

Recorded Interview

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I am the oldest boy in my family and I was born on the farm about five miles west of Rossville, IL on September 30, 1925. I have three sisters, two older than I am, and four brothers. We moved just across the state line into Indiana when I was twelve years old and in the eighth grade. I graduated from high school when I was sixteen, in May of 1942. I turned 18 on the last day of September of 1943.

My dad raised corn, soybeans, wheat, oats, clover, and alfalfa hay. We had about twenty head of milk cows that we milked by hand each day. We had about 10 brood sows and raised about 60 to 80 pigs every year. I helped my dad farm our 300 acres. There is a lot of work on a large farm; we milked twenty head of cows each day. We had a large farm and back then we didn't have the big tractors with rubber tires. We had a little F12 Farm-All on steel wheels; it pulled a two bottom plow and a 7' tandem disk.

On December 7, 1941 I was a senior in Cayuga High School in Cayuga, IN when I learned of Pearl Harbor. I was drafted at age 18 and inducted into the Army on March 10, 1944 at Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis, Indiana. There wasn't much anyone could say; it was a fact

of life back then. If you were well and able without any disabilities you were drafted. I was to report in January but I came down with the flu and my January reporting date was changed to March 10. I left home on March 9, 1944. My dad told me it was ten degrees below zero the day I left. We spent about two days at Fort Benjamin Harrison before they put us on a train to Jacksonville, Florida and Stark Army Base, just outside of Jacksonville about forty or fifty miles. The name of the camp was Camp Blanding. Basic training was not too bad. I was a farm boy and I did not have a pound of fat on me when I went in. I weighed 145 lbs. and I was 5'10". When I went home five months later on a ten day furlough, I was 5'11" and weighed 165 lbs. I gained twenty pounds. There was one boy, Cobb, I never will forget him. He was from Sikeston, Missouri, and he came in weighing two hundred and thirty-five pounds. He was a town boy. He went out weighing 185 lbs. Mortar and machine gun ranges were about ten miles from our barracks. Right after breakfast we would head out and walk that ten miles, train all day and walk the ten miles back. Ten miles today would sound like "forever" to some people. We walked that ten miles twice a day and didn't think too much about it.

I was in D Company 209th infantry in the Training Company at Camp Blanding. They trained us with the M-1 Carbine, Browning-Colt .45 Pistol, machine gun, and mortar; we got some of everything. I was in Jacksonville from March 15 until I had a ten day furlough to go home on

July 30. I had been away about 4 1/2 months. I went home for ten days and when I returned we were sent to Camp Maxey, Texas where we thought we were going to join the 99th, which was ready to ship out. It turned out that they had all the men they needed and were ready to ship out. We were at Camp Maxey about three or four days before we were sent to Camp Howze, in Gainesville about the 15th of August.

Basically, once at camp, they put us where they needed us. We had three boys in the same company I was in at Camp Blanding that went out to Camp Howze. Two of us, John McCrory and I were put in the same Machine Gun Squad. Ward Geier, from California, Missouri, was put in the Mortar Platoon. Ward is still living and used to come to all of our Company D reunions. His health is real bad now and his wife has to do everything for him. About fifteen years ago, McCrory and his wife both died of cancer within a two year period. I think he was around seventy.

They put us on a troop train, sent us up to Camp Shanks, New York, where we waited until we were shipped out on October 5th on the USS Monticello. They told us we were in a storm and for three days the shipped rocked. It was about the middle of October and I believe we were in a darn hurricane. It took us about three days to get out of the storm. I never did get sick; but one night I stayed in my bunk, passing up meals. I knew if I ate anything, I would loose it. The storm finally passed.

They would let us go up on deck during the daytime. I was not a gambler; I was brought up in a Christian home. I was just a country boy and I just did not drink or carouse. Most of the men sat around on the floor and played poker and shot "Crap." We got paid at Camp Shanks, just before we shipped out. All the men had money and they gambled with what they had. Eventually, about ten days out, on our level, about 4 or 5 men had all the money! Before we arrived at Marseilles, the men started to go on sick call. Outwardly, they did not appear to be sick. We found out that because they had been sitting around on the floor of that boat they got the "crabs." They were going to the infirmary to get treatment to get rid of them.

There was one aircraft carrier in our convoy, about 13 to 15 ships, and about five troop carriers. In addition, they had destroyers, and sub chasers. It looked like a small armada going across.

We arrived in Marseilles about the 20th or 21st of October to find out that many ships had been sunk in the harbor by the Germans during the southern invasion. That inhibited our access to the shore. Consequently, we used a gangplank which led to a dock that was built for us. These innovations provided a way to access the shore. By the time we got off the boat it was about dark. While we were at sea, we really had no exercise for two solid weeks. They marched us twenty miles to a bivouac area just outside of Marseilles. On the way over I had gotten ringworm in

my private area. The conditions on ship were such that ringworm was easy to get. In addition, we had on those long winter clothes. I was in a great deal of discomfort; that ringworm was just like a "raw piece of meat." I knew I had ringworm so I went on sick call to get something to put on it. They told me that they were sorry but that they did not have anything for the ringworm and I would have to wait until I got off the boat. When I finally was able to get to a medic, I describe how bad I was feeling. The medic said he could get something for me in two or three days but he did not have anything at that time. I asked him if he had any iodine and he did have iodine swabs. (You had to break the end off the swab and the iodine would run out.) The medic warned me that if I applied iodine it would, "set me on fire!" I remembered that when I was a kid, mother would use iodine to kill almost any infection. The medic did give me some of the swabs and I saturated the area for about two days, three times a day. The iodine burned like fire but it cleared up the ringworm.

The staging area outside of Marseilles was flat. The Germans had built barriers about 3 feet by 4 feet to keep gliders from coming in and landing in that area. The French or Germans had erected tall poles that stood about 30 or 40 feet in the air. One of the poles was taller than the others; that may have involved radar. Those poles were spaced out all around our staging area.

We were supposed to line up our tents in the staying area, in a precise way considering company, unit and platoon. Each one of the poles that I described had three guide wires coming out of them. There were some men who avoided the three guide wires in their designated area causing their pup tent to be out of alignment with the rest of the tents in their row. The Sergeant chewed them out for not having their tent lined up like all the rest of the tents. The men explained that they did not want to interfere with the guide wire. "I told you to line that tent up and "Damn it, I mean line it up." The soldier just took a trenching tool, cut the wire, and lined the tent up "back to back" with the others. (*Unknowingly, they cut the guide wire in the process.*) About two nights later, we had one heck of a storm and the wind came in the "wrong direction" and downed those poles across two of the tents. One man was killed, another had a broken arm, and a third man had a broken leg. They had warned us about going in certain areas because of all the rocks that were spread around to keep gliders down? We were told specifically not to mess with any of that stuff because someone had booby-trapped them. There is always one who will not listen. He got out there and started digging around for a souvenir and a booby trap went off. He was not killed but there was quite a bit of damage done.

We were in the staging area about five or six days. There were two men in a tent, each having a shelter half. Tents were divided by another piece of material that hung from the top of the tent.

We went from Marseilles to St. Die on 2 ½ ton Army trucks. We went close to St. Die. In Dijon the Germans had blown up the bridge over the River Qui. The railroad bridge was still in tack. The engineers fixed it so we could get on the French railroads even though they were narrow gauge. The trucks would just straddle those rails. We crossed a river there on that railroad. That was an experience. We didn't go very fast, probably three or four miles an hour. At that time we were carrying a full field pack on our back with a blanket, shelter half, tent poles, a rope and weapon. There were about seven men in our machine gun squad: 1st Gunner, 2nd Gunner, and 5 Ammunition Bearers. The Ammunition bearer carried a carbine which was a miniature M1. When I got hurt there was just myself and another boy from the original squad (He had not been hurt). Our 1st and 2nd Gunner carried a 45 pistol. I was First Gunner when I got hurt.

We went into combat at St. Die to relieve the 3d Division and it was cold. They had had one heck of a battle a day or so before we got there. We arrived late into the evening. The bridge had been blown up, which was typical of the German Army when they pulled out of an area. Our engineers had put up a swinging bridge. The bridge was about 3 ft. wide and there was a cable about three feet overhead that you held

onto when you walked across. We all went across carrying a full field pack and our carbine, all the while the bridge was swinging from our weight. The river was high and you didn't dare fall off. We stopped eventually at a forested area with six inches of snow on the ground. The Sergeant said, "There are still a lot of Germans out there in the forested area. Go out there and bring in those bodies." All the American GIs had been picked up. We found twenty-seven dead Germans, frozen stiff as boards. We had to find a piece of rope to tie around a leg or foot so that we could drag them to the truck. It seemed kind of cruel, but two fellows would pick up a body and throw it up into the truck. That was my first detail and it was hard. We would take them back and give them a burial. The whole process kind of "hardens you."

We were on the move all the time. As soon as we took one objective, we moved on to the next. We crossed the German border on the 16th of December 1944. They moved us up into the mountains about three or four miles. We followed logging roads where they had cut timber and at one point were told to dig in along the logging road. We stayed there about two days; we didn't know what we were going to do. Everyday a German patrol would come along and snipe at us. The Germans knew we were going to hit the Siegfried Line.

We received some replacements and one fellow, I think, was from Missouri. He was about twenty-six or twenty-seven years old. I was only

nineteen. It was his second day with us and he said he had to take a "crap," and asked me where he should go? I told him to go off a certain distance and dig a hole. He wanted to go farther away for more privacy. I told him not to go very far because we had been getting German snipers in this area everyday. I told him if he went very far he could be in trouble. He said, "I have not seen or heard of any snipers." Just a few days before, we had a machine gun set up in the road just in case. The boy who was sitting there at the gun was shot at by a German sniper and the bullet hit the site right in front of him.

As it turned out the soldier did not take my advice and went 50 or 75 yards up the hill to relieve himself. He set his gun against a tree, put his helmet on his gun, unloosed his belt, and took his canteen off and laid it down. He relieved himself just like he was out hunting someplace! He finished, pulled up his pants, and at that point a machine gun kicked dirt up very close to him. He proceeded to run down the hill holding his pants up. About every 5 or 6 steps "bbbbbbb..." sounded and more dirt and leaves began to fly. He never got a scratch coming down the hill! Just as he hit the road, he stumbled and fell. Again, more machine gun bursts and dirt! Once again, he jumped up and made it to my "double foxhole," jumped in and landed right on me! He did not have to be warned about safe boundaries anymore. He had left his helmet and his

gun when he started to run. We waited until after dark and the Sergeant made me go up there with him to get his helmet and his gun.

Our First Sergeant was Bill Hollis and Orla Williams was our Tech Sergeant. Our Staff Sergeant, Dick Lademan, was under Williams. Staff Sergeant Lademan was from Detroit, Michigan. He was hurt a few days before I was hurt when we were going into those pillboxes. We hit the pillboxes on December 18th and I was wounded on the 21st. We moved out about 2 o'clock in the morning. We got to the barbed wire entanglements about 5:30 a.m., just about the break of dawn. We just about made it through the barbed wire when some Germans spied us and ran down with some hand grenades. Sergeant Williams and Sergeant Lademan were running back and forth in the trenches throwing hand grenades at the enemy. The Germans threw hand grenades in the trench. I remember Lt. Lamb who might have been with mortars. Unfortunately, he was killed.

The German's had a lot of trenches running back and forth. Williams and Lademan got into one of those trenches and a German threw in a hand grenade. The Germans did not have the shrapnel grenades; we called them potato mashers. The German grenade had a wooden handle, and firing pin. They had a canister about 1½" x 4" big and a handle was about 6" long. One landed almost on top of the Sergeant Lademan. It did not kill him but it took half the meat off of his derriere. He

lay in that bunker for three days before a litter made it to him. The Sergeant, two others, and I were wounded. They had to carry us three or four miles where we met a jeep on a log road. They had to put one of us on each side of the 2 jeeps to carry all four of us out.

We captured fifty Germans and three or four of the concrete fortifications. One of the Germans could speak perfect English as well as we could. He said, "You boys may be getting the best of it down here, but we are knocking the hell out of you up North." The Battle of the Bulge started on the 16th; we didn't know anything about that, but he did. The litter bearers took us out and they also took sixteen of those German prisoners, four on each litter, two in the back and two in the front. The German on the rear corner of my litter was the one that could speak such good English. To get down the mountain you found yourself going down and then back up according to the road. We got about two hundred yards from the concrete fortifications and the Germans started dropping shells very close to us. (We were doing the same to them.) When a shell hit close to us, one of our Germans let go of my litter and I hit the ground. We had one Sergeant who was in charge of getting us out of that area, into a safe zone, with medical help. He told that German, "If you drop that man again I am going to take your head off." The bearers grabbed us up and went on further. The German in the rear could speak English. Apparently, a piece of shrapnel had done quite a bit of damage when it

hit him. He was rolling around, screaming and hollering. We had to get out of there. The Sergeant made the litter bearers take me and the others and we got on out. I had shrapnel that hit me below my right shoulder blade.

We had a machine gun set up between the ones we had captured. Those trenches were not very deep; about as deep as a table top. The trench would branch off about fifteen or twenty feet and stop. We had the machine gun set up in one of the branches. About three o'clock in the afternoon a shell dropped into the trench close to us. We ducked down in our trench and a second shell hit almost immediately after the first. I did not hear the second shell. I was just sitting down in that trench. There were three of us on the machine gun. The one boy was hit pretty bad and was yelling pretty loud. I didn't feel a pain "in the world!" I just could not get up; my legs would not move. I turned to see what was wrong and saw that the heel of my boot on my right foot had been hit by a piece of shrapnel and I was missing a big chunk of rubber out of my boot. A couple of men came out to get the boy who was hollering and said, "Are you just going to sit there?" I told them that I could not get up. Doctors told me later that the piece of shrapnel hit me at an angle and nearly cut my spinal chord in half. I have never moved a toe or a leg ever since.

The wounded young man and I went to one field hospital. After a day or so we were moved to an evacuation hospital at Épinal. We were moved about a week later to Hagenau and from there they moved us to the 21st General Army Hospital in Méricourt, France. We stayed there nearly two months. Later we were taken to Marseilles and put on a hospital ship, USS Thistle. We sailed out of Marseille on the twenty-seventh of February and pulled into Charleston, South Carolina on March 14th. I suffered with bed sores; there were not enough personnel on board to make sure we were turned often. The care was about the same at the 21st Hospital. They had one nurse and two attendants. They did not have a wheelchair to get you up out of the bed. They gave you a bath but otherwise you just laid there. We did not have foam rubber mattresses or enough nursing staff to help reposition us to prevent bed sores. Instead we had cotton mattresses that were about 4 inches thick. My heels turned black with bedsores and the doctors had to remove the decayed flesh. Bedsores were on my hips and tailbone as well. I suffered uncontroable spasms in my leg, flexing and straightening.

We landed in Charleston and stayed there a week during which I got a bad kidney infection and almost died. They actually called my parents to come down. I did get over the kidney infection. On the 26th I traveled by train to Memphis and was admitted to Kennedy General Hospital and stayed there for fifteen months. I realized that men who

were being injured in France were being flown back to the states to Kennedy General. We had boys who were hurt the first of March in France who got back to Memphis before I did. Kennedy General had been an Army hospital before the Veterans Administration took it over, 7/1/1946. I was there fifteen months. The injured were given therapy so that we could take care of ourselves. They did a pretty good job; back then there was a lot of trial and error. They didn't know anything about therapy as we know it today.

When I was released from the hospital I went back to Indiana and stayed four years. My parents were really good to me. My mom wanted to do everything for me. I almost had to hurt her feelings. I asked her to let me do what I can do for myself. I was in a wheelchair at that point.

The first wheelchair had a high back and because it did not fold, you could not put it in a car. About a year later they started making the first folding chair. I did not get into this power chair until I broke my leg and messed my right shoulder up moving my wheelchair away from the computer. This was about April, 2008. I spent six weeks in the hospital. My wife wanted a computer and I was enjoying it. One day, while at the computer in my power wheelchair, I picked up my right foot to put it on the pedal. My shoulders were wearing out and painful. I used to mow most of my sixty acre farm with my yard and garden tractor. I had a little sickle mower on it. I tried to work the farm myself, as much as I could. I

developed a cyst on my shoulder and the doctor said I had to get in a power chair. I backed up to the computer, forgot to put that foot up, and broke the leg, between the knee and ankle. I didn't have feeling in that leg, so I was not in pain. I think I broke the leg on Friday and went to the V.A. Hospital on Monday. I went to my hometown doctor on Wednesday: a few days later the leg was swollen, red and feverish. I went to the VA Hospital and had it checked out by a nurse practitioner. She didn't think my leg was broken and she gave me something for the cellulites. They did not even take an x-ray. I broke it on a Saturday and I saw the doctor on Wednesday morning. I knew something was not right and Mary Ann called the VA. She spoke to an LPN who said I should go see my doctor first. We went to the local hospital and had a doctor look at it. He told me, "Herb, I think that leg is broken." He sent me for x-rays and ordered some pre-operation test. The leg was broken in two places and I also had a blood clot. I spent six weeks in the hospital. They put my leg in a pillow cast because I was paralyzed; they taped the pillow cast to prevent movement. I used it for two months.

In 1951, I came back to Memphis and went to Business College along with two of my buddies for two years. One boy went to University of Memphis and the other one went to Memphis Art Academy. After Business College I went to work for a Cotton Firm, McCallum & Robinson. I worked there for three years. I enjoyed the work but the pay was not too

good. I took a Civil Service Exam for an accountant and there was an Air Force Base called Mallory Depot there in Memphis. During this period of time I met my wife. I went to work, March 1, 1953 and we married in October 1953. In January of 1956 we both went to work at the Air Force Depot. My wife grew up in New Albany, Mississippi, where we live currently. We bought a sixty acre farm (1956), built a new house (1957) and moved down there. We worked for the Air Force Depot for two years. I had majored in accounting in Business College and had a year of accounting in high school. I worked in accounting at the Air Force Depot. When we moved to New Albany I interviewed at one job, but felt the person talking to me did not want to hire a handicapped person. I didn't want to be somewhere where someone did not want me. I said, "Gentlemen I can tell that you have reservations about hiring a handicapped person." They protested, "No, no." I told them what I felt and understood them to say. It was not long before a job came up at the Veteran Service in the American Legion Post. They came out to ask me if I would be interested. I went to work for the county as the Veterans Service Officer and I was there for twenty-eight years when I retired.

We adopted a daughter in 1959 and when she started to school (1965) my wife went to work. In 1991 I had colon cancer and six months of chemo therapy. Two years later it showed up in my lung. In January 1993, I had surgery again. I was lucky because they thought they would

have to remove the lower lobe, but they “wedged it out,” instead, as they described. I have been doing pretty well ever since. The doctors that I have talked to have told me that I am the only person that they know of that has had colon cancer and then have it occur somewhere else and still be alive 20 yrs. later. And here I am, twenty years later telling about it.

I never regretted the service. I feel that people like Jane Fonda made it hard on the guys that fought in Vietnam. When they came home people looked at them as if they were villains. Those boys were getting shot and killed.