

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Robert McCabe

Conducted Kevin Haney

August 9, 2006

This project sponsored by the Indian Prairie Public Library
In partnership with the Library of Congress

Part 1: Introduction

Ok, this is an interview being conducted on August 9th, 2006, in Willowbrook, Illinois. Uh, the person being interviewed is Robert McCabe, date of birth was February 9th, 1919. The interviewer is Kevin Haney, and this interview is being conducted on behalf of the Indian Prairie Library, and the interview is taking place on August 9th, 2006 in Willowbrook, Illinois. Mr. McCabe, would you just open up with letting us know what branch of the service you served in, what the period of service was, and um how you came to be in the military

I was in the army. Um I went in in the summer of 1941 before the United States became involved, and I was um released in about April or maybe March of '45, after the war ended. And uh that was the extent of my military experience.

What were the initial days of the army like? Training, boot camp, that kind of thing?

Well, my first stop was down here in central or southern Illinois in a base that has since been closed. I think it was an Air Force base, and I had a physical. Must've passed it because I got orders then to report to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and another fellow and myself drove out there in his car. And uh it was an officer training place, and we went through three or four months of training, and they asked us what part of the country we would like to be assigned to. I said California because I had been out there and I liked it. And I was assigned to uh Camp Camp, uh what was it now. I thought about it a few minutes ago, well I'll think of it later, I can't think of it now. And this is where we trained soldiers coming into the army enlisting or drafting

You were a lieutenant?

I was a lieutenant.

Ok.

And uh I guess I was there a year, a year and a half, I'm not quite sure. And I was transferred up to Fort Ord, not too far away from this first camp. The first camp was built just for WWII to establish with the army.

What were your duties at the first camp? You said you were there for about a year and a half at training camp.

It was strictly a training camp. Yeah, we trained the men that went into service. We had a component, a pretty good sized component of regular army non-coms to assist or to

carry out most of the training I would say, and uh after that time, it was a year and a half or so, I went to Fort Ord for a unit that was being organized.

Now what was what was your method, what was your function during this year and a half? I mean, were you in charge of a platoon or what was an average day for you like at the training facility?

I supposed you'd say a platoon, but I don't know if we wrote it down that way at that place. I was in a company and uh there were a number of tenants, 4,5,3,4,5, and the training of these young men which we learned a few months before and the army just told them whatever.

You were in a barracks?

I was in a barracks with other unmarried officers. These were called BOQs - bachelor, officers, orders.

What was the morale of the men like?

I would say that it was neutral. I don't think any of them were very upset about being in the service, or a couple of the Germans were there, but not very many, and um some of the things I remember, now this was before the war, this was when I was still at the camp before I went to Ord.

Ok.

I was there on Sunday, I guess it was on a Sunday that the war started. I had an automobile, and another lieutenant and I were driving down to Santa Barbara just for the day, and uh a car I remember, a car pulled up behind us, and a man was driving, and a woman was very upset, and she opened up the window and yelled out at us, "Turn around and go back to your post. We're at war!" So I turned on the radio, and I heard what was going on. There was a uh a newscaster at that time, I can't recall his name, and we listened to him and got back to camp, and when we got there, the orders were to arrest all of the Japanese-American soldiers who were at the post.

Japanese-American soldiers?

Japanese-American soldiers, which was done. We rounded them up, and I heard later they were sent up into a post in the state of Washington. And uh, I don't know what was done with them. Some of them up there, I think, there was a very famous Japanese unit that later went on into the Air Force and then some of those, Jack Roberts, was the name, some of them from Jack Roberts, I don't think much was done with them, they were just held up there in barracks.

What were your feelings at this time, you're an officer in the arm and war just broke out.

Well, we got used to war. We had been listening to it with Germany and France and England and so on for a year or two before that, and we knew it was always a possibility that we would be in it. As a matter fact, we felt that it would be a probability that we would be going into it, and we were excited. We gathered around when we heard about it, talked about it, and I don't think that people were sad. They were just excited. And uh well training continued as had been going on and uh

Was the training more intense?

Probably more intense. It probably got more intense, yes. I don't remember, but it probably did. Jack Roberts was very nice. We would go out in the fields and train there, and some days we were in the barracks, the barracks part of the camp, and uh training wasn't very much in there. I remember one day during the lunch hour, we sang *With My Gut Against the Gaping Rock*. And I was just dozing, and something woke me up, and it was a big rattlesnake about ten feet away from I don't know. It didn't attack me or anything, I got out of there unhurt. So after I left that camp, I went to Fort Ord, and we used to go to a place called a hunter military reservation which I understand at that time was owned by William Randolph Hurst. Hundreds of thousands of acres, and we'd go up there and train some, what we would train at Jack Roberts and Fort Ord, too, this was just a little change. And uh I was in Fort Ord or something

And that was in California?

Yeah, that was in California. That was nicely located as far as I'm concerned. It was up around Tom Hill, California, which was a famous resort area up around Monterey, California, and uh then we got orders to move. We got orders to move, and we didn't know much about what was going on. They didn't tell us.

What were your orders like at Fort Ord? More training?

Yeah, I guess it was training.

More specific training?

Mostly training, yeah. We were still training, yeah, and yeah practicing. Training and practicing, yeah. What was I going to say? We started south from Fort Oregon when we got these orders, and like I said, we thought we were going to the Pacific all along, but we didn't, and we ended up in Camp Polk, Louisiana. For whatever reason, that was way south and east in Louisiana then, and we left Oregon I'd say in a week, and we went to Camp McCain in Mississippi and were there a short time. It was like Camp Roberts, built for WWII, and uh from there as I recall we got on a train, and uh all the shades were

down on the train. It was a blackout situation, and we moved for a couple of days I guess, and we really didn't know where we were going.

Were you guys admitted at this point, or were you still with the training?

No, this was this second year. We became a unit and uh it was the 738 field or something, and I remember one night, we had the shades down and blackout everywhere, and we stopped at a station, and I got the impression that it was somewhere in Virginia, and I don't know. And then we took off again and then disembarked from a train near the coast, and it was somewhere, I believe, north of New York City, and uh got on a cruise ship, an English cruise ship, and um took off. I guess we probably stopped for a while. I remember it was English because they had a waiter or someone who would bring tea for us every morning and then the afternoon, so it was a little less for uh but the fresh boarding on the ship. I remember putting up on deck loaded with swords, and I don't know, maybe it was just officers that were there. Anyway, I ran into a few young men that I had known back home, and anyway we were on the ship for 7 or 8, 9 days, whatever, and a great big flotilla ship surrounded by military destroyers or whatever they were, and about the third day I remember there were some depth charges set off about a mile from my ship. Apparently someone felt that they had detected a submarine in the area, whereas if they did, I never heard of it.

Now when about was this? What month or the spring of?

The invasion was in June, I believe, so this must've been in spring, or it must've been in March or April. In the second day out, we took the uh, what's that current that comes up from the Gulf of Mexico?

Stream?

The Gulf Stream, and it got very warm for a couple of days.

Now this was back in '44?

The invasion was in 44?

Correct

Yeah this was in '44.

It was about May

Probably, sort of earlier than May. We get off the ship and docked into a town that I think was Liverpool, and we really didn't know too much about what was going on, and we got on the train and started south, and uh got on the train until I guess the next

morning. I'm a little cloudy now on this. I remember some of these things, one of my friends, the whistle of the train sounded, and he said, "Yeah, these are female trains 'cause the whistles are a much higher tone than American trains." So anyway we were heading off in a day, but I'm not really sure about that. It was a camp not very large on some on the estate of some Lord somebody or other, and we slept in tents, and uh uh what I remember happening there was a large scale operation to confuse the Germans. Messages going out on radio and telephone and so on which the Americans knew would get picked up by the Germans, and uh we were had known they were involved in that some way or another, and we were there for a few months I guess. It was a nice place, the weather was beautiful, and uh we would go up to the little town once in a while. And then we got into our trucks and vehicles and went down to the town southeast England and got onto an LST or whatever those boats were that could carry 100 men, maybe a few more, and guns.

Now were these the actual landing craft?

Yeah these were landing craft.

Ok.

And we went across the English channel and landed at Utah Beach. Now this was not the first day. There had been a landing a few days before that.

Ok. What

And uh what?

What did the beach look like at this point?

It looked pretty full I guess. They were still working on, there were a few odd corpses around in the sand and in the water, and we started up a hill to the south beach in the second area by the road. And I remember there was a straight line of soldiers coming back, and I didn't recognize them, but at first I thought these were German soldiers. What a shock because German soldiers were here. It didn't look quite right to me, but parts of it were German, and some of them were building a west wall, and I thought afterwards, the wall, it must've been tougher in this area. And then we went over to Utah Beach, that was the southernmost of the two American beaches, and then there was Omaha and Utah, and then northward there were two English beaches where the English disembarked, and we went to a location not too far from where we got off the ship.

You were bringing your artillery along with you?

Oh, yes, we were.

What types of guns were these?

These were uh 8 [inch Howitzers] ... and uh we went into position, and we were there maybe a week or so, I really can't remember. It was about a small group at a time getting into a little action with the Germans a few miles away.

Now were you actually doing the firing the guns or?

I can't remember if we actually fired at that time or not, but we may have. We could've tested the strength of the Germans and we went back, went east. There was a bay there called the Bay of Biscay or what it is, but uh, yeah, the Germans were along the coast there, and uh we got about that much and I say we, there were a lot of others along the coast, and there were Germans, uh, I think near the English Channel or wherever it was. And from there we moved north eastward again, and we went into a position, and there were two German armies holding off the Americans First Army, and we moved down south, the first time, and I guess we were down there, and the Third Army was there, and we were assigned to the Third Army. The First [Army] ... he was up here, we were up against, I believe that we were up against the German armies, and uh at this time we put a wall against the Germans to prevent them from coming south. They were being pushed east by the first army, and the English were coming from the north, and it was trying to trap these two armies, and it uh, I think it came pretty close to working. They had an escape route which wasn't very wide, but they had uh a couple of SS divisions taking the walls as an escape route, and the Germans were doing that. My unit after getting up there was not very far, maybe a mile back, and we go up to the uh the prisoner of war camps, and we get thousands and thousands of German prisoners, and a number of components of the assignment escaped, and we uh just sorted them up so uh the prisoners were going to eastern France or Belgium, places like that.

Were you moving from a path, was there a lot of actual fighting or?

Yeah, we were moving very long distances, and we were stopping this fighting yes. And we uh we um.

Did you actually come into contact with Germany infantry that were still fighting or

Oh yes, oh yes. We did and uh, what I'm trying to think of something, well uh I'm skipping part of it now. We get up along the Rhine actually, and we move around from one town to another, and uh in one night we were crossing the Rhine River, and I remember it because I never saw such a display of gunfire and fireworks. The sky was like the middle of the day although it was the middle of the night, and we crossed the Rhine, and uh we go from here to there and here to there and moving all over the place.

Ok, now did the Germans seem to be kind of resistant kind of heavily and when you were in Germany yourself, or?

Some places I guess that they resisted more heavily, but uh I say when we set up their prisoner of war camps, they were coming in by the thousands. And later on um uh I can't think of it. Not too much went on, but I know we were by the river for a while, and the other units crossed upstream and downstream from where we were, and uh and then we moved into Germany, probably there was a little heavier resistance when we were trying to get into Germany.

Were you in touch with your family during this period at all?

Oh yeah, I'd write to them every once in a while. They'd write to me, and we'd get mail. I don't know how regular it was, but we'd get it. And uh I don't know what the mail was called.

And uh alright, so then you're making your way through Germany?

Yeah, and uh I remember coming to a uh a great big barbed wire camp. Quiet coming around, not a sound, and uh we went into it, and I think they had a sign up there, "Stay Out Diphtheria" or something like that, and it was a prisoner of war camp. The Germans had all left, and uh there were thousands of Americans in there, and uh we kept moving on that road.

What was that like, that camp?

Well, the camp was clean, and as I was saying, it was quiet as a mouse on the outside, but once we got into the barracks and they realized that we were there, of course there was pandemonium. Um later I'm really confused about this, but I know that later we got into this camp like Auschwitz, but it wasn't Auschwitz.

Concentration camps?

Concentration camp. It was in Germany, and I used to hear that it was one of the better ones as far as the prisoners of war were concerned. Apparently what the Germans would do, they would get rid of those who couldn't work and send them off to Auschwitz probably, and we got in there, and I do remember seeing a great big pile, there must've been 15 or 20 feet high of bodies in the middle of a field inside of the camp. And uh I remember going into it into a barracks, a barracks very much like our American, the German army had I guess. Except that I think they had maybe 3 prisoners sleeping on one bunk, but I remember going in there and that the smell was so overwhelming that I had to turn right around and come out, and I gagged as soon as I got out. Um, and there were no Germans there either. They were all gone, so we just kept moving.

How were the prisoners to see you? Were they

Well, yeah, they were happy, yes, but a lot of them were in pretty bad shape. I think that the Germans had left probably a few days in advance, and I don't think that they had been fed since that time. I don't know. Um,

Were you surprised that the Germans had camps like this?

No, well, we had heard something about it, yeah. I was always a little skeptical because at my age I had heard a little something about the Germans in WWI, and uh they would take babies and bayonet them and throw them around on their bayonets, and that all turned out to be phony. And I think that the German, the main German soldier was alright uh, and uh well, we went through a number of towns in Germany, and when the war ended, we had just crossed into Czechoslovakia, about 15 or 20 miles inside Czechoslovakia, and we thought that we'd be going to what's the name of it

Prague?

Prague. But we didn't get that far when the war ended, but we stayed there for 10 days or whatever it was.

What was the mood of the Czechs and the mood of the Germans when you camped in those areas?

Well, the Czechs were very happy to see us. The only way that I knew we were in Czechoslovakia, the only way that we knew, was all the Czechs were standing there at the border. This wasn't a main road, this was a secondary road, and they had flowers, and they were throwing them at us, things like that, so they were happy to see us. The Germans at that time from what we heard and what we saw a bit, the Germans were surrendering up to the Russians up in front of us and then walking back to Germany. They were being discharged from the army. Turn in the guns and that sort of thing. And everything was very proper as the Germans would do it. As we were coming through these towns in Czechoslovakia, um the Czechs were shooting them or hanging them on the telephone poles and things like that.

The Germans, yeah.

Yeah, and uh of course when I got back as far as we were, that wasn't happening anymore, but uh after a week or so, we went back into a little German town on the border, and we stayed there for a short time, and we may have gone to a little town or two and ended up in a town called Stouben (stow-ben) which was very nice. Many, many people from Berlin would come down there, and it was sort of a haven. It was on the Danube River, and uh the Danube was close to the spring I guess, kind of a flood stage. I don't think that you could go swimming there, but uh we could go down and sun ourselves when it was warm. We had a nice base there, we uh, there was a what they call a karcern (kuhr-tern), and I'm not quite sure how that's spelled. I think it's K-A-R-C-A

What exactly is that?

It's just a small army post for uh local Germans that were in reserve units and lived around there. That's the way I understood it to be anyway. There were barracks, and it was probably over half a mile long.

Oh, a karcern is what the Germans used to call it?

Yeah.

So it was like a German military camp?

Yeah it was a German military camp.

Oh.

Small camp, and they had some I think they had some barracks there before. It was a nice place to be, but also we couldn't stay there. I had a place outside of the camp where we, I guess it would've been a hotel. A condo? I don't think that they had condos, but maybe an apartment building.

How long were you in Germany, were you on occupation duty?

Well, I was on occupation duty for quite a while after the war ended. The war ended, whenever it was again, May or something like that?

Yeah, the war ended in May.

Ok. We had been, the rumor had been that we were gonna go to Japan until the Japanese surrendered, but then they started breaking up the unit, and uh we all had points, so we could do whatever when our points came up, but I wasn't married, and I was sort of enjoying it there. The army is set up to keep the morale high, so they would set up excursions for us. So I went to Switzerland a couple of times, then back to Paris and a couple of other places we were going because there wasn't much to do, and it was very nice.

Ok, and um then what happened? When did you get word when you were coming back into the states?

Pardon me?

You got word that you were coming back into the states?

Yeah, then I got finally word that I was coming back to the states. I don't know how that came about but, maybe I could've delayed it longer if I wanted to, but I was coming back, and uh I remember we rode freight cars, boxcars, back to some place or another, and I think I ended up in uh some very little state over there in Europe, and I can't think of the name of it. Not Belgium.

Luxemburg?

Luxemburg. I spent a night or two there. I was pretty much on my own. I had to report some place or another, but I got down into the coast of France, and I got onto a ship there, this was a pre-arranged by us, and I forgot what I was going to say. Um.

Now at the time you were done with your service, were you still a first lieutenant or a second lieutenant?

No, I was promoted to captain and then a major.

Oh, you were a major?

Yeah, yeah.

How many men did you have under your command?

Well, I wasn't a commanding officer in the unit. I was, a what you call an operational officer. Um so it wouldn't have been that many. Just a couple of men and myself, and the battalion consists of about 600 men, that was commanded by a lieutenant colonel.

Ok. What were your duties as operational officer?

Well, during the war, it was to see that the guns were in position and that they were firing at the targets, properly. And the ammunition and all that. Things like that.

How did you coordinate artillery fire in the second World War? Did you fire from forward areas?

Sometimes. We had forward observers. Sometimes we would get orders from the rear. Sometimes our airplanes would see something and get a message. Um.

What was the range back then of artillery?

You know, I don't remember now. It was a number of miles, but I don't remember how many.

Well alright, where were, I'm sorry, where were you born and grew up?

Chicago, IL. Grew up in Chicago.

Ok. Alright. Now after the war did you go to school on the GI bill?

Yes, I did. I did. I went back to get a masters degree.

Ok. Alright. And um what sort of a career did you go into? Do you think that your military experiences affected you in some ways or shape your attitude, something like that?

I suppose they did, but I uh don't really know that. I became a school teacher, and then later a principal. I've been retired for about 22, 23 years.

Um, anything else you'd care to add?

No, I guess that's enough. I don't remember what I was going to talk about anymore, so yeah.