

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Melvin E. Brochocki

Conducted by Ms. Deb Barrett

August 5, 2010

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This interview is being conducted on August 5, 2010, with Mr. Melvin Brochocki at the Indian Prairie Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Mr. Brochocki was born on October 15, 1923, in Chicago, Illinois. He is a retired chemist and manager, and learned of the Veterans History Project through the library newsletter. Mr. Brochocki has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.

Life Before Military Service

Mel, where were you living just before you entered the service? What was your life like at that time?

I was working as an inspector at Illinois Tool Works, and living in Chicago on the near north side.

Were you living with your family?

I was living with my family.

With your parents?

Right.

It was just kind of a normal existence. I never thought of going to war or anything like that. Then I was drafted!

How old were you when you were drafted?

I was nineteen years old.

It was a surprise to you that you were drafted, or did you expect it?

No, I expected it. They were drafting everyone of my age so I knew it would come sooner or later. My number came up then [in March 1943].

What was your parents' reaction?

Oh, they were expecting it also. They hated to see me go, but my time came.

You said you were nineteen when you went into the service. You were drafted into the Army?

Yes.

Induction and Basic Training

Where was your induction?

My induction was at Chicago, and then I went to Camp Grant for outfitting – giving me all the uniforms, taking all the tests, going through all the physicals.

Tell us: When you were inducted, what was involved? How long was that?

Well, first we were taken somewhere in downtown Chicago.

You were picked up by buses?

Well, we had to report there. Then we were sworn in and were loaded onto a bus and taken to Camp Grant. At Camp Grant, we spent a few days there taking tests.

Written tests? Physicals?

Written tests to determine your intelligence. Then we took physicals and were outfitted with all the clothing that we would need. Meanwhile they were deciding where to ship us and what to do with us. I was sent to Fort Eustis, Virginia, then – anti-aircraft training.

You said a lot of young men were being drafted, and that was the time. Were any of your friends with you when you were drafted, or anyone you recognized?

No, none of my friends were drafted at the same time. They were all going in, but we were in different parts of the city. All my good friends I never saw until the end of the war.

What was it like when they got you to Chicago? Was it a lot of lines?

Oh, yeah. That's one thing when you get into the Army. You get used to standing in lines! It's just one thing after another. You're always waiting for something. So you get used to it pretty quickly.

So they gave you your uniforms. What happened to your civilian clothes?

To tell you the truth, I don't remember! I don't know if they sent those home, or what they did with them.

But you didn't have them with you.

No. My civilian clothes were gone.

Gone, and you were a soldier.

I was a soldier.

What were the tests like that you took?

Well, all the IQ tests. I don't remember a lot of details, but they gave us other tests and asked a lot of questions on what your experience was, if you had any particular knowledge of certain subjects. They wanted to know all of that.

So, based on the results of these tests and questions they decided that you would be good with anti-tank.

It was anti-aircraft. I don't think it would have made any difference where they shipped me. I wouldn't know anything about it anyway.

So they sent you to Virginia. How did you get to Virginia?

By train.

Was it a troop train?

It was a troop train. They loaded up in Chicago. They had a full – I don't know if it was eight or ten cars on the train. And we just headed for Virginia. It took three days to get there.

That was a long trip.

Yes, because we were on sidings all the time waiting for freight trains to come by. We had low priority getting on the tracks going somewhere.

You had to let all the freight trains go by. So three days. What did you do in those three days?

If we had any reading material, we read. Otherwise we just talked together and look at the scenery going by.

Had you been out of the Chicago area?

No, I really hadn't traveled at all.

So you saw a little different landscape than you saw at home.

Yes. Yes.

What about meals; how were the meals handled?

They had a kitchen on the train. They would bring back containers of food and serve the food in the cars, then.

So you had trays? Do you remember any of the food – what it was like or what you had?

No. They always served meat, potatoes and vegetable. You'd get dessert sometimes. Under the circumstances I think they did as well as they could. It wasn't like home cooking (chuckles)!

How did you sleep? Did you sleep in the seats, or did you have sleeping cars?

No, we didn't have sleeping cars. We just slept in the seats.

So three days, and you ended up in Virginia. When you got to Virginia, was there a bus there to take you?

No. We pulled right into the camp. And when we got out of the train they just walked us – marched us, but we didn't know how to march (chuckles) – right to the barracks.

What was your barracks like?

It was a two-story building. Of course it had a latrine with showers and sinks in it – bathroom.

And what about the beds – were they bunk beds? Were they single beds?

Bunk beds. They were bunk beds.

How many beds in the room?

I don't remember. There were a lot of guys (chuckles)!

It was a big room.

It was a big room. It was regular – you've probably seen the barracks. It's a long building, two stories tall; bunks on both sides of the center aisle. You get a lot of guys in the barracks.

Were you assigned a bunk or did you choose a bunk?

No, at that time they let us choose our bunks. It was the kind of thing where you walked in and picked your spot. So I picked an upper (chuckles)!

So you got there, you picked your spot, and you had to stow all your gear.

We had a barracks bag. But actually we didn't have the barracks bag at that time because it was loaded somewhere else on the train. After they recovered all those, they brought them out to the barracks and we had to reclaim them.

How did you store all your things?

We had a foot locker, and everything had to go in there.

It had to go in a certain way, right?

Yes. We did have racks we could hang our clothing on. At that time it wasn't in very good shape, after the trip. Later on we had to get everything pressed – all prim and proper to meet the standards of our sergeant (chuckles).

Who did the pressing?

They had an iron available in the building. Once we were established we were able to send our laundry to a central place and they sent everything back to us all nice and clean and pressed.

But the first time, you did it yourself.

Yeah.

Had you ironed before?

Yes, I did! My Mom taught me (chuckles).

So it was a good skill she taught you. So your sergeant had very exacting standards.

Oh, yeah!

Give us some examples.

Well, it was just the kind of thing that we weren't used to someone giving us orders. He yelled a lot (both chuckle). No matter what we did, we felt we all had left feet all the time – it didn't seem like we did anything right for him. It's a learning process, and after a week or so we were able to march in pretty good order.

What was your typical day like? What time were you awakened? And how were you awakened?

We were awakened – well, there was a bugle call over the speaker system all through the area. Then, also, the sergeant actually had a bunk – a private room – in our

barracks. So he would come in and yell out (both chuckle). I don't want to say what he said (both chuckle)!

He wasn't very delicate.

No! Of course, anybody who dared to stay in bed by that time, if the sergeant spotted him, he would come over and just dump the guy on the floor.

Just lift the mattress and dump him out.

Right.

What time was this that you had reveille?

It was 6:00.

How much time did you have to get ready?

Oh, about a half-hour. You'd get through the washroom, get dressed and get your bunk straightened out. Then it was out for exercise.

What type of exercise – calisthenics?

Calisthenics for the most part.

Did you eat breakfast after calisthenics?

Yes.

Did you go as a group, or did you just have to report back by a certain time?

No, you had to march everywhere. So they marched us over to the mess hall. Then, after the mess hall we were on our own to get back to the barracks. We didn't have to march back.

What types of breakfast – what was breakfast like for you?

One thing about the Army, they always served a complete meal. Of course, it's not like home – Mom's cooking (chuckles). So it's something you just have to get used to. Some of the things they served I didn't like. But I didn't have anything else to eat, so I ate it (chuckles)!

How much time did you have for breakfast?

I'd say at least a good half-hour or so. And normally we'd have some free time after we got back to the barracks before we'd have to fall out to go to whatever was on the program for that day.

What types of programs did you have? Was it classes?

We had classes. We had to start out, of course, we had to learn how to fire a weapon. Then, because we were in anti-aircraft, we had to start learning about what the weapons looked like – machine guns, and the .40mm anti-aircraft guns.

Had you ever shot a gun before?

No.

So this was all brand new to you.

This was all brand new.

What type of rifle or gun did they give you?

Well, we had a '03 rifle – a 1903 single shot rifle that we trained on.

Do you remember what it was like when you shot it the first time? Did anything surprise you?

It had a pretty good kick (chuckles)! But I took to it well, and I scored very high on my marksmanship. It was interesting – something new in my life that I'd never done before.

So you learned how to use the rifle. Did you also learn how to use all the anti-aircraft weapons?

Well, we did, but that was later. We had to learn how to march correctly. We went on forced marches.

What is a forced march?

When you have to do a certain number of miles in a certain amount of time – like five miles in one hour or something like that.

Did you have to carry your packs with you?

Oh, yeah, yeah. You always carried your pack (chuckles). Never make it easy!

When you marched, did you do cadence when you were marching?

Oh, sure. The sergeant and the corporal – he always had a corporal with him – they would count the cadence to keep us all marching together. Of course, from the beginning there were some guys who really had two left feet, so they are always out of step (chuckles). In every unit you just got to know who those fellows were and felt sorry for them, because they got all the aggravation of the sergeant on them.

You had the forced marches. What other types of learning did you have?

Well, we had classes and we had to learn how to break down the rifle and how to clean it. Then we started learning about the anti-aircraft: .50 caliber and .40 mm that we were going to work with. And we had to learn all about those before we ever got out in the field and worked with one of them.

So you learned how they worked, but you didn't use any of them until you got to your next school.

Right.

How long was this time that you had in Virginia?

It was twelve or thirteen weeks.

While you were there, were you allowed to call home or write home?

Yes. Both. For making calls, we had to go to the PX and they had phones available so you could call home. I don't remember how many times I called home, but it wasn't too many. For one thing, it cost money (chuckles)!

Were you able to receive packages from home? Did you receive any?

Not initially. They didn't want anything. But then after six or eight weeks they said we could get packages from home. Of course, I was lucky. My mother supplied me with a lot of things.

What sort of things did she send you?

Basically, food.

Goodies!

All the goodies.

You must have been a popular guy!

I was, because I got a lot of packages.

Your buddies must have really enjoyed your getting a package.

Yes, they did.

What did you do with any free time you had? Did you go into the town?

No. We couldn't go off base during the basic training. We had to stay right on the base. So the only thing we had available was to go to the PX and do whatever you could there.

What sort of things could you do there?

Not very much at that time. Mostly it was just to get some food, and they had – I forget what they called that beer ...

Near beer?

Near beer that was 3.2 or something like that. Of course, I never drank much beer before. I'd occasionally have a glass of beer with my Dad, but I didn't really care for it. So I would normally just take some soda instead. Otherwise we would just sit around and talk, because there was no TV, there was no ...

Were there any movies?

There were movies available, but most of them were old ones I'd already seen. So I didn't really take advantage of that at all.

When you finished basic training, did they have a graduation ceremony of any type?

Well, it was. We had to stand dress review out on the field, and we were told we officially passed all the tests and were ready to go into service. That was a big thing in our dress uniforms. They had the general out there (chuckles).

Then, just prior to that time, actually, is when they had a lot of different tests they were giving: If anybody knew anything in particular -- specialized in something -- they were able to try to get into some branch of the service that would use that. They advertised the ASTP, which is Army Specialized Training Program. And that was to be able to go to college. I thought that would be a great deal.

While you were in the service.

While you were in the service. So I took the test there, and after the graduation they sent me to Washington D.C. to take further testing to see if I was eligible for the

ASTP. I did well on the tests, so I was sent to Westminster, Maryland and went to Westminster College.

Was it Western Maryland University?

Western Maryland University.

What were you supposed to be studying in college? Did they have a certain program outlined for you?

No. We were all just taking an engineering course. Everybody was in the same thing. We had – I don't know exactly – probably about 400 men there. We just took a regular college course. Of course, it was thirteen weeks to do a semester's worth of college work.

So it was about twice as fast.

And we were all carrying about ten hours of work. They kept us busy from 9:00 in the morning when we went to classes until 5:00. Then we'd have an hour and a half for dinner. Then we'd all have to be in our rooms studying.

So you were on the college campus.

We were on the college campus.

Were there regular college students there?

Yes, there were.

Were you in classes with them, or were you in your own special class?

No. We were completely in our own classes.

For these fast courses.

Right.

Did you have a barracks or dormitory set just for you guys?

Yes.

While you were doing this, did you still have to do your regular Army routine of marching and any of that, or was it strictly college?

No. Well, except that they marched us to classes, they marched us to lunch, they marched us to breakfast (chuckles).

They didn't want you to forget how to march (chuckles)!

Then, on Saturday morning we would have to do some things that a soldier would do. We had to march. We played soldier out on the campus. They would have us set up like opposing forces and show us how we would have to advance, and if we were attacking a position. They didn't let us forget we were soldiers.

Did you interact with any of the other college students?

There were times that we were free. Then, on Sundays, we had the day off completely. Well, we were busy until Noon on Saturday, but then from Noon Saturday we were able to get passes to go out to other towns in the area, or just in Westminster itself.

So did you go out?

Yes.

What sort of things did you do?

Me and a couple of my buddies really enjoyed York, Pennsylvania, which wasn't far away. We used to hitchhike over there.

In uniform?

In uniform. They had a great USO. So we were able to get some food there, enjoy seeing some girls, dancing and enjoying ourselves.

Did you do anything on the campus?

Not much. Like I said, one time they had us put on an exercise. We had rifles that were not loaded. But we were able to put on a demonstration of one force attacking another. People were up on the high hill to observe what we were doing down below.

Did you do any recreation on the campus?

There was a gymnasium available. Of course, we had plenty of exercises anyway – we would still do exercises every morning before we went to class.

How did the other students – the non-military students – respond to you?

Most of them were welcoming. There were a few of the men on the campus that held a grudge against us because they never seemed like they were happy to see us at all.

So all the men in this program took the same engineering courses. How long did it take to complete the program?

Well, we were in it actually for almost four months. Like I said, it was 13 weeks. No, it was longer than that. It must have been more concentrated than that, because we got a year-and-a-half of college credit for what we did in the time we were there. And we were there from July to May of the next year, and we got a year and a half of college credit after the war from that time at the college.

You said while you were there you sang in a church choir.

Yes. Me and a buddy of mine – Fred Brackman – used to go to church every Sunday at the Catholic church in town. We especially liked that because people would ask us to come home to dinner!

That was nice! People you didn't know? Just people in the congregation?

Right. People in the congregation would just ask us to go with them and we were able to get some home cooking.

Some home cooking and a little more family type of life.

Yes.

You did that the whole time you were at the college?

Yes.

And you said you went home for Christmas – you got a pass?

I got a pass.

What was it like going home? Your parents must have been thrilled!

Yes. And my girlfriend was very happy, too (chuckles) – my future wife.

How long were you able to be home for Christmas?

I don't remember exactly, but I think it was about a week.

And you got home by train?

I got home by train. Yes.

You had the time at home. You got to sleep a little later and didn't have to get up to do exercises (chuckles).

I got to see all my relatives. All my male friends were away because they were in the service, too. So I didn't see any of them when I got home. Mostly I saw relatives and was able to get together with all of them. Enjoy food (chuckles)!

Good food (chuckles)! So you took a train back?

Yes.

You were still in school at the time – still in Maryland.

Yes. At Christmas I was still in school.

You have here in the notes that you gave us that the program you were in was one-and-a-half years of college in nine months' time. So you finished. And that was April, 1944?

Yes.

So you were 20 at that point?

Right.

The ASTP programs got closed down.

Yes. They decided they needed men in the infantry because they were planning on the invasion of Europe. So they closed it all up and sent us to infantry divisions. There were men all over the country in the colleges, and everything just got closed down and they sent us all to infantry divisions in the United States that needed to be filled out.

Where were you sent?

I was sent to Camp Claiborne in Louisiana.

Louisiana in the summer, huh.

Right.

Must have been a little toasty.

Oh, man! It was miserable.

You got there by train?

Yes.

Troop train again?

Troop train again.

How long did that trip take you from Maryland to Louisiana?

It seemed like everything took three days! It took three days to get from Maryland to Louisiana.

You said in your notes it was only supposed to take two days?

Right.

What happened?

We just got put on sidings too many times. Troop trains at that time didn't have priority. What had priority – all the freight trains that were carrying supplies for Europe, or supplies for the Army; those had priority. We just sat on the sidings a whole lot of the time.

What about your food?

Again, we ran out of the food.

What did you do?

We just didn't do anything.

They just said, "Sorry, no food?"

Right.

So you were a little bit hungry when you got to camp, then.

Oh, yeah.

You said the water was little bit different than you were used to.

That was such a funny thing – funny at that time. Everybody was so thirsty we ran out of water early in the morning that day and didn't get there until 5:00 in the evening. They marched us over, then to go to our barracks. And when they told us to fall out, everybody dashed for the water fountain. The first guy that got a mouth full of water turned around and spit it out (chuckles)! It was that rotten egg taste.

Like sulfur.

Sulfur water.

So you decided to go thirsty?

Well, you know, after a couple of days of going thirsty we all decided to drink that water (chuckles).

So you were connected then to the 84th Division?

84th Infantry Division. Right.

And what did you do at Camp Claiborne?

I was assigned to the heavy weapons company, which were machine guns and 81 mm mortars. We had [two] platoons of machine guns, which gave us four machine guns -- .30 caliber machine guns at that time. And two platoons of 81 mm mortars. We each would go off in training. Of course we also learned personal weapons. We were able to get the M1 Garand rifle and carbines. So we were on the ranges quite a bit learning how to fire those weapons. And we learned how to fire the .30 caliber machine gun. So I was assigned to a machine gun squad.

In addition to that, they put us through a lot of training to toughen up our bodies.

For example, what?

We went out in the field for a week or two at a time and just camped out in the open. And marched all over the countryside.

When you camped out in the open, did you have field exercises that you did as well?

Yes. We were learning at that time; most of the time we really didn't know what was going on. But they told us to go there, and to go over there and do things (chuckles). We were in exercises that were pitting one regiment against another, and learning. What it is, is mostly training for the officers to learn how to move their people around in combat, and be able to attack a position and how to defend a position if they were on that side.

While you were out there – when you were in the field – it was full-time field exercises. Or did you have some “down” time?

No, no. It was full time. Sometimes we'd have night exercises. Sometimes they were during the day. Sometimes we were able to sit around for most of the day and go out at night and do something.

We would have to carry around not the real ammunition, but they had cases that weighed just as much as the regular ammunition. I was a second gunner, so I would

carry the tri-pod for the machine gun, and the first gunner would carry the machine gun itself. The other fellows in the squad would carry two cases of ammunition. And wherever we would go for the exercises, we would be carrying all of that with us all the time as well as the pack on our back, which had all our belongings in it and half of a tent shelter.

When we got to the place where we were to stay for the night we would set up our two-man tents.

So each man carried half the tent.

Yes.

What was your food like when you were out there?

Sometimes we had MRE's ...

“Meals Ready to Eat.”

“Meals Ready to Eat.” And other times, if the kitchen could get where we were, they would set up and cook our meals. We would have our mess kits with us, so we would go through a line out in the open. They would just slap the food in the mess kit and we'd go off to sit in the open to eat.

The MRE's: What sort of food was in there?

It was all food that wouldn't spoil. For instance, for breakfast they would have a small can ...

Like a can of meat of some sort? Like Spam or something?

Yes. I was trying to think of the size of can. Like a tuna fish can. That would have eggs in it – cooked. We'd have a couple of biscuits – dried biscuits. We'd have maybe a piece of dried food in a wrapper. Of course, we always would get a small piece of candy in there because that was good energy. And that time, they'd also give us a little pack of two cigarettes. Which I never used because I never smoked.

Because you didn't smoke.

I never smoked. So I gave them to one of the other guys.

So you had all the night exercises, the field exercises during the day; you had to learn how to learn all these ... [machine] guns. How long was this training in Louisiana?

Let's see. That lasted from May, when I joined the division, to September.

This sounds like it was more intense training that you had.

Yes. This was definitely the type of training that we would need for combat. In some cases they would fire artillery over our heads, and we would fire blank ammunition – so we got used to the sounds of combat.

Did anyone ever get hurt with the live ammunition?

No.

Everybody was good at staying down.

Right.

Did you have any free time while you were there?

Oh, yeah. If we were not in the field. When we were in the field, though, sometimes we were out for a couple of weeks so we were there all the time. But when we were in camp we'd have free time in the evening after dinner, and we'd have free time on the weekends – normally on Sundays.

What did you do?

Not much (chuckles)! We were able to get to; they had a movie theater on base. I don't remember the movies, but I went to several movies over that period of time.

Were they new movies at that time, or were they still the old ones?

I think they were fairly new ones at that time. I know they were movies I hadn't seen before.

Did you go into town?

I went into town a couple of times. But it was so crowded with GI's everywhere in the town that I didn't enjoy it. After a couple of visits I didn't go into town anymore.

You just decided to stay on base.

Yes, to stay on base and relax.

When you finished in Louisiana, what did you do next?

Next we were ready to ship out to Europe.

Did your family know you were shipping out?

Well, I did get another furlough then. At the end of our training we got another furlough home. It was good to see the family again – it was another five days.

They knew you were leaving for Europe.

Yes.

It must have been very hard for them.

Yes. They were unhappy. Of course, they hoped that everything would go well and I would be back to them again.

So you went from Louisiana to home. Was that on a train?

It was on a train.

Deployment to Europe

Did you have to report back to Louisiana?

We went back to Louisiana. And the whole Division was put on trains and shipped up to New York to the point of embarkation.

That must have been a couple days.

That was three days, too (chuckles)!

Everything was three days!

Everywhere we were sent it took three days.

When you got to New York did you stay overnight there, or did you immediately get on the ships?

Everything had to be loaded. I didn't have any duties of that kind, but other people from the division had to load all the equipment that we had and prepare it for shipment for overseas.

What did you do during that time? How long did you have to wait there?

It seemed like the Army always had some things for you, because they keep you busy with seeing movies about things you're supposed to do, things you're supposed to know. So, even though you're not really doing anything, the Army keeps you busy.

What types of movies did they show you?

Some of them were going over the equipment that we had, tactics that we were already trained in.

Like a last minute refresher.

Right.

Where did you stay while you were there in New York?

... It was ... [Camp Kilmar] in ... [New Jersey]. We did get a couple of passes to New York City.

Did you see any shows or anything?

No. We went to a couple of dance halls and enjoyed visiting with a couple of young ladies. They didn't have trips out to the Statue of Liberty at that time during the War. But I got to the coastline and was able to see it from afar, anyway. We did get to visit some restaurants and enjoy some good food.

And the people in New York treated you well when they saw you in uniform.

Yes. They were always very nice to the soldiers at that time.

How long were you in New York before you set sail?

I would say probably the better part of two weeks before we were put on a boat. Most of the time was spent in the camp.

So you got on the boat. And it was the Stirling Castle?

The Stirling Castle, right.

You said it used to be a British luxury liner.

Yes. But it wasn't a luxury liner for us (both chuckle).

What were your sleeping quarters like?

We had to string up hammocks in the area my company was quartered. During the day we would be out there, and at night we would have to put up all the hammocks and climb into them for the night.

Were you on an upper hammock?

There weren't upper and lower at that time because you were stringing them up to the upper levels.

So it wasn't like on Navy ships where they were one over another.

No, not on this one. Depending on where you were at on the ship, some other people had quarters like that. But our company was set up on hammocks.

So you set sail for New York on September 18. And it was twelve days?

Yes. It took twelve days to go over in a convoy.

How many ships were in a convoy, do you know?

I don't really know, but it was a lot of ships.

Do you know about how many men were on your ship?

My ship had the whole regiment on it, so that was 5,000 men.

While you were going this twelve days, what did you do? Did you have regular duties that you had to perform?

No. The Army always sets up classes for you of some kind (chuckles) because they always want to keep you busy. There were mostly things we had learned before, but we just had to go through it again. They would go over how to break down a weapon, now to clean it; what the tactics were when we would be in the field; how we were supposed to advance on the enemy and things like that.

What was the mood on the ship?

We were very up-beat.

You were. When you traveled across the ocean, did you go in a straight line or dig you zigzag.

They would do both. Sometimes we were just going, then they would tell us there was possibility of submarines around and they would all go into zigzag patterns. Fortunately, in the convoy I was in we never lost a ship. We never got attacked. So after a little while of zig-zagging they would decide all was clear and we were able to straight ahead. Of course, the Stirling Castle would have been able to make the crossing in about five days, but we had to travel with the convoys.

Everybody had to keep up.

Right.

So you have a relatively smooth passage.

We were very fortunate. We didn't have any problems.

So, after twelve days you landed in England?

Right.

In Liverpool.

Right.

And you were there for about three weeks. What did you do? When you landed you said you traveled somewhere else – you didn't stay in Liverpool?

No. We went to camps, but I don't remember where those camps were. But we were ...

Winchester?

That was the name of it. And I don't remember exactly where that was, even. All the weapons were packed in Cosmoline, so now we had to clean everything! First you put it away, and then you take it all out again and clean it!

Where were you living? You were living on a base?

We were in barracks in England, then.

Was it just Americans on this base, or were there other forces?

No, it was just Americans. It was all of our Division that was quartered in one area.

You said you were about three weeks getting everything ready. Did you have some free time while you were there?

Yes. I got a couple of passes to London. On one of the passes I experienced an air raid.

You did! What did you have to do?

We had to go into a shelter – an underground shelter. We heard the explosions, but fortunately none of the bombs hit anywhere where I was.

So you didn't see any of the actual damage.

No.

But you heard it.

Well, I saw damage that had been done previously. During the time in London we had we saw various buildings that had been burned out and bombed out.

That must have made the war seem a lot more real to you.

Oh, yeah. A lot different than in the United States.

You started seeing it and not just hearing about it.

Yes.

So you lived on the base, and had your meals and everything there.

Right. And that was the normal mess hall ...

The usual stuff. When you did go into town, did you meet some of the local people? Did you talk to them?

Not really. We would get on a train near the base where we were and travel into London. The London people were so used to seeing so many GI's there that they really didn't pay attention to you. If you were somewhere like you were going to get a meal, you might talk a little bit with the waitress or something. But otherwise the rest of the time we would just come and go without anyone really noticing we were there.

At lot of the Americans were passing through.

Oh, yeah.

So you finished this time in London, and in October you left for France.

We were landing on Omaha Beach. We had to climb over the side of the ship and go down – not the rope ladder – but sort of a netting that we would climb down the side of the ship into a landing craft. And we were taken onto the beach in that because they didn't have the harbor clear yet to take the big ships in.

That must have been a little unnerving to climb down that netting.

Yeah. It was a little different.

Did you have your packs with you and everything?

Yes.

So you had all your stuff on your back, and you're climbing down this netting into the craft. How did they get the equipment off the ship?

The engineers in our division handled all that. They would take all the crates and everything – they would be responsible for that. We didn't get that until we were on land again. So we didn't have to worry about bringing that into shore.

When you got to shore, then ...

We went to a small camp there. Well, not very small because it was the whole regiment. Then all our equipment was brought back to us and issued to us again. And we were ready to go. We had all our ammunition and all our equipment.

How long were you in that area?

Just a couple of days.

And you lived in tents?

Yes.

So it was just like the field exercises you had.

Right – kind of like that.

So you were in tents – the whole regiment in one area?

Yes. We were spread out because there was still the possibility of German aircraft.

So they didn't want you in one spot.

We couldn't really stay close together. We were in a general area, anyway.

Things must have been feeling real to you at this point.

Yeah, especially when you were landing on Omaha Beach and you could see the emplacements where the Germans were ...

Like the machine guns and things?

Yes. They were up on the hill. Omaha Beach was low, and the gun emplacements were all up high. Of course, by the time I was there we had a road to ride up on. They had to load us on the trucks on the beach and drive us up the hill to go up there. But you could see what had happened in those places on June 6.

You could see the results of D-Day. That must have affected the mood of people there.

Oh, sure. Then we knew we were there. We knew it wouldn't be a very long time before we were in combat.

That was late October that you were there.

Right.

You said on November 6 you went to another area 153 miles away.

Yes. Then we moved to an area around Geilenkirchen, Germany. We drove through Geilenkirchen and that was our first view, really, of a city that was destroyed by combat.

This was Germany or Belgium?

I don't know if Geilenkirchen is exactly in Germany or if it is in Belgium.

You talked about going into France and then Belgium.

Yeah, we went to the area where we ...

So you traveled through some areas to get to Germany.

Right. That was the first taste we had of hearing the sounds of battle.

And what were you hearing?

They put us in an area where we had to set up our tents and we had shells going overhead from the Germans, and shells going out from our side that hit the Germans. So we were in an area where there was combat going on around us, but yet we were given the opportunity to hear what it was like – to know what a shell sounds like as it was passing over.

There must have been some people having trouble sleeping.

Yes.

So you were able to hear the combat going on – the shelling that was going on.

Right. We had just one day there.

And you dug foxholes there?

We dug foxholes there, yes.

And you had done this before in your field exercises.

Yes. That part was just the same.

But you probably went a little deeper just to be sure (both chuckle).

Yes. They had been cautioning us that occasionally a short round comes in where the shell was supposed to go over you and it doesn't, and it hits somewhere in your area. We had to make sure we were dug in to be safe.

Did this happen while you were there?

No. No.

So, you dug your foxholes. And this was where you were staying for a while?

No. We only stayed there one day. It was just a kind of getting used to things. I think they handled that very well, because we stayed a couple of days in places where we could hear the sounds of battle so that when we were on our first line assignment we didn't hear any sounds we hadn't heard before.

So it would be something familiar to you.

Right.

So, where did you go from there?

From there we were moved up on to the Siegfried Line, and we were sent to Lindern, Germany. We were going to attack to take the town of Leiffarth.

So you set up camp like you did before.

No. There we were living in homes that hadn't been destroyed. We just stayed in the homes. Of course, we were staying in the basements because you never knew when somebody was going to start shooting at the upstairs portions. So we were still behind the lines, but we were getting closer.

Our first attack was to attack and take Leiffarth. That was our first day of combat. As we went out we were taking fire from two pillboxes that were out ahead of us. My

first gunner and myself found a shell hole and got into that shell hole because we were taking fire from the Germans. We started digging to set up a regular placement to set up our machine gun in that shell hole so we could start returning fire. We were firing at some Germans who were out in the distance, and also firing at the pillboxes. The engineers, fortunately, were able to work their way around the pillboxes and be able to put their – I don't remember the name of the thing they used to use – but they would shove it in the hole of a pillbox and it would explode inside the pillbox. So they were able to knock those two pillboxes out. I was glad it was them up there and not me!

I bet! You said there were two tanks behind them that they also got.

Right. And for that, our artillery was firing at those tanks and they were able to hit them, but didn't knock them out, but then they moved back from the area where they were firing at us.

While you were there, you said you lost contact with some of the infantry units.

Yes. We were supposed to be supporting E Company. They moved forward and our lieutenant didn't give us the instruction to move up out of the positions that we were in. So they moved further up and left us behind. Those things took up all of a day. When we were forming up to go forward, there was a little hill out there and our lieutenant put us in a very bad position. Instead of going up on top of the hill, he had us go dig in on the reverse face of the hill.

So you were exposed.

Yes.

What happened?

Well, we were able to dig in. My first gunner and myself dug in down the hill a little ways. And the other squad put their machine gun up on the top of the hill. So they had a view out over a big open field. There was a series of trenches up on top that we didn't even know about. The Germans were able to use them to come up very close to where we were.

The first thing that happened, the first gunner on the other machine gun lifted his head up above to look out over the field and he got hit and killed, right in the forehead. So that was our first casualty that day.

We were dug in, and all we could do was protect the area behind us so somebody didn't circle around. Someone – a German up above – threw a potato masher, which is a German grenade, and it bounced down into our foxhole. It was on my side, so I grabbed it quickly and threw it out before it exploded.

As we were there, in a couple of hours, during the night, a couple of Germans came. There was a bridge off to our right. The Germans went under the bridge and set up their machine gun and started firing at us. Of course, we returned fire then and some of our guys were able to work their way around further and throw a couple of grenades at

them. We did silence those guns. Then, that was about Midnight, 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. The rest of the night was quiet.

The next day we were able to move up to the top of the hill, where we should have been in the first place. We were able to provide some supporting fire to E Company which was taking the town of Leiffarth, which we were supposed to have taken on the first day.

So they did capture the town. When that mission was accomplished, that was early December, late November. And you said your group was removed from the line and had some R&R?

Right. That was one thing. Always, when you were in combat, in most cases, they were able to leave you in position for two, three or four days at the most. Then be able to pull you out of the line, taken back, get your clothes changed, take a hot shower and get some good hot food.

Clear your head a little, too, probably.

Right.

So you went back to Palenberg?

Right.

And had some R&R?

Yes. We spent a lot of time sleeping off the line. Because on the line you don't get to sleep very much.

Right. So you said this happened several times. You'd get more assignments and go back and forth.

Yes. We were set up on the line, like I said, for three or four days. Sometimes we had to advance and take the German positions. Sometimes we were told just to hold our positions. We were experienced combat soldiers by that time.

And you were 21 years old at this point?

Let's see. I was 20.

You were 20, and you were already an experienced combat soldier. So you said later that month – later in December – the German Army had broken through the lines?

Right. That was in the First Army area. I was in the Ninth Army, which was in the northern area of Germany. The Germans had broken through our lines. Actually,

what happened, General Eisenhower was planning an attack on Germany which was supposed to be a breakthrough for us to break out of the Siegfried Line and get out into the open areas of Germany. All of the troops that were for the breakthrough were taken back to another area, and the front line was made up of only one division, spread out for a long area. The Germans knew that – I don't know how, but they knew it. And they picked that point for a breakthrough of their own. So they were able to break through lines and spread out. We were in Germany, and their plan was to go all the way down to a city of Belgium – can't remember the name of the city right now ...

Marche?

No. I might not have put that in there. I think it was Liege. They had broken through and were about fifteen to twenty miles into Belgium, and we were assigned – the division was assigned – to stop the northern side of the breakthrough. The Germans were penetrating, and we protected a whole series of towns – my company and our battalion was assigned to Marche, Belgium. We were told to hold that at all costs.

We set up our lines and, at that time, there weren't any Germans in the area who were attacking or shooting at us. We were all still ahead of them. So we had time to set up our defenses for the area.

So this was mid-December, getting close to Christmas. So it was winter. It was icy?

At that time it was not – before Christmas – it was bare ground. It was cold, but we hadn't gotten any snow. We did have some ice on the roads when we were traveling down through that area. But it was not really heavy snow or anything like that.

So you held the position. You were told to hold it at all costs. And you said on December 24 a small German tank force came up.

Right. That was our first contact with the Germans on the Bulge. We had heard stories that some of our men were slaughtered at Malmedy. Of course we were all very angry. We were fortunate in the fact that in our area we did not suffer a heavy attack. They came up the road and fired a little bit – a couple of their tanks came up and fired some rounds. We fired back – our artillery fired back at them – and they pulled back from there. So we were fortunate not to have any real confrontation with them.

It must have been a great sense of relief.

Yes, it was. But one of our other platoons of machine gunners got hit really hard. They lost several men.

So you felt fortunate.

Yes.

So that was Christmas Eve, Christmas Day.

Christmas Eve they ... [attacked] again. There was a small wooded area off to our left side. They had some men come up there and fire into us. Unfortunately, the machine gun position that we had set up that we figured they would be able to throw a grenade into our emplacement. So we decided to do it to them. My sergeant was in the foxhole with me at the time, and we made steps to be able to take our machine gun and run out of the foxhole back to a stone fence that was in back of us near the hotel where we had been staying. We both threw grenades and picked up the machine gun and ran to the cover. Our other people in back of us fired at the German emplacement there. We could hear them screaming in pain. We managed to make it through and were okay.

We made it back to our other line. Then, after that, the Germans pulled out of that position and left us.

So they retreated a little bit.

Right.

You said Air Force fighters and bombers came and attacked?

Yes. That was a happy day for us. We were used to having fighter cover all the time, but with the bad weather they weren't able to do it. When those waves of airplanes came over we were all cheering.

With good reason.

Right.

So, seeing those fighters overhead was the best Christmas present you could have ever had.

Right. It sure was.

Then we celebrated New Year's Eve there.

You said your captain helped you celebrate.

The captain had a bottle of whiskey he was able to give to us. So everybody had a couple of shots of whiskey – all the guys from my squad. It was quiet in our area at that time.

Then, on January 2, a British division was moved into our area to relieve us. We were all pulled out and sent to another area further to the west. We were going to start attacking the Germans then. We had built up enough strength and were not worried about holding the line anymore.

Now you were going to advance.

We were going to destroy them.

When we kicked off on our attack, actually there weren't any combat German troops out in front of us until we moved a couple of miles forward. That was set up that we were going into one small town after another in that area of Germany – it wasn't Germany, it was Belgium. In that area there were a lot of small towns. The Germans would be entrenched in a town. We would have an artillery barrage, and then the infantry would attack. We would provide machine gun cover to them. We would fire over their heads into the town while they were moving up themselves.

It just seemed like every day we would take another town. We just kept moving forward. The whole division was moving up at the same time. If there were more German defenses in one area, they would send more troops in there and keep moving us forward all the time.

By that time, too, it was 0^o to 10^o temperatures.

Frostbite.

So many men were going back with frostbite and we weren't getting replacements at that time, so each platoon was short at least two or three men. But we kept moving forward. I caught a terrible cold. I was always worried at night when I was coughing that I would attract some Germans to start shooting at us (chuckles).

We were just about at the point. The next day we got word we were supposed to meet the First Army the next day.

I was just so sick. I had a terrible fever. I was going to continue on, but one of the guys called the medic over. I had 103^o or 104^o fever, and he said I had to go back. He guided me and we went back and met the medics who were behind us. They checked me and put me in an ambulance and I didn't remember anything for two days. I was in the hospital in Liege. The nurse said, well, you're back with us again. It was the first thing I knew.

Fortunately, my platoon on that day did go up and met the First Army people. There wasn't any real fighting at that time. By that time the German lines had broken and you'd see Germans surrendering rather than fight any more.

I was back in the hospital about three weeks. Then I was sent back to my company. They were in [Schaesberg], Holland. I got a chance to recover. There again, the people were very welcoming. They were making cakes and pies for the soldiers. So it was a really relaxing time.

It gave you a chance to really recover – your body as well as your spirit, probably.

Yes. Right.

At that time, fortunately, quite a few men who had trench foot were able to return to the division, too, so we were able to get people back whom we had originally. I always admired – I don't know how the Army arranged it that they knew where all the divisions were, all the people were; were able to get men back to their companies and platoons again. Then we were supposed to cross the Roer River.

That was mid-February.

This was mid-February now. We had quite a better time in the rear echelons before we had to go back into combat again.

We prepared. We were going to cross at 10:00 at night, I think it was. We all went up to the river. When we got there a German dive bomber arrived in the area. We had flood lights with us. They spotted the plane. The anti-aircraft was firing at him. It didn't bother him. He just came down and dropped an anti-personnel bomb right in our area. That was another time I was so fortunate. There was an extra pontoon on the bridge. I went down on the left side of it. The first gunner went on the right side. The bomb dropped on the right side and he was killed. I was wounded. I had shrapnel in my hands, in my shoulder and four pieces run through the steel helmet. Fortunately it slowed it enough that it went into my scalp but didn't penetrate the bone.

Wow.

So I went back to the hospital again!

That time, of course, I had a longer time in the back. I missed most of the advance across Germany because I didn't get back until we were ...

You rejoined them around April 20?

Right. By that time they were in ... [Hannover], Germany, which was about 100 miles from the Elbe River.

So again, while I was in the hospital, I got a couple of passes into Paris. So I was enjoying myself (chuckles). I got to really see all the sights that I'd read about in Paris. A lot of them were not opened to visitors. But at least I saw the buildings. Paris, of course, was in great shape because no combat ever happened there.

Now, when you rejoined the unit you also got a promotion.

Right. I was promoted to sergeant.

You were 21 years old at this point? You said April 20, 1945.

Right. Actually, then, at that point it seemed like the Germans were all giving up. As we were moving forward we had to set up our machine guns a few times in order to take some town. We were providing covering fire. But there wasn't really much combat then. We didn't lose any men at that point. We had been getting replacements by then, so we had quite a few new men in the company who were replacements who were severely injured before and were sent back. A couple of men were sent back to the U.S. Other ones after they left the hospital were never able to get back to the company.

You also said a lot of the Germans were surrendering, but they wanted to surrender to the Americans and not the Russians.

Yes. Right.

Did you meet any of these? Or, what did you hear them say about why they wanted to surrender?

I talked with some of them when we were on the Elbe River. They were on the east side of the Elbe and we were on the west. We wouldn't cross that because we didn't want to be firing at the Russians and have them firing at us.

So the Russians were going to go as far as the Elbe River.

That was about 50 or 60 miles from Berlin.

So the engineers – our general decided there were just a lot of Germans on the other side of the river who wanted to surrender. Our general decided the engineers would put boats into the water, and we were going to round up all the Germans and have them surrender to us. I think that made him look a lot better to have so many thousands of Germans surrendering to him (chuckles).

So did the Germans say why they wanted to surrender to the Americans?

Yes. They had heard that the Russians were very hard on them, that the Russians killed all the Germans rather than take them prisoner. They were afraid to surrender to the Russians. They knew that the United States would give them good treatment. So I went over in a couple of the engineers' boats and helped line up the prisoners and make sure they didn't have any weapons on them. We took all the knives away from them, sabers and whatever they had. I got my prize pistol that I was able to bring home after the war – a P38 pistol. I also got a small dagger with an engraved swastika on it, which is one of the souvenirs I brought home.

You said there was also an area – a displaced persons camp.

Yes. That happened before we got to the river. That's true. There was a Polish DP camp – displaced persons camp.

You said they were slave laborers.

Yes. They were all slave laborers. They worked in the fields around that area. I'll tell you, those people were just skin and bones. They didn't get much food at all. They were, of course, overjoyed to see us.

So the Germans who were running it had run off.

All the Germans had disappeared. The camp was still closed up. I wasn't there when they first opened the gates. But the Polish people who were there were afraid to come out. They didn't know for sure who we were. They didn't know anything about the war or how it was going. So when they were told that they were free, they were very happy.

You said there was one problem with them.

Yes. When we left the gates open – I wasn't there as a guard or anything. I was able to get in to visit the camp, just to see what it was like.

You said the Polish slave laborers who were in there, when they were freed ...

They would sneak out at night especially and attack some of the German farmers who had mistreated them.

So there were going to get their revenge.

Yes. They were going to get their revenge then.

What did you do? What happened?

They had to post a guard at the gate. We still left it open, but wouldn't allow any of the Polish people out at night.

Of course, during the days they could go out. But there were troops all around so they really couldn't do anything then at that point.

So your division then was moved, and you went to Mannheim, Bruhl and Heidelberg?

Yes. The war ended at that point. We were on the Elbe River in a small town there. Then the war ended when we were there. Of course, we were overjoyed at that. We celebrated by firing some rifles in the air, too (chuckles)!

And then, after that, we were on occupation duty and went to three different cities. They would move us from one to the next. We would have to run patrols at night and also patrols during the day to make sure the Germans weren't planning anything. We finally wound up in Heidelberg, which is the nicest place because it was not bombed. The United States never hit that area because there was no manufacturing in that area. The only thing they destroyed there was a bridge over the river.

All this time you had after the German army was gone, and there were all these Germans around – farmers and other people – how did they react to you?

Most of them were very sullen. Of course, they wouldn't say anything to us because they didn't know what we would do. But they were not happy to see us. That's for sure. They would do what they were told. Like one thing, they couldn't be out anywhere from 6:00 in the evening until 6:00 in the morning.

They had a curfew.

There was a curfew on for all the Germans. We would run patrols in the countryside to make sure everything was quiet all night.

Did anyone try to sabotage anything?

No. But there were areas in Germany where the troops had some people who tried to kill them. They would string cables across the road. There were a couple of areas where they would be driving along and the cable would ...

Decapitate them.

They wouldn't decapitate them, but they'd kill them anyway. So we had to take all our jeeps and put iron rails up in front of them ...

To catch any of them.

They were maybe about six feet high, which was over our heads, to make sure if there was any cable strung out anywhere that they would hit it and it wouldn't hurt the soldiers in the jeep.

Fortunately in our area we didn't have anything like that happen.

Some areas in Germany the people were a lot more fans of Hitler and hated the Americans. But the areas we were in, the people were very docile and didn't give us any problems.

They weren't happy, but they didn't cause any problems.

Since you were no longer in active combat, you had a little more time to relax.

Right. We didn't have much to do. There weren't any movie theaters or restaurants (chuckles) ...

So you got your hands on an accordion.

Yes. Evening was fun time because I would play the accordion and the guys would sing. I forget the name of the thing – in the Army they had a division that could pick up some sheet music. I don't know how they knew, but they found out I could play the accordion, and somebody in the division got some sheet music to me so I could play songs I didn't know (chuckles). Of course, we had a beer hall then – a place to relax in the evening. The guys would love to stand around, sing the old songs, have a few beers, relaxing.

While you were going through all this, did you have a chance to get any mail from home? Did you send mail?

Yes. It's amazing. They got mail to us – never while we were on line in combat. But as soon as we got back to an area for some relaxation, they would always bring the mail up to us then. I told you before; I would get a lot of packages. I think one time I got twelve packages!

You had a party with the guys!

A lot of the guys didn't get anything. So a lot of the guys would partake.

Everybody would share.

Yes.

Were your letters home censored, or was anything you got from home censored?

They were available for censorship. But I didn't try to write anything about where we were or what we were doing. My folks and my future wife said there were never any words scratched out or anything. My letters were always what I wrote.

So the war in Germany had wound down. You said on May 8 you celebrated the official end of the war – VE Day. You spent some time in Paris, Lyon and the Riviera ...

Yes. The Army organized all of that. They would have it set up so the division would get so many people available to go to Paris, Leon or whatever town they had available. Of course, the Riviera was the prized one. So I put my name in for it. We were sending two men from the company every so many days. So I was able to get on one of those trips, which was really nice.

While you were celebrating the end of the war in Europe, the war with Japan was still going on. What were you looking at? What were you expecting?

They had told us that the 84th Division would be going home and get a month furlough. Then we would be assigned to go to Japan. So when we got the news that Japan had surrendered we were overjoyed.

Return to the United States and Discharge

That was the last thing you wanted was to go and fight more. So that was good news. What happened with your division then?

We just had to wait our turn to go home. They set up a point system for every different thing – how many months of service you had, how many days in combat you had; they had points for all these different things. I don't remember how many points I had, actually, but when our division was slated to go home in January, I had enough points that I would be eligible.

Some of the people who had joined our division in Europe didn't have enough points. They were in our division through part of the combat. Then they were transferred out of our division to some other division that was staying in Europe. We would have other people transferred in just to go home. So we were sent home as a division ...

That was ...

In January 1946.

On the Lou Gehrig was the name of the ship?

Right.

And you left from LeHavre, France?

Yes.

You said you left on January 8, 1946. How long was the trip home?

I think it was eleven days. It was a very stormy trip.

Sounds like it was a very messy trip, too.

Yes. We had a couple of storms. One day we only made one mile.

Wow.

Because the captain of the ship just had to turn us into the wind to hold our position. There were so many men sick on the ship from the waves, bouncing up and down. I was a good sailor, and another one of my buddies was a good sailor.

The ship was crewed by an English crew, and he had relatives in England. He would talk to them, and they invited us to the crew's mess and invited us to go on the fantail of the ship and relax there. Where otherwise we were not supposed to go above decks. So it was really great.

It was amazing. These waves were so high you'd sweat they were over the top of the ship. Then the ship would just go up and up and up, and ride to the top of the wave. It was really an experience for a land lubber (chuckles).

Probably made the trip a little easier, too.

Yes. And of course I still played my accordion. And I'd play on the intercom to entertain the regiment.

After you got past that storm and things settled a little more, the mood on the ship was probably a lot different than it was when you went out.

Oh, sure. Everybody couldn't wait for the time we would reach New York.

What happened when you reached New York? You saw the Statue of Liberty?

We saw the Statue of Liberty and everybody cheered.

I'll bet.

It was a happy day.

So you pulled into the harbor in New York. Did your family know you were coming home?

Well, I had written them so I was assuming they knew. But at that time they didn't know when – all they knew was that I was coming home. When we got into camp I was able to get to a phone and call home.

That was Camp ... [Kilmer]?

Yes. That was the same camp I couldn't remember the name before – that's the same camp we left ... [from].

And you went by train – was it still a troop train when you went to Camp Grant for your discharge or was it a passenger train?

No, this was still a troop train. They just loaded up all the guys and sent us to Camp Grant to be discharged then. Camp Grant is near Rockford – it used to be.

Right. So you were discharged on January 25, 1946?

Right.

And you got back to Chicago from Camp Grant on a passenger train?

Yes. It was a passenger train down to Union Station. And my family met me there.

Your parents and your sister and ...

My future wife.

Were you engaged at that point?

Yes.

So your parents, your sister and your fiancé were there. And you went back to your parent's house?

Right

You must have had a great party!

Yes. Not that day, but it was a great party on the Saturday afterward. My parents had a big sign outside the front of the house, “Welcome Home, Melvin.”

Return to Civilian Life

They must have not wanted to let you go. What was the first thing you did when you got home? Did you have a good meal? Sleep?

Oh, yeah! Meals – Mom made all the things I liked.

Starting by that time a few of my friends got home also, so I was able to get together with them – friends from high school. Fortunately, none of my good friends were killed in the war.

So you were able to get together then.

We had several reunion parties.

It certainly was a lot to celebrate.

Yes, it was.

Were there any men you met along the way in the service that you still keep in touch with?

Well, I was fortunate that our captain of our company organized a reunion in Terre Haute, Indiana, about five years after the war. He sent out invitations to all the men, and about 50 men came to that. After that, we had a reunion every year for all my company ...

From about 1950?

Right. And that continued until about four years ago. By that time we had so many men who had died, and so many men who couldn't travel any more. Some of the men – quite a few of the men who were in the company when we first formed it in Louisiana – a couple of them were ten years older than I was. So they were dying off already. So we just couldn't get together as a company any more.

Do you belong to any veteran's organizations?

I'm a member of the VFW. Our division had reunions, and I went to five or six division reunions. We had two of them in Springfield, Illinois – so they were handy.

When you got home, did you use the GI Bill? Did you take advantage of those benefits?

Oh, yeah. I did. First of all, I took advantage – I stayed home for a couple of months – the 52-20 Club; I'd get \$20 a month from the government until I got a job or went to school. But I didn't use that for very long. I found a job – in March I think it was, 1946. It was the company that made housewares – Ekco Company, at Cicero and Armitage Avenues in Chicago.

I was in a lab. I had intended to go into air conditioning – to study air conditioning when I came home. I started working in the lab. I found that so interesting I decided to become a chemist.

I enrolled at Northwestern that fall – fall of 1946. I went to night school for six years to get my degree.

So you got your ...

I got a Bachelors Degree in chemistry.

So that's what became your career.

That's right. I worked mostly with finishing steel – finishing metals. I worked with electro-polishing and plating, and painting. That was all my experience in the field then.

I'm assuming you married Virginia soon after you got home?

I married Virginia in May of 1946.

You both waited a long time for that day! And you settled in Chicago?

Yes. And we found an apartment on Dickens Avenue, which was only a block away from my first job (chuckles).

So it was an easy commute.

An easy commute. I didn't have a car at that time. And Virginia was working in an office not too far away, but she had to take a streetcar to get there.

So you settled into civilian life and things progressed all right for you.

And all through we had five children. At present I've got nine grandchildren and three great-children.

That's wonderful!

Lasting Impressions

When you look back at your military experiences, how did they affect the way you think about military in general? About war? About what's going on in the world around us?

Well, of course I wish there would never be another war.

Because you know what happens – what it really is. So it's hard to see the young men and women now ...

I feel sorry for all of them because I know what they're going through. Except I think war today is even worse than it was when I was in it.

Why is that?

Well, there are just so many new weapons that kill so many people. Our weapons were small compared to what they've got now. The bombs are bigger. The shells are bigger. They shoot with .50 caliber guns instead of ... [.30 caliber guns].

So the power of destruction is so much bigger.

And then I think we were fortunate that the men who were wounded – we had several men wounded in my company; one man lost both legs, several lost one leg. But now, with these bombs that they have that they're facing driving in a jeep somewhere and hit a bomb in the road, they lose both legs, their arms, their head is damaged, their brain is damaged. It's a terrible thing.

Did you consider your time in the service to have been a good thing in your life, a beneficial thing? What was the effect that your time had on you in your personal life?

Well, I think since I came home in one piece I think I benefited from the war. It taught me a lot about people. We had people in the company from all over the country. It made me realize how important the United States is to the rest of the world. And even now we're providing soldiers to fight in all different countries. I think we've got men in forty different countries in the world. We keep going out to help other people – just like we helped Europe in World War II.

Is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to talk about at this point?

I really don't think so. You've covered it very well, the way you led me through it all.

In that case we'll be going off record. Thank you for telling your story.