

# **VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT**

**Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations**

**Interview with**

**Charles L. Lewis**

Conducted by Martin W. Thomas

September 9, 2004

This project sponsored by the Indian Prairie Public Library  
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## **Part 1: Introduction**

**This interview is being conducted on September 9, 2004, at the Indian Prairie Public Library in Darien, IL. My name is Martin Thomas. I am speaking with Charles L. Lewis. Mr. Lewis was born on June 7, 1921, in Chicago, Illinois, and now lives in Woodridge, IL. Mr. Lewis learned of the Veteran's History project through an Internet search using the Google search engine. He has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project... Here is his story:**

**Mr. Lewis, during this interview, how would you like me to address you?**

Chuck.

**Chuck. Thank you, Chuck.**

## **Part 2: Entering the Military:**

**Chuck, when did you enter the service?**

I entered the service by enlisting in the Signal Corps Schools, Electronic Schools, November 20, 1942, in Chicago.

**What were you doing at the time you enlisted?**

I was in school, under the GI bill and a friend of mine called me and told me that if you enlisted and passed their test, the Signal Corp would give you 10 months of electronics training and when you graduated, you would enter the military as a Second Lieutenant.

**Now, you say you were already in school when you enlisted?**

Yes.

**How were you able to go to school on the GI bill at that time?**

I qualified for it and I was under a pre-med course.

**Your tuition was paid for by the GI bill?**

Oh, yes.

**And you say you enlisted in the Signal Corps?**

Yes. I lived at home; I didn't have a uniform. I went to 10 months of schooling. The last school I went to was Lewis Institute on the South Side of Chicago, which was the precursor of IIT.

**How long had you been at Lewis Institute before you were actually called up?**

I was there four months, the last four months of the 10-month electronics training period and then I was shipped to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, without Basic Training and without the gold bars of a Second Lieutenant.

**There are two things I would like to address. One is very unusual and the other, unfortunately, is probably not too unusual. First of all, you say you went straight to Fort Sill without any Basic Training. Do you have any idea why they skipped Basic Training for you?**

No, I don't.

**And the second, the unfulfilled promise, if you will. What was their explanation?**

That there were so many Signal Corps schools across the country; they couldn't possibly make them all Second Lieutenants.

**Even though they promised it at the beginning. Did you have any recourse at all? Did you make any attempt to...?**

No, no.

**So they sent you to Fort Sill. What did you do at Fort Sill?**

I joined the 349<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion and they were known as "School Troops." And the guys there said you are lucky, we're School Troops, we're never going anywhere. Which meant in a few months we were on a troop train headed for a port from New Jersey to go to Europe.

**When you first got to Fort Sill, how long had you actually been in uniform?**

We made a stop in a camp in Michigan and they gave us our clothing. We had no idea what went anywhere. I didn't know what leggings were; I didn't know what a helmet liner was and so forth. We weren't properly dressed until we arrived at Fort Sill and the other soldiers took pity upon us and showed us how different things worked.

**But that's one of the purposes of Basic Training, to teach you how to dismount a drill, marching, proper wearing of the uniform and so forth.**

I don't think we had time; we were at war.

**What was that like for you, to be issued uniforms and you still don't really know how to be in the army?**

It was just part of the game.

**There were many others in your same situation?**

There were five others. There were six of us altogether from the Signal Corps School though we did not know each other while we were in school of course because we went to different schools. But we were shipped together. They had to put us together because we were all black and we were destined to be shipped to the 349<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion at Fort Sill.

**Was the 349<sup>th</sup> a segregated battalion?**

Yes. White officers and two black Warrant Officers who were the pilots of the two Piper Cubs that we had and they would observe the strikes and so forth, or the targets.

**They were the spotters?**

Spotters. Thank you.

**You said all the officers were white. Does that go all the way down to Second Lieutenant?**

Yes. From Colonel to Second Lieutenant.

**Did that ever change during the time that you were in the service?**

No. Didn't change until Truman came in.

**How long were you at Fort Sill?**

I was there through Thanksgiving of '43 and soon after that we shipped out for Germany.

**Chuck just referred to a very large, very complete photo album that he has of photographs taken throughout his service. We looked at this before we went on record. He has some very interesting photographs including a dead Moccasin Snake. As a quick aside and we may refer back to this periodically during the interview: You told me before we went on record that you took all the photos in this album except the ones where you're in the photo.**

I would say 99%.

**Was photography a hobby of yours before you went in the military?**

Yes, yes.

**We're very fortunate because it's a very good photo documentary of everything that he saw during the time he was in the service.**

**When you were overseas, how did you get these photographs developed?**

I don't remember. I'm sure when I came home I had reels and reels and reels of film to be developed.

**Oh, undeveloped film?**

Yes.

**We may come back to that. It's just very interesting to me that the quality of a lot of these photographs, for the time, is remarkable.**

They don't see the light of day too often.

**The lens technology back then. What kind of camera were you using, if I might ask?**

I'm sorry, I don't remember.

**Somewhere in here there was a photograph of a camera; it was a box camera; it looked like a Brownie. I don't know if that's what you used.**

I think that was a post war picture when a friend of mine, George Wright, from Vicksburg, Mississippi, and family came up to visit me. They had a Kodak Box Camera.

**What you were using was an American camera?**

35 millimeter.

**Oh, 35 millimeter.**

**What was it like for you at Fort Sill being away from home? Was this the first time you were away from home in your life?**

Except for Scout Camp and that sort of stuff, yes. It was exciting. It was interesting. I had a hard time understanding the southern, rural lingo but that didn't last long and made new friends. When the six of us first got there, we made a pledge that we would stick real tight to each other because we were never going to be able to understand these farmers. I think that changed after about the third day.

(Both laugh)

**So what you're saying is that it was a positive experience for you?**

Oh, yes.

**Were you home sick at all?**

I was anxious to go on my first furlough. The only problem there was – well I have to back up a bit. On the train, we were on the Golden State Limited. The six of us left Union Station in Chicago. I was in the Men's Room in Kansas when a porter, who was also black, came in and told me to please hurry up and go back and get my stuff and move it up to the "Jim Crow Car" which is the car right after the engine.

**That's how he referred to it, as the "Jim Crow Car?"**

I don't think so. I think he said the first car. I knew immediately what he meant so I took my time; I dawdled and dawdled and dawdled. Here I am with the uniform on getting ready to go somewhere to fight a war and I'm ready to fight one right there. So when I got back, this older white couple were waiting for my seat and I dawdled, dawdled. Finally, I made it to the "Jim Crow Car." Because it was the "Jim Crow Car," the people who were riding there took food for two or three days so it was a trashy, messy place. The conductor took two seats for himself. A seat for him to sit on and on the opposing seat he had this miniature ticket office and little baggage thing. When we went to Oklahoma City, the train backed in to Oklahoma City; we got out; we went inside; we found out that everything was segregated and that we had to go to a certain place to get something to eat. We just came and stood back out on the platform until the train was ready to go again. When furlough time came, we knew exactly what we were going to run into but that was the way it was.

**Before you entered the service in Chicago, did you have any experience like that prepared you for this or was this all new?**

No, I didn't have any experiences like that, but I heard about it and knew about it, had heard conversations about it and so forth. I knew about prejudice; I didn't know I was a second class citizen until I was about 11 or 12. I grew up in a middle class black neighborhood on the South Side, very near the U of C. Both my parents were professionals, both college educated. In Woodlawn there were doctors and lawyers and

policemen and ministers and dentists and post office workers and that's what I came from.

**So the furlough you're speaking of, was that from Fort Sill.**

Yes.

**Anything remarkable about the furlough or where you went or what you did?**

There was a nightclub on the South Side I used to go to a lot. Before I went into the service I used to see Second Lieutenants out there on the dance floor dancing a lot and I had imagined myself, on my first furlough, I would be out there dancing with golden bars on and I was out there with no bars, with nothing on, buck ass private.

### **Part 3: Going Overseas**

**So, after the furlough, is that when you were shipped out?**

No. Came back to Fort Sill and then we started. We had Head Quarters Battery, Service Battery and three Gun Batteries, A, B and C. I was in Head Quarters Battery. I never even saw the Gun Batteries. They were in different barracks. We soon were told that we were going to practice what we were going to do going over seas. I was a radio repairman. I was concerned with the AM and FM radios that we had. In artillery, when you're on the road, moving your convoy, you're in radio contact. As soon as you stop, the wire section takes over because there's more security there. Headquarters is in touch with the Gun Batteries and they're all in touch with the Fire Direction Center, that's a group of people who had slide rules, they didn't have computers then. They had slide rules and charts and tables to tell them for so many miles away, the shell, the amount of powder, whether the fuse was quick or otherwise, they put that in the 155 Howitzers. I only saw the guns firing once and that was Germany. I had to see what they looked like. I had never seen them before. We were quite some distance from the guns. After we got the practice in Fort Sill, then we were shipped to South Camp Hood Texas with some more practicing simulating warfare. Then we got on a troop train that passed through Chicago. They stopped at Tilden Tech High School for us to get out and do calisthenics. Of course, I had to look at every car passing by hoping I would see someone from my neighborhood, and I didn't. Then we got back on the train which went up through Canada and down upstate New York which was absolutely beautiful, reminds me of Switzerland. Back down to the Jersey, what do they call that, Palisades and got on this black troop ship which joined the convoy, made about 9 knots an hour which was quite interesting. Then when we got near England, we took off on our own, which made you feel a little scary. You kept watching the skies.

**You say your ship moved out of the convoy?**

Yes. And they went into South Hampton, England.

**Do you have any recollection or estimate of how many troops were on your ship?**

No.

**How long did your voyage take?**

Nine days.

**Nine days.**

They did issue a newspaper, I don't know if it was the one going or coming, but it was called US Cold Dale Tale Victory.

**(Tape stopped while Chuck looked for a copy of the newspaper, the Cold Dale Tale)**

Gold Bale Tale

**Gold Bale Tale.**

Published by the ship.

**Published by the ship, that was on his return trip and he doesn't remember the troop ship going over, the name of it. What was the trip over like?**

It was interesting. It was kind of rough. I never did get seasick. Some people got horribly seasick. One time I went up to the head. The toilets were always at the bow of the ship, the bathrooms. They had these toilets like that. Then they had the face bowls and then they had the showers. I stayed up there one day a little too long, shaving and doing everything and I was beginning to feel sick so I got the heck out of there.

**A lot more motion on the front of the ship?**

Oh, yeah. It would go up; it would hang and a guy would groan. It was something else. Not too many people went to dinner.

## **Part 4: Experiences**

**You already told me that when you arrived, you went to South Hampton.**

Yes.

**And you debarked there?**

Yes, and went to Merewilts, England.

**How do you spell that?**

M - E - R - E - W - I - L - T - S. That was our first stop.

**What did you do there?**

We had to wait 'til we got our equipment. We had to set up. I remember taking my first shower there. The showers were kind of half way outside. We had to knock the ice off of the showerheads. We didn't bathe too often on the troop ship going over and we were in bunks, maybe 5 tiers high. I remember seeing a guy, several tiers over, who was examining himself closely. Whatever one person has on a troop ship, everybody else gets. So, by the time we got to England, I had a full case of crabs. And they told me to go in there and wash myself in this brown laundry soap. Carefully, wash everything carefully and wash my clothes. I did that and that's how I got rid of them. That's what everyone had to do.

**You mentioned lack of showers. Was that to conserve water?**

No. It wasn't lack of shower, you just didn't feel like it 'cause the ship was bouncing around so much. If you stayed there too long, you got sick. It was the head, the head of the ship so there was quite a bit of movement. Not straight up and down, it was sideways and every which way.

**In Merewilts besides being assigned equipment, did anything else happen there?**

Some very interesting things happened. When they set up the kitchen, they have a place out there that when you finish you dump whatever's leftover into a garbage can and then you dump it into pots of water and then you dump it into hot clean water and then it's done. After a couple of days, real little kids were out there by the garbage can. So you saw that and the next time you took more food and so you'd drop off more food in the garbage can. Each day the kids would get bolder and bolder and bolder. This happened clear across Europe. Then we found out that white infantry troops found out that we were coming they told everybody that we had tales and that we had venereal disease. So the older people stayed away for a while. Then they got to know us. Other young men, other Englishmen were off in their military, so we were the only young males around. So pretty soon, older people started coming around. It got so that when my buddy's first child was born, I heard about it. I had to go and find him at the mayor's house with the mayor's daughter to tell him that he was a father. This was repeated across France, Belgium, Holland and Germany. The same thing. We would go into a town, every once in a while you'd see a curtain jiggle and that was it, you wouldn't see a soul. When we'd

leave a town, they'd be at the, even in Germany they'd be at the curb crying and everything.

**Crying, why?**

Because we're leaving. They got attached to us. We got attached to them. It was the same thing. Somehow the troops that were leaving found out that we were coming, that we were black, so they would tell these people that we wouldn't see hide nor hair for a couple of days. Again, the little kids would appear to get the garbage and then leave more and more garbage for them and the kids would get a little older, older and then pretty soon you'd have adult.

**At that time, my assumption is, interracial dating in the U.S. was very rare?**

Oh, no.

**Wasn't rare?**

Just frowned upon.

**Was it more common over in Europe, England and Europe?**

I don't know. If we weren't there, how could it occur?

**True.**

I was in Germany for kind of a long time. I did see some Germans who were mixed.

**When you were at Merewilts, how long had you been in uniform by that time?**

As I said before, I was at Fort Sills several months before we shipped out. So I was acclimated.

**What was your rank at the time you arrived in England.**

Private. BA Private. Oh, I have, when I was made Corporal... Oh, I'm wrong, I'm wrong, sorry. I made Corporal before I left.

**Before you left the States?**

Yes. June, 1944.

**When did you arrive in England? It was obviously after June, 1944. September, '44.**

September, '44. This was sent to my parents.

**I see. O.K. What Chuck just showed me was his notice of change of address.**

APO New York.

**APO New York.**

**After Merewilts, where did you go?**

We crossed the North Sea. That was another very rough crossing. We had gotten our trucks and our guns and all of our equipment. The guns and trucks were stored below in the ship and you were not allowed to go down there because if one broke free, in that rough sea, you know, you'd get smashed. We went into Lehavre and lot of sunken ships in the harbor at Lehavre and our ship just weaved around them and we landed and went to Camp Twenygrand. That camp there was a staging area and was named after cigarettes believe it or not. You know we were given free cigarettes.

**Yeah, I know.**

We were in Camp Twenygrand. We weren't there long until we got all of our equipment, trucks and guns and everything all together. Then we started our convoy. I can remember stopping, although I don't like France now, but I can remember when the convoy would stop, people would run up with bread and wine and stuff.

**They were welcoming you?**

Yes. I remember in Belgium, we stopped and a little boy was going by and I asked him where were we and he said, "Belgique." It was the first time I'd heard that word, Belgique. That was in Belgium. Then we supported the 9<sup>th</sup> Army crossing the Rhine River, our guns did. A very interesting thing happened in Germany. We would police up on trailers to attach to our trucks. We would put all of our equipment, all the radio equipment in the trailer so we had more room in the truck. The only thing is, when we would get to a river crossing, none of those wheels fit the bridges that were pontoon bridges that they had put up because all the bridges had been knocked down, the military put up the bridges. So we had to put all that stuff back in our truck, abandon the trailer, cross the river then police up on another trailer. We did that all across Germany.

**Were the trailers too wide for the bridges?**

Too narrow. The bridges had troughs in them.

**I see.**

And it was American size vehicles that could fit over and these trailers were too narrow. And I imagine most of these trailers had been horse drawn.

**During this time, now you're moving by convoy?**

Yes.

**And you showed me your APO change of address. Were you able to stay in touch with your family?**

Oh, yes. They had the Tribune sent to me, and I would get it by mailbags full. It wasn't a "daily" Tribune, not at all. And then I would have to try to find a place to bury them when we left so the movements of my outfit couldn't be traced. I was told that there were a lot of Tribunes found under a lot of hay when the Germans came back to wherever they came from.

**I imagine that made you pretty popular with your fellow soldiers to have news from home like that.**

Not necessarily.

**They weren't newspaper readers?**

Oh, let me tell you what happened. Starting out with going overseas on the troop ship, the officers decided that the troops would only get comic books. Every major magazine, war time style for the military, was smaller and had no ads in it but it had the familiar cover. So we raised hell, until we could get our Saturday Evening Post and Collier's and so forth. Unfortunately, I never got to know any officers. There was a barrier there, and I really didn't want to know any.

**Do you have any idea why they had that rule?**

The officers that blocked the magazines? They did it themselves. It wasn't any army rule or anything. They just probably decided, oh they don't need.. what do they know about the Saturday Evening Post or Collier's? And that's what I read at home.

**And they didn't want to leave it up to you?**

No. They just arbitrarily decided they would keep all those things and just send us the comic books.

**Were these magazines, they were coming through the PX or were they your own private mail?**

No, they were through the military. This was the military edition, it had no ads in it, in the magazine. They were condensed.

**So you say you were able to stay in touch with your family and they supplied you with the Chicago Tribune.**

Oh, another thing. How was that, why were we given a liquor allowance? We were given a liquor allowance by just a small portion in our cups until we raised hell and we got larger portions. They wanted to clamp down on that, too. I don't know how they knew who was 21 or not, but everyone got a liquor ration. And we had to make some noise before we got what we thought we should be getting.

**Now is this army issue, just like your food?**

Yes.

**You didn't have to pay for it?**

Correct.

**And you mentioned, briefly, the Twenty Grand and the fact that they were issued...**

No, not issued. They were given to us by, was it the Red Cross? Or some organization. But after that you could buy them.

**This sort of ties in. I was going to ask you what you were eating at the time. K rations or C rations generally had a little packet of four cigarettes as part of the thing. Were you eating out of a mess kitchen or were you actually on individual rations?**

We had K rations. Some were good, some were quite good. And they did have a chocolate bar that could last you a whole day – very hard, dark chocolate. It would take a whole day to eat it. It was so hard. But generally, our mess stayed with us. Although we had K rations. They were issued to us.

**But you were getting hot meals out of ...**

Most of the time. We were cut off one time in Germany and we were on a farm. We took over this farm house. It had a great big farmyard. It was a fenced in farmyard and also it had places for cows, for geese, for goats, for pigs. There was a crazy guy in our group who, some mornings, would go out and open all the doors and all these different animals would be milling around and the Polish slave, the Polish slaves stayed there, the owners were gone, they were around there somewhere. They would come in and dutifully put the cows back where they belonged and so forth. We were living off those

chickens. One time it was my duty to cut up the chickens. Someone else had to take the feathers off, thank God. I had never seen a whole chicken like that before and they only let me do that once because they could not recognize any parts that I had cut.

**Pretty clever way to get out of cutting up the chickens.**

I really didn't know what I was doing.

**On the rations, so you were supported by Field Kitchen?**

Yes.

**Did you ever have Spam? Was that part of your diet?**

Oh, yes, oh, yes. Didn't have it too much in civilian life but I knew what it was.

**But they actually did have it?**

Mm, Mm. (affirmative) The milk I didn't like. It was powdered milk. But I'm not a coffee drinker, and everyone else would be drinking hot coffee in the morning, and I'd be drinking milk. They'd look at me and shiver.

**Laugh.**

I still drink a lot of milk.

**One of the questions I ask everybody is: Did you have any USO Shows, and I've seen in your scrap book some USO flyers.**

Mm, Mm. (Affirmative).

**Did you have any famous entertainers at your USO.**

No. No. There was a band, a female band called the Sweethearts of Rhythm, and the leader was a black woman, but she was very fair and had blonde hair and they passed through. Everybody liked them. Sweethearts of Rhythm, I'll never forget them. But the other entertainment, I never saw anybody important.

**Did you have any furloughs while you were there?**

I had furloughs when I was in England. In fact, I took pictures of London from a moving cab, and I like London. In fact, I ran into a black girl from my neighborhood who I didn't know too well. But when we saw each other, we ran and hugged each other.

**What was she doing in England?**

I don't remember. I don't know if she was connected with the military or not. But when I ran into her after I came home in '46, we just barely spoke to each other. I didn't know her well.

**But she was a civilian?**

No. I can't remember what she was. Mary Lou Hebert (H-e-b-e-r-t).

**Chuck, we're about ready to talk about your combat experience.**

Oh, I want to mention one more thing.

**Please.**

Everyone started naming their trucks, and no one named my truck, so I had them paint on both sides, "Jackson Park Express" which is the elevated train that we used to go downtown from Woodlawn. And passing large convoys of large groups of American soldiers, that truck would always get a rise out of somebody. "Oh, Jackson Park Express."

**I was going to ask you, do you recall any particular humorous or unusual events before we talk about combat, but you just did. Can you think of any other?**

On the troop ship going over, you were assigned, now and then to go down and ladle out food as the troops were coming back. And a guy, who delivered our Tribune in Chicago, young black kid came by, "Hi, hi." Haven't seen him since. I saw him that one time.

**But you knew him from being your delivery boy?**

Mm, Mm. (Affirmative) And another time, in Germany, I saw another guy from Woodlawn in a truck, "whoomp," went by like that, so I waved and that was it. I didn't see him 'til I got back home.

**As we go along, if you think of any other unusual events or humorous events, please, volunteer and we'll just cover them in.**

**So your unit, at the end of the convoy, where did you end up? You said you were supporting the 9<sup>th</sup> Army.**

Crossing the Rhine River. I have, I don't know how I came across this, but I have a report, written from the Medical Activities and they give the different places we went to. The battalion departs Le Havre on 10 February '45 and moved immediately on the same day to Camp Le Gran in France, the battalion arrived there late the same day.

**With your permission, I'm going to read this right now, scan through it, so we'll go off record.**

Or you can make a copy if you wish.

**We went off record briefly so I could read a Medical Detachment, 349<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion report.**

Which is an excellent history.

**Which is an excellent and very brief history, it's a two-page document and with Chuck's permission, we're going to copy this and add it to the transcript of the interview. Chuck, also, while we were off record, I discussed very briefly with you, your involvement with the 349<sup>th</sup> and you had told me that you were with the Headquarters Battalion rather than**

Headquarters Battery.

**Headquarters Battery, sorry. Headquarters Battery, rather than one of the actual gun batteries. Would you tell me first, what was the mission, what did the Headquarters Battery do?**

All I can tell you is from my viewpoint and my job. I was a Radio Sergeant.

**I was going to ask you next what your specific jobs were.**

We had three different radios, three different types of radios that we had to keep in working order. Although I had this ten months of electronic vacuum tube, electronics training. We could design circuits or anything. All we could do was first echelon maintenance was change batteries, change tubes, change frequencies. That's as far as we could go with all this training that we had.

**Why was that?**

First echelon maintenance, that was the rule.

**You were capable of doing more than that?**

Oh, we could draw circuits, everything. We maintained the Fire Direction Center which directed the guns on when and where and how to fire and how much powder to use and all that sort of stuff. I took care of Colonel Baker's battalion set which was FM. We used FM and AM. We used FM whenever possible because it was more secure than AM. AM blasted all over Europe. And as I said before, we only used radios when we were

moving. As soon as we got settled then the wire section would throw their lines out and everything and they would go completely to telephone which was much more secure. Incidentally, Colonel Baker, we were somewhere and there was a rape report. So Colonel has a rape(victim) show up, had us all out in front of Headquarters. This is a building, around it are these trucks with these big radio antennas, big thing of telephone wires going into the building. Our brilliant Colonel had the rape(victim) show up right in front of the Headquarters Building. And we were there and the woman would come down and look at us. Some of us spit after her as she would go by and of course, she didn't see anybody. And that night, for three nights, we were shelled. But they were high bursts; they were bursting above the trees and just the shrapnel, a little warm, would come down.

**So, I think you're saying that she was able to see the Headquarters.**

Headquarters.

**The configuration of the Headquarters.**

Yeah.

**Did you have any suspicion that this whole thing was a set up to get inside the compound?**

No to get inside, but to spot what was going on. We didn't have a compound as such.

**Did you have any suspicion that the whole rape charge was fabricated?**

Yes, Oh, yes, Oh, yes, Oh, yes. Even though I knew some people were capable of it. But then, because we were shelled that night and for a couple of nights afterwards, that cinched it in our minds.

**Did the Army ever try to follow up to see if she had?**

Oh, I wouldn't know. Remember, I had no contact with the officers, or very, very little. Captain, the only person I really knew was a young Jewish guy named Captain Lubmit. One of our soldiers, who was a real clown, told Lubmit that the Nazis had perfected a Jew detector. And he believed him – not too bright.

**You told me, maybe off record, because we saw it in this medical detachment report, that you were at Wegberg.**

Oh, yes, that was one of them.

**And the record there shows that you got there on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March and that you're**

Wgberg. W-G-B-E-R-G. On the third of March '45.

**And that your battalion fired its first round on March 6<sup>th</sup>. Why don't you, just on your own, tell me about your experiences and your battalion's experiences during that time.**

Well, I told you about the trailer business what happened after we crossed the Rhine River. We kept moving, sometimes we'd stay in a spot just a short time; sometimes we stayed with Radio until we were told that we were going to be there for a while, then we would go to wire. As before, we'd be there a couple of days and pretty soon, the kids would start coming around.

**Leo. For the record, you're showing me a photograph that you took?**

Yes, Leo. The kids always wanted to gather about Leo. I can't remember his last name. As they are slightly older there. We'd be there a few days, kids would start coming around and then we'd move on and then the same thing would happen at the next stop. We didn't always know that we were in these towns. I didn't know that until I saw this. (Referring to the Medical Attachment Report.)

**What accounted for their fondness for Leo?**

I have no idea. I have no idea. And, of course, whenever we found puppies, we kept them for a while. I had a puppy once for a while. Can't remember what became of it.

**When you were telling me about forming up and moving, you said you got all of your equipment, you mentioned guns. I see in a lot of these photographs, usually I've seen carbines.**

Those were our personal guns, 30 caliber.

**You were assigned a ..**

Oh, everybody had one.

**A carbine is not known for hitting power, it was just a personal defensive weapon?**

Yes. And they contracted out everywhere. And my carbine was made by a jukebox company. I'll never forget that.

**What was the name of the company?**

Oh, boy, I can't think of it now. It was printed right there on the metal. I can't think of it now, but they made jukeboxes.

**Your weapon, were you trained at all?**

Oh, yes.

**Did you get some rifle training?**

Oh, yes, in Fort Sill and in Camp Hood, Texas. Certain Sergeants had automatics. I never liked automatics, although I had trained with them and so forth.

**Did you say automatic pistol?**

Yes.

**45?**

Oh yeah, 45 caliber.

**Were you ever required to fire your weapon in combat?**

(Negative answer.) But you always kept it somewhere close to you.

**Any other stories you'd like to share about your experience while you were in combat before...?**

I can't tell you where we were because I can't remember, maybe I didn't even know. But we were bivouacked in a tavern. The radio section was bivouacked in a tavern. The owner and his wife were there. We were told that she was pregnant and I forget what floor she was on, but we were forbidden to go to that floor. Well, we found the alcohol. There were German Tiger Tanks in the area because we could hear them.

**Hear their guns or hear their movement?**

Hear their movement. Those are very noisy tanks. **(Tape change)**

Someone found the liquor and everyone got blind drunk. There were German Tiger Tanks in the area because we could hear them, couldn't see them but we could hear them. I do believe a nine-year-old German kid could have captured the whole radio section.

**And you told me that it was the actual movement of the tanks.**

Very noisy tanks.

**Very noisy but how far away would you estimate they were?**

I don't know. I don't know. Couldn't see them, but we could hear them maneuvering around. Our occupation time was in Greiding.

**Could you spell that?**

G-R-E-D-I-N-G. It was right on the Autobahn.

**Now this is where you were after VE Day?**

Before, during and after.

**I see, O.K.**

There was sort of a walkway. There was a hill there and a lot of the townspeople would walk through there and some of our guys would go up there and sit down and have candy bars and coffee and stuff and attract frauleins that way. Our Supply Sergeant, Skeets, Henry Washington, Jr., would go up there and could never attract any female. Some guys would have used coffee grounds and make contact. We used to kid him. One time he did get a young lady, got her in the Supply Room and it caught on fire so that took care of that. Oh, and another time – Dusseldorf? We were in a town where the Big Red One had been, because in the dining room they had their symbols all around, written on the walls, you know the big red one.

**Yes.**

Germans kept this place clean. Soldiers are always very careless. 30 caliber bullets would get into the trash. The Germans would burn the trash every morning so you knew not to walk outside of this building while this trash was burning because the bullet heads would fly this way and shell would fly that way all over the place. I remember that.

You know, young guys can get into a lot of trouble. Oh, in one of the towns, I can't remember which one it was, there was a Schwarzer Bear Bar, there was a Black Bear Bar. There was a big sign out there, Black Bear. That's where all the Black troops gathered for some strange reason. Ran into a lot of girls that way, too. Remember the Germans were in their army so the American males were the only people available. So we were welcomed everywhere after they discovered that we didn't have tails and we weren't diseased and so forth. But I can remember German girls looking down my shirt and I said, "What are you looking for?" They were looking for where my color ended. They didn't believe I was the same color all over.

**They thought you were sunburned, maybe?**

I don't know what they were thinking.

**What was your unit's mission after the war ended? How long were you in Germany after the war ended?**

Several months during the occupation. Then, pretty soon, came VE Day, Victory in Europe. Then we were preparing, the Gun Batteries were getting ready to start practicing to go to Japan. Then VJ came and then some of the guys who had families had more points than other guys, so they started shipping them home. This friend of mine, George Wright from Vicksburg who is now in L.A.; he went home Thanksgiving of '45 on an aircraft carrier. The storms were so strong that after he got home he wrote me a letter and said the aircraft carrier had damage from the waves. But he finally made it back home. I went with a big bunch of single guys who didn't have many points. There was a very popular song out at that time, "I'll Be Home For Christmas," and we would say, "Christmas '48."

**(Laughter)**

We didn't know how long we would be there. I got home in '46.

**I'm going to ask you about your own personal experience during this time because there's one you mentioned, I think off record, about the war trials. Did your unit have any other mission other than just stay in place and wait for rotation?**

Far as I know, no other mission. But that's when these different trips to see different things came up. I went to Nice.

**For rest and rehabilitation?**

I didn't need any rest and rehabilitation, but I went anyway. I never will forget the Hotel Nigresko, gorgeous place. In Nice, there's a lot of Italian blood because that's right across the water from the Italian Riviera. Welcome to the Riviera.

**Chuck showed me a brochure. As he was looking for this, I see a lot of very interesting brochures from that time. From hotels, from a tour, I think I saw a Bavarian Tour in there.**

Price lists.

**Price lists. Some experiences that you had while you were waiting to rotate back home. It sounds like you didn't just sit around the barracks. You got out and around and saw some things?**

Nuremberg War Crimes Trials, Nice, The Riviera. It was very interesting

**The Nuremberg War Crimes Trials, would you please speak for the record on what you saw there, how long attended and how you got to go there in the first place.**

We were in Greding and the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials were in Austria. So we all piled in this truck to go to this big courtroom where they had the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials. We were sitting there watching Goering and all these well-known German people. Everyone had seen their pictures; everyone knew their pictures; everyone knew what they had done. All these people were there, Goebles. Everyone, practically, except Hitler. The War Crimes Trial was going on. Wish I'd had my camera with me; I don't know if I could have taken pictures there or not. It is something I will never forget and yet I don't remember much of what went on but the fact that we were there. I could see these well-known personalities right there in front of us.

**How far away from them were you? You were in the spectators' gallery?**

I would say 50 feet.

**Were there English translations you could listen to?**

Oh, yes. You had earphones and a little controller thing at the side. You could listen to the person that was testifying or you could listen to the same thing in any other language. It would be very interesting to listen to it in English as they were testifying in another language. And then to go to that person who was testifying and look at the person as they were saying it and watching their reaction and so forth and so on. So it was an interesting thing to do. Get it in their own language or get it in the English translation or listen to some of the other translations. It was fun.

**Did you follow the remainder of the trials through newsprint?**

Oh, yes. Well there was only one conclusion; they were guilty.

**You mentioned Nuremberg and you also mentioned the French Riviera. How long was that?**

Several days.

**What was that like?**

I was impressed by the Hotel Negresco, of course we didn't stay there; we stayed at a cheaper place. But I would look in there and they would have tables all set with cherries at each place setting. We stayed in a hotel room, and sometimes when other people came to visit us in the hotel room, there was a strange apparatus out in the middle of the room;

we didn't know what it was. It looked like a toilet seat but it wasn't. Found out later what it was. It was a bidet. We didn't know what a bidet was. It was an extra seat as far as we were concerned.

**In '46, you were discharged?**

Yes. Came home on a black troop ship. Came into the Jersey Palisades and there was this huge sign, "Welcome Home, Job Well Done." And we all had the same feeling. That wasn't for us, that was for the white troops. My Dad had been in World War I in France; he was gassed in the trenches there. And I'm wondering, why didn't his generation straighten things out.

**Yeah.**

But you know, when you grew up in a certain situation, that's the way it is.

**Part 5: Life After Military**

**Chuck, when and where were you discharged?**

I was pulled back in 1950 for a year and five days. I'm trying to keep that separate in my mind. I really can't remember my World War II discharge. I don't know if it was in Chicago or in a camp around Chicago.

**But it was in this area?**

Yes.

**What did you do in the days and weeks after your discharge?**

My mother said I walked around with a quart of beer. Not a twelve ounce, a quart of beer. When I left this country, I was a non-drinker. When I came back, I was a big beer drinker, drank beer constantly. Trying to think of the brand name, a very cheap brand. I don't even think they make it now.

**Did you end up going to work or back to school?**

I went back to school. I was on a pre-med course, and I went back to Wilson Junior College which was in the Chicago school system, finished two years there. Then I went to Roosevelt University, downtown switched to business. I was working for an import jeweler at 55 East Washington in the Pittsfield Building in the mailing room. I remember mailing out uncut diamonds and things. While I was there my MOS, which was Radio Repairman, came up and I was pulled back into the service for a year and five days. I

was with a black Boston National Guard outfit in Camp McCoy, Michigan, which is the icebox of the world.

**You mentioned it was a black unit, but you told me, it was probably off record, that Truman had integrated the services in '47 or thereabouts. They still weren't fully integrated?**

No. No. I couldn't get over these guys and their accent. I kept thinking, "Come on, talk naturally." "We're going for a ride in the cah." That was the way they talked. Then I learned, later on, that most of these guys, not most, that a lot of these guys were Cape Verdians or a lot of their families were from Cape Verde, an island off of Africa where Portuguese and Africans mixed up. These guys had names like Gomez, Nunziato and stuff like that.

**But they were Massachusetts natives?**

Yeah, later on when I went to Martha's Vineyard, a lot of the people who ran, what do I want to say, the little businesses there, in Martha's Vineyard, were Cape Verdians, I could tell. They were a very attractive race, I think, with the Spanish names.

**Did you finish school at Roosevelt?**

No. The sad end of the story, I had all the GI bills and never got a degree.

**Chuck, were you at Roosevelt when you were recalled into the military?**

Yes.

**Then did you go back to school after your year and five days?**

I went to Northwestern downtown.

**After you got back?**

After I got back. I saw where a sorority there was running a writing contest, short story contest. I was thinking I was a writer; I'd written some stories, so I submitted two stories to this contest and that's the result.

**Well, I'm seeing your picture. First Prize Article Category was won by Charles Lewis for "How To Be Happy Being a Negro."**

It was a sardonic, humorous article. Like if you're in a store and you're next in line and they choose somebody behind you, you'd say, "Well, they have poor eyesight," or

something like that. Then I won honorable mention for the second story, so I won two prizes. I won \$35.

**So you said your education was supported by the GI Bill?**

Mm, Mm. (Affirmative) Then we moved to Woodridge.

**You say we.**

My wife and I and family. We had two young boys.

**When were you married?**

1959. You can see that on my Web Page, too.

**You were married. Where were you working? What were you doing?**

Soon after I got home, a friend of mine called me, the same one who told me about the Signal Corps School in the beginning, told me that they were hiring people as Signal Corps Inspectors. So, I took the test and got into that, and I became an Itinerant Inspector shifting around to Zenith and Helicrafter's and Stewart Warner and different places.

**For a private company or for the government.**

I worked for the government as an inspector on items that the military was buying. That Signal Corps Training affected my work life for the rest of my life. After I got to my glass ceiling in the War Department, I transferred to the Environmental Protection Agency, the EPA in Chicago. And then I got a higher grade, and that's where I stayed until I retired.

**And when did you retire?**

September, '85. I was a Hazardous Waste Specialist for Illinois and Indiana.

**You said you had children?**

Yes, two boys, Stephen and Lawrence. I didn't want them to go to the schools that I went to in the inner city of Chicago, and we started looking, I forget where we started, but we made a big arc around Chicago. One of the places we went to was Woodridge, Winston Hills; they were building this development there. Then later on, we were still looking and Debbie Reynolds was invited by the contractor to Woodridge, and the Tribune ran a two page spread. Then we got much more information. The Woodridge/Downers Grove school system sent more kids to universities than any other area in Illinois. We moved to Woodridge.

**Woodridge was a fairly young community at that time.**

Mm. Mm. (Affirmative) Out of it I got a lawyer and a sales engineer.  
**Wonderful. Congratulations.**

**Chuck, the next question, and I know the answer because you told me off record, that is, did you stay in contact with any wartime buddies after the service?**

Yes, in fact, we tried to do a reunion thing. This was in my mother's house in Chicago. I was in Woodridge at that time. Tried to start it, but no one was... Oh here it is... With this camera. ...Mississippi...and here he is with his wife, later on. And that's as far as it went; we didn't get together after that, but I'm in touch with him now.

**When did you last see him?**

He visited here, and I was in the hospital.

**At Hinsdale?**

Oh, that must have been... It was after my wife died. It must have been, maybe, '98, 1998 or 1999. But then we drove to California. When was that? Got a station wagon and drove the kids out there and saw him out there. I can't remember when that was.

**Have you joined any Veterans Organizations?**

I have played around... No.

**So, it was George Wright you said you've been in contact with?**

Mm. Mm. (Affirmative) He was a wire Sergeant. He was a country boy that knew how to do things.

**Any other contacts you've had with any of your fellow soldiers?**

There's a guy named Lafayette Morrison who was in the neighborhood I grew up in, in Woodlawn. I spend five months in Florida every winter, and I haven't contacted him since I've been back. I suspect he's dead, but I really haven't called his number.

**Chuck I think I'm about ready to wrap up. Before I do though, is there anything that we may have touched on that prompted any other recollection you'd like to share?**

I would say that I wish there hadn't been a gulf between the officers and the men, but there was, on both sides, and I think we both lost.

**How would you say that your service experiences affected your life?**

I think my whole working life.

**It did because it gave you a direction?**

Oh, sure because I started off in the War Department, that's not what they call it, Department of Defense, as an Electronics Inspector and I went to different plants. I went to Teletype; I spent about three years. You're not supposed to fraternize with the workers at these plants. But I was at Teletype for about three years, and before I knew it, I was going to Teletype weddings, Teletype funerals, Teletype parties. Almost started off with a Teletype girl, but another guy who was in the Signal Corps, a white guy, started going with a Teletype woman, and he was shipped off to a plant in Wisconsin.

**A lesson learned.**

I said no. But I still have friends from that work experience.

**Part 6: Conclusion**

**One thing you've already explained to me was growing up in Chicago, fairly insulated from some of the racial realities of the time and the experiences you had there. Thank you very much for sharing those so frankly.**

I never had any obvious racial problem. I'm not naïve enough to think that there weren't any. There could have been a lot of things going on underneath that I didn't know. The business of not being accepted at OCS because I had a heart murmur, of course, that was planned and done. I kind of knew it at the time. But I've never been called a name. I've had great success in Woodridge. The Woodridge Toastmasters started in my family room. I was Chairman of the Woodridge Unit of the American Cancer Society. I stayed with them for years, even joined them down in Florida. I was involved with the Woodridge Recycling. I was very much involved in that because that started soon after I retired, so I was always over at the recycling center. Then I belong to the Woodridge United Methodist Church on 75<sup>th</sup> Street and I've been Chairman of lots of different things there.

**I understand that you were in contact with somebody who works at the library here?**

Yes, what's her name? I don't know her well. In fact, she went with us when we went down to Imopole, Florida. I didn't go down, I was already down there. I had joined the church over there – the plight of the blueberry pickers. That's on my Home Page, too.

**Chuck, before we go off record, would you like to read your Web Page into this transcript, so that if anybody reading this wants to see that, they can do so?**

My Home Page is: [www.homepage.mac.com/CharlesLewis9/FileSharing1.html](http://www.homepage.mac.com/CharlesLewis9/FileSharing1.html)

**Thank you very much and you know that from memory.**

Oh, yes. I would like for you to find a computer here so I can show you how to find my pictures.

**Chuck, thank you very much for spending the time with me today and giving a very interesting interview.**