've heard that. (Everybody chuckles.)

Well, anyhow, I bought this saloon. The first week I had it, I had to put an ad in the paper to sell it. It took me eighteen months to sell it. Then I had the offer to move to Minnesota. Get all set up, train the man to run it. The two men who started this company and everything in it, they mortgaged their houses, their cars, their wives, to get the money to start it. They didn't have enough money and they went belly-up. And I was out of a job. I got hired then by a man at Metallurgical, Inc., in Minneapolis to run his heat treating. He had a giant heat treating place. He wanted a superintendent to run it, because no one had been able to run it. I took that job, and in about three months I learned why no one had been able to run this shop. He had about six cronies – drinking buddies, wife-swappers; they used to go out drinking and wife-swapping. And they didn't work, and I couldn't fire them. So, in two months he called me into his office, and his six cronies were behind him. He had a bottle and glasses on the table, and he said, "Bates, I've got an early Christmas present for you. You're fired!" I said, "Al, that's the kindest word you've said to me since you hired me." And then I looked at those six men, and I said I'd better get out of here, and I opened the door and left. I was out of work a month, went to a head-hunter. He said, "I don't have anything that fits what you're looking for." And I'm going down the hall, and the first time I ever saw an employment office with a black employee sitting at a desk. He followed me out, and said, "You look like you're looking for a job." I said, "I am." He said, "I sent men out on an interview and they come back. They're good men. They tell me, 'I don't know why they wanted me to interview; I don't know what they're talking about.' There's no business, there's no job. They wanted them to do something." He said, "Do you want to go out and look at it?" I said, "Sure." I went out and met a man at a 25,000 square foot, vacant building,

on the grounds of Federal Package Company which was all wired in, huge business. This man said to me, “Mr. Horn, who is President of all this, has got an idea that he picked up that the big three industry in Detroit – there were only three automobile companies in Detroit – the big three want their own specifications. They don’t want to go, for example, to NEMA – National Electrical Manufacturing Association. – for electrical components. They want their own specifications. This man wants to know what they want, and he wants to build a plant here to fill it. He wants to send you up there.” I said, fine, I’ll go. So I went to Detroit, stayed there two weeks, came back with a book like this, mulling sketches of what I was doing. I met Mr. Horn, and in fifteen minutes I told him if he built this he’d have a hell of a business going. He said, “Okay, you’re hired.” Take this to start, the sketch you made. He had a lot of money. And in two weeks time there was all kinds of equipment coming into that building – brakes for bending metal, shears, automatic rolls. I got samples and started going across the United States explaining to people that they wanted to keep dust and moisture out of anything to do with starting equipment. I’d done more sketches. I eventually wound up traveling all over the United States, England and part of Europe as a – I would go out as a front runner. I would explain to a distributor or manufacturer what this could do, and you could buy it here. And I’d go somewhere else. Never went anywhere without an appointment. I called the city to get a list of manufacturers and set up appointments.

So you went back to Europe. Did you ever go to any of the places you had been while you were in the Army?

No. No. Where I went for was as a distributor of this product. I went back to the distributor in London, and today I wouldn’t know who. And then the distributor in Stuttgart – Germany was rebuilding so fast. Regensburg, Frankfurt, Stuttgart – I set up these distributors. I would take the product, load it up and distribute it. And I was in every major business in every major city in the United States, and then went to London. I was only in London to set up a large distributor. The same in the cities in Germany. I flew planes across the Atlantic that had bunks you slept in. Lockheed used to build a plane called the Constellation – beautiful, four engines; greatest plane I ever flew in; quiet. They had bunks. From your ticket, I had first class. I’d get a ticket, get in there, get up in the bunk – I had a big steak for dinner – and somebody would wake you up in the morning. Somebody would say, “Mr. Bates, your coffee’s ready.” And I’d go down. And in London there was a limousine waiting for me. It was an experience. So I went from nothing into that.

Looking Back

Did you make any close friendships with anyone while you were in the Army that you still keep in touch with?

The only man I knew was this Cowboy. When he came out of the Army I hooked up with him in Chicago. I wanted to be an engineer. Cowboy wanted to be construction worker or truck driver. Cowboy wanted to go into taverns, have a beer and maybe get into a fight. I didn’t. I’d had enough of it. I split with him. I ran into his brother-in-law years later in one of the businesses I was calling on. He said Cowboy was dying, he was

in the hospital. {indistinct} Anyhow. He said, Cowboy was dying, that he was in the hospital. I think it was Central DuPage. It was very small at that time. I called out there and talked to somebody. They said, "Let us know and we'll have the nurses bring him in to see you." So they brought Cowboy in. He had a big scar on his forehead back through his scalp. His brother-in-law had already told me he had become an alcoholic. He'd gotten married, had ten children and his wife kicked him out. I guess they went in for a lobotomy. He looked at me. He didn't know me. (Tape stops and starts.) I said, "Hi Cowboy, how are you?" And he just looked at me. And I said, "Cowboy, I bet you remember the night you came into that bar over there and the three GI's had me backed up into a booth, and you walked in the door and they took one look at you and disappeared." His eyes changed all of a sudden. He said, "Yeah, three against one – odds changed!" And then he went back. He just stared off.

His eyes just vacant. Yeah. Have you joined any veteran's organizations?

I belong to two: VFW and the American Legion.

Did you go to any reunions of any kind?

Well, when I left at the end of the war, there were three men left in the original platoon that I had joined up with. And we were separating out. And I lost track of them. There was never anybody I knew after that. I thought of going back to reunions of both the 41st squadron and the 11th Army division. I don't know. I can't get into it. I wouldn't know anybody. This man who has these armored vehicles out in Big Rock, he wants me to come with him all the time and drive some of the vehicles. He puts on exhibitions in various places. And I went with one down to a school north of Aurora and talked about the vehicles to the kids, and they asked me questions. Then we'd get in the vehicles and show them how they ran and so forth. And we were dressed in old Army uniforms. And I looked at it, and I can't get into it. I just can't pretend. It's just so far from real. It's a fake. I can't do it.

(Mrs. Bates: Do you remember that grandson, Alan, who was in the service; in the Army, too. Remember? And the nurse – he was in the hospital during the war?)

I didn't know him. I worked with a man who was over there who married a girl from France. I didn't know him in the Army.

So you met as veterans, not as active duty.

The only other story: I was reading a newspaper, the Beacon News in Aurora one day a couple of years ago, and there was in a story in there about a man who was in the medics who helped open the gates at Mauthausen. And I read that, and he said the men from the third platoon of the 41st cavalry squadron escorted him in. I said, "That was me! I was there." So I go this phone number and called him, and we got together and talked about three and a half hours. And I said, after I went in there and we opened it up for you, I went back down on another mission and got shot up and thrown out. He said, "Yeah, I picked you up."

You didn't realize it was the same ...

(Mrs. Bates: He took the map over and they trace it all out.)

He said, "I thought you were dead. I went over to see you and I thought you were dead. I picked you up and you were breathing." His name was Peterson. I think he died now, too. He said, "Yeah, the medics followed you down and saw the place where you got shot up and I saw you laying on the rocks and thought you were dead."

(Mr. Burke: This was before the body cast?)

Yeah. I was laying there. But that was him. He said, "We picked you up, drove you back, put you on a stretcher in an ambulance, and I never knew what happened after that. But I'm the guy who picked you up." Isn't that something?

Oh, yeah!

(Tape stops to turn over.)

...got married. I got married to my wife, Ann, and we were married 25 years. She was with me. She used to travel with me around the country because I'd never be home. I would call her and say I'd be in Los Angeles next weekend and she'd fly out to see me. She got used to all the nice things about planes not going and sleeping in airports all night. And then we bought a little place down south in Wilmington, Illinois. I used to raise prize sheep. But she got sick and died. Cancer. A couple of years later we met.

(Mrs. Bates: We've gone through more than 25!)

Congratulations! How did your military experiences affect the way you think about war or the military today?

Well, I think that it was Clinton who ran down our services so bad in number. It was a crazy thing to do. You can't let your military run down. There's always a madman somewhere. After World War II they said they didn't need the military; that there wouldn't be another war. But there's always a madman – there's always an Iraq somewhere. And we're always in there trying to straighten it out. And I'm not against that. I think we should help out. But we never should have let our military; our military should be the strongest in the world and keep it that way. And the one thing that gets me so mad is to hear our President stand up and say we're the greatest military power in the world. He shouldn't say that. He should be more humble. We should have the greatest military power, but be humble about it.

Talk softly and carry a big stick?

Talk softly and carry a big stick. Absolutely! To be able to say to somebody, "If you don't behave we're going to be there," and they know you're able to be there.

How did your service and your experiences affect your life?

It made me determined to be somebody, to be something, to go to school. Hell, if I'd shoveled steel the rest of my life I would have died at age 60. I wanted to go out and be somebody, go to school, education. I've been into everything. This book will tell you things that you wouldn't believe. I'd have two or three things going at one time. And the military taught me to do that – get out and live. Hey, you're alive. In combat I had about ninety days when I was wet, stinking, no sleep, no food; every day, every second some sniper could have got me. And I came out and I'm alive. I go somewhere today and someone says, "It's a lousy day, it's raining." I say, "It's a wonderful day, it's great."

I'm alive.

The military left me with that.

Is there anything we haven't covered that you'd like to add before we finish?

I'm an animal lover. I pick up stray pets – fix them up. I've had \$6,000 cats – one just died on me -- \$10,000 dogs. They're worth every cent of it. If I can buy them two more years of good life for \$5,000, I do. I feel about people the same way! Other than that, I'm a good poker player. (Everybody chuckles.)

Lots of practice?

Oh, yeah. A lot of gambling.

(Mrs. Bates: All of these pets have been strays that he's picked up and doctored them.)

I pick them up almost daily. Broken legs and all. One of them was so bad, one night I had to do what I used to do to lambs that are born almost dead. You take a half teaspoon of whiskey, warm water, a little sugar, mix it all up and with an eye dropper put it down their throat. They'd get the first drop and the second – that whiskey and sugar burns and kind of brings them back. If they're going to live, that'll bring them back.

Well, if there's nothing else, thank you very much, and we're going off record.