

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Alan R. Hurst

Conducted by Ms. Deb Barrett

February 10, 2007

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

This interview is being conducted on February 10, 2007, with Mr. Alan Hurst at the Indian Prairie Public Library in Darien, IL. My name is Deb Barrett. Mr. Hurst was born on January 29, 1924, in Rochester, New York. He worked in the manufacturer of release paper, and learned of the Veterans History Project from his daughter. Mr. Hurst has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.

Just before you entered the military, where were you living? What was your life like?

I lived in suburban Rochester, New York, in a town by the name of Brighton. I had graduated from high school and was a freshman at the University of Rochester.

What was your life like at that time?

Very calm, organized – trauma free.

And what changed all of that?

The war. As I recall, I volunteered into a pre-meteorological program. We were sent to Fort Niagara for induction, I guess you'd say, and then to Atlantic City for basic training, then to Brown University for pre-meteorological training – which really had nothing to do with meteorology (both chuckle); totally unrelated. That program was shut down and I went to – I was in the Air Corps at the time; this whole thing was in the Air Corps – I went to Greenboro, North Carolina, basic training center #10. And from there I got myself into an Army specialized training program and was sent to Stetson University in Florida. We were really just treading water there. I became an instructor in physics and mathematics, which was just a way of keeping the troops off the streets. From there I was assigned to the City College of New York, and went there for about three to six months, I guess, when that program was shut down. The whole outfit that was up there ended up in the infantry, and we were sent to Camp Polk, Louisiana.

Okay. Let's take a couple of steps back. You volunteered, and in what year was that?

You mean how old was I? I guess I was about 18.

So that was ...

1942.

So you were just a freshman in college, it was 1942. Was there any specific event that prompted you to volunteer?

Well, no. Everybody knew it was either do that or they were going to be drafted. So you tried to pick a program that would provide some use at some point in the future.

So it was better to volunteer and get your choice.

Yes, and get into a program that sounded like it would be interesting.

Was there any difference in the time commitment when you volunteered versus being drafted? For example, if you volunteered were you in there four years as opposed to when you were drafted?

No.

At the time it was all the same?

For the duration.

Okay. So you volunteered for this meteorological program?

Yes.

And what was meteorology – how did they relate it to what someone might do with it in the military?

Forecasting weather – this was part of the Air Corps, so it was forecasting weather for airplane flights over the enemy, presumably.

And this was something you had an interest in before?

No.

You just decided this would be something you'd like to try?

Yes. Well, it seemed to be the lesser of the evils available.

A safer type of choice. Okay, so you volunteered for this program, and you were inducted where?

Well, they sent me first to Fort Niagara, New York. I think it was just a matter of a month or so. It was in the winter. It was in January. It was cold and snowy.

So you spent your birthday at Fort Niagara?

Right, I guess.

What did you do for that month in Fort Niagara?

Nothing. We built barracks and did odd jobs. There was no training, really.

No training. You were inducted already, or you were just waiting?

I may have been inducted in Rochester. I really don't remember. And then they shipped us off – most of the guys in our area went to Fort Niagara for their first station while they were assigned to wherever they were going to go to.

How did your family feel about you making this choice?

Oh, I think hopefully they agreed with it. My father had been in World War I, in the Cavalry and the Artillery.

Did he give you any advice or anything before you left?

No. I think he probably thought it would do me good. I don't know. I don't recall any traumatic departure.

So you went to Fort Niagara, basically for a month keeping you busy.

Yes, right. And then I went down to Atlantic City and lived in the Shelburne Hotel. We did close-ordered drill day after day. We did a little rifle range, but that was about it.

Where did they have a rifle range?

It was out on an island near Atlantic City. I can't remember the name. We'd march out there – it would be a ten mile hike out there. We used old Springfield rifles and then we'd have to march back (both chuckle).

Was that your first experience with guns or rifles?

No. My father had introduced me to that. He had a 45 caliber pistol that he had retained. It was not an automatic, it was a revolver. I've still got it. And so I had been trained to shoot that. Also a 22 caliber rifle. So I was a bit familiar with it and did better than most people for that reason.

You had some experience and practice.

I wasn't overwhelmed with firing a gun. A lot of guys were very gun shy.

I would imagine it's a little unnerving the first time.

Yes. That training – when you're a kid you don't think about it – it paid off through my whole career in the Army.

The rifle training?

The rifle training and the revolver. Because I felt at home with them I wasn't concerned.

It must have made your time in the service a lot easier.

Well, not necessarily, but came in handy.

So you had that training.

We had that in Atlantic City. That's the other thing we did. Then we were shipped to Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. We did some close-ordered drill there. But mostly it was just academic courses: math courses, geometry courses. They didn't seem to be related to anything, really, to be honest with you.

It seemed like something to keep you busy and maybe getting a sense of everyone's level?

We lived in the college dorms, and it was really a very fun time. I joined a fraternity in college and there was a chapter at Brown, and I had the run of that place on the weekends. There were lots of girls around – Pembroke College had lots of girls. I met girls from my home town from there. It was a pretty easy life.

So you guys were mixed in with the college kids.

Well, no. Our classes were separate.

Your classes were separate, but you lived on the campus with them.

Yes.

What was it like being in the military on a college campus?

No problem at all (chuckles), no sweat.

So it's like you left college, joined the military and you were back in college.

That's right. That's what it added up to.

So that must have been a little more comfortable feeling for you.

It was very nice. It was a pretty soft life (both chuckle).

So you had your classes, you had some drill ...

We had some drill and things, a little physical training. But no firearms – nothing related to war action, if you will. I don't know what the reasoning was in putting us in that

situation. I think from the Army and from the economic viewpoint it was a complete waste of time. But it was lovely!

It was a lot nicer than being in barracks (both chuckle). So how long were you at Brown?

That's a good question. We probably went up there during the summer – I would say six months or so, maybe eight months. I can't remember. When we got there, I think we arrived in the spring and left in the fall, so to speak.

So this was still 1942, 1943?

This would be 1942.

So you started right at the very beginning of the year you enlisted, right in January.

Right.

So you were at Brown ...

And then we took the train. When they closed that program we took a train down to Camp Polk, Louisiana, where the 75th Division was on maneuvers. And we became replacement people for men who had been shipped overseas from that Division. So as they shipped a bunch of guys wherever they shipped them, they needed replacements and we became their replacements in the maneuvers.

And what did the maneuvers entail?

Normal maneuver activity. They would split the men in the regiments up into teams so they would mock fight against each other. That's what we did.

War games.

Exactly.

Practice fighting before the real thing.

Well, yes – just maneuvering.

So how long were you at Camp Polk?

From Camp Polk we were shipped to Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky. I don't know – six or eight months. Then we were at Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky, and we trained with live ammunition up there.

Was this the first time you trained with live ammunition?

Yes, other than firing the guns at Atlantic City, yes. I was in a heavy weapons company, which was 30 caliber machine guns and 81mm mortars, and we were out on maneuvers training with those guns.

Training to use those guns. Did that training with live ammo for the first time affect anyone's attitude or mood?

Not noticeably, no.

It seems like what you were doing was getting closer and closer to what the real thing was going to be.

Right. And then we were shipped from there to New York City – it was up the Hudson from New York. It was a camp that was used for staging for overseas shipments and I don't recall what it was (chuckles). When we got on the trains – I guess it was in Evansville, Indiana – it was supposed to be a very emotional, heart-stirring type of embarkation. And we had the Division band there, with some skinny little, scrawny Warrant Officer conducting the band. And what they played was "A Tisket, A Tasket," (both chuckle). And that's a damn fact! It was ridiculous! I was offended by the stupidity (both chuckle).

That was an interesting choice of songs, for sure.

Good grief! Anyway, we ended up at this camp north of New York City for not very long I don't think – a few weeks. And then we got on a boat, joined a convoy and sailed for England. Actually, we landed in Swansea, Wales. It was a rough crossing. My gosh!

This was like 1943?

Yes. In the winter, I think.

How many men do you think were on this ship?

It was a huge boat. We were on G deck, which is the farthest down you could get. And I could remember they had boards across the hole where we slept on cots – we had canvass cots. You could look between the boards and see water! That's how far down we were in that ship. If we had been torpedoed, forget it – there was no way we'd ever get out of that ship. We were a thousand guys on there or whatever – it was a big ship.

Was this a military vessel?

Yes. Well, I don't know.

Because I know there were some vessels that had been cruise ships that had been converted.

I think this was a converted ship of some kind. I can't tell you if it had been a passenger ship or what.

Do you remember the name of the ship?

No, not just off hand. I heard it, but I don't remember it. All I can remember is being on deck and watching the destroyer escorts out there – I mean they come up to the crest of a wave and then they would disappear for a couple of minutes. And then they would pop up way over here somewhere (both chuckle). It was a rough crossing. Oh, boy.

A lot of men got sick?

I guess so. But it wasn't a big problem. So we landed in Swansea and went into a camp in Pembroke, Wales ...

Let's back up just a minute. When you were on this crossing, first of all how long did it take?

I don't really have the faintest idea – at least five days.

Five days is pretty quick to get across.

Maybe it was longer than that – I don't remember.

What did everyone do to pass the time?

We played cards. That's about it. We wandered around – you could get up on deck.

You had drills?

I'm sure we did. I don't remember them, but I'm sure we had lifeboat drills and that sort of thing. But mostly it was amuse yourself. That's about it.

So you landed at Swansea.

And we were trucked over to a camp. We lived in Nissen huts outside Pembroke, Wales. And all we did was march. We'd go out on hikes all day – 25-30 hour hikes. Out and back. Out and back. Regardless of the weather.

Building up your endurance?

I guess. I don't know.

So how long were you there?

I don't know. A couple of months, I would guess. Then we shipped to, I'm guessing it was South Hampton, because we had to drive there. And we boarded landing craft tanks. Meanwhile, D-Day had occurred, of course, in June. It was even before we got to Wales that D-Day occurred. And we were able to, in this boat – which was a landing craft of the kind where the bow opened up like a book so you could disengage its occupants. And we went down the Seine River to Rouen – which is half-way to Paris; a third of the way, anyway. We got off there – it was miserable weather, rainy and muddy – and camped in – I guess we must have been in tents; I know we weren't in buildings; I don't know.

This was winter? Spring?

No, because our assignment then became; we traveled north through France through Charleroi – I think it's French, it might have been Belgian – and up and around the end of what was then the Battle of the Bulge, and came down from the north side through a town by the name of Spa, little towns, Grand Halleux, I think it was the Salm or the Petite Salm River. It was snowy, cold, and we were involved in the counter-offensive, really, at the Bulge.

What was your clothing like at this point – you were going through a lot of weather, snow ...

All we had was long johns, wool pants, wool shirt, an OD sweater – knitted sweater – a field jacket and a top coat and that was it.

And you kept warm?

By and large, in those conditions. I mean you're walking or you're riding so you can stamp your feet or you're moving. The big thing was gloves – nobody had any gloves. We didn't have winter boots, so it was difficult on icy roads and such. We did get combat boots, finally, which was an improvement over the canvass leggings. I can't remember when we got those – I think we may have been issued those back in the States, probably. Anyway.

What were your meals like when you were going through France?

Lots of oatmeal, K-rations, C-rations – always the same.

What was the difference between K-rations and C-rations?

K-rations came in a box with a round can of something in there which you opened up and could eat hot or cold – usually cold. And there were some biscuits in there. There might have been a bar of candy in the box. C-rations were by themselves. They were round half-pint sized cans, which was mostly corned beef hash. When you got C-rations if there was anything in there but hash it was very unusual. And depending on where you were, sometimes you got hot meals. Sometimes a kitchen was set up and you'd stand in

line with a mess kit – which you didn't carry with you, it was provided at the time. And you'd go down the line and get hot oatmeal or whatever they were serving.

Whatever they could provide at the time.

Yes. Nobody starved to death.

So you were marching through France, Belgium, you came around the Bulge ...

We probably crossed the border from France into Belgium, I think at a town by the name of Charleroi. And you could tell when you went from France to Belgium within a couple of miles – you knew you'd gone from one country to another. It was in the middle of the night. It was an endless string of vehicles and guys. In France you walked through a village or town and it was absolutely deserted – nobody lived there as far as you could see.

So it was a big change in just seeing people.

And then we crossed into Belgium. As soon as you stopped in Belgium, if you stopped for any reason – in a convoy there's a lot of starts and stops – as soon as you stopped the doors would open and people would appear with coffee, no matter what the time of the night was. The Belgians were terrific. The French were absolutely zip. And they haven't changed. So, the Belgians were great. And the Dutch were great, too. We crossed up into the Netherlands – no, wait a minute, no, we didn't at that point, that was much later. We stayed in Belgium because we had objectives – Vielsalm was a regimental objective. And you were subjected to – we were on the attack at that point, so we were trying to work our way through hedgerows, little stone villages and whatever, all of which were deserted – and you were subjected to enemy fire, particularly artillery and mortar. It was very hilly country – beautiful, though. I mean we had at least a foot of snow the whole time. Dysentery was a problem. Guys would get dysentery and that became, I guess you could say very inconvenient.

How were they treated for it?

They weren't. They just got over it. That's all. As far as I know. At that point we didn't see much of the enemy.

You were under fire but you didn't see them.

Right. It was very hilly country.

What was it like being under fire for the first time?

Scary. You just kept going. We lost some guys. Corporal Doug, he and part of our company were caught in the middle of a field, of which there weren't too many because it was very hilly and very forested – acres of pine trees. The Belgians and the Germans,

too, were great conservationists. They had acres of pine trees that they had planted. So there were some fields, but not a lot – in the valleys mostly, of course.

So it provided cover for those firing and for those firing on.

Yes. You could see your shells landing, let's say across the valley. I was never a forward observer which I was very pleased about – those were the guys who hopefully could see where your shells were landing when you fired. But it was exciting. I can remember seeing – if you were on the lee side, the enemy was on the other side of the mountain, the ridge – I can remember seeing German artillery shells come down and land on a slanted slope and not explode but skip like a stone across water. They'd just keep going down the hill. I don't know, I guess they went off eventually. And I don't know what caused that. It was cold – maybe that was part of the problem.

Ice?

Yes. The mechanisms would not function properly at low temperature. That was kind of interesting to see. The shells would land around an area, you'd get shrapnel in the trees around you and what have you. We lost a few guys. Some of them just wandered off at night – they'd go out to take a leak and just disappear and never come back. Carl Ruff was one of those. He died as a POW. It was one day after the other.

Those men who died in the fighting. Were they buried there? Were they taken somewhere?

I don't know. We did not stay there to do anything. When people in those weather conditions, when you were killed, if you could be seen, you froze and your muscles would contract. So that the guy who was dead and lying on the ground, his arm would stick up, or his leg would go up and freeze solid. And there could be several dozen of those guys where they'd get caught in the open in an artillery barrage or something. So I don't know how they were disposed of. I do not know. You didn't stand around and worry about that.

That wasn't part of your responsibility.

Right.

You were a Private?

Yes. Yes. I was a Private virtually the whole war. I was very independent minded, and therefore I didn't necessarily fit into the stratagem of the military life (both chuckle) where you did exactly as you were told, regardless. I usually figured out a better way to do something, and that didn't make me any friends (both chuckle). In the non-com group I was not their favorite because I was eternally challenging how they were doing things (both chuckle).

So you were in Belgium.

Yes, we were in Belgium. And then, at some point, and I don't remember when, nor do I remember where we were. I think it probably was after Bastogne had collapsed, and we were in control again, so to speak. After that – I'm guessing now – the whole Division was shipping around again down through France to what was called the Colmar Pocket. It's a city right on the French-German border, right about Switzerland. Of course it was a lot warmer down there. And we took part in the offensive against the Colmar Pocket, which was a resistance of the Germans trying to keep that corner. The weather was good, and I can remember we got a shipment – while we were down there it was mud up to your ankles – we got a whole shipment of ice crampons which had followed us from Belgium. And the last thing you needed was ice crampons. And there were thousands of crampons just piled up. Nobody could use them or wanted them – typical Army. And the town we were in and around, we used to call a mole house – it was Mulhouse (Mul – oose), proper pronunciation. We were there. We lost some guys there – Jack Rosenstein, Murison, he shot himself in the hand.

Intentionally?

Yes. So that he could get out. Rosenstein was killed by a mortar shell, which was a good way to go because ...

You don't feel anything. It's just over.

I can't remember who else we lost down there.

The guy who shot himself in the hand ...

I never saw him again.

So ...

I don't know where he went or what happened to him. He was a Staff Sergeant. He was a replacement from the Air Corps. He was not happy (both chuckle). He had children and a wife at home, and he did not picture he was ever going to end up in the infantry. Anyway, he messed up. And in those days you could not give a rating away. I mean, when one of your patrol guys was shot or got sick or whatever and they disappeared, ratings – by that I mean Corporal, Sergeant, Staff Sergeant – you couldn't find anyone. When word got out, like when Murison was gone, you couldn't find anybody. The officers would be looking around for somebody to appoint to take his place. Nobody was around.

Nobody wanted it.

Nobody wanted it. I mean, I consider myself a success remaining a Private, a PFC, for the whole war. You had to really work at it. (both chuckle) Well, anyway, after the

Colmar Pocket ... and we were with the French Army. I can remember there were donkeys covered with pots and pans and blankets and stuff, and guys in red turbans walking down the road leading them. It was kind of a strange mélange of ...

Not much camouflage that way (both chuckle).

It was tough going. I think they called it the Vosges Mountains. It was tough territory. If the Germans had been capable, or had the troops to defend it, it would have been a very bad situation. It was very, very hilly, very mountainous – not ice-covered, but steep ravines and all of that. It would have been easy to defend. Anyway, after that the whole division got shipped back up through France again, all the way west of Paris, as usual, up to the Netherlands. It was the southeast corner of the Netherlands. The Province was Limburg. And one of the towns there was Roermond. And that was a very quiet area – it was really a kind of rest area.

This was 1944?

Yes. That was in the spring. It was May, June, somewhere in along there. We were housed in what you would call peasant houses where the farmers lived. You would sleep on the floor.

Better than tents.

Oh, yeah! It was good living. And food was regular. We were oriented in a defensive position, but there wasn't anything to defend. Then we advanced – I'm guessing now – we advanced to a river whose name I'm not clear on – it might have been the Meusse, I don't know – but it was a significant obstacle. The Krauts were on the other side. But it was a quiet area. I don't ever remember any patrols trying to cross the river or anything like that. We must have been there for maybe two or three weeks, a month. Then I don't know how many artillery pieces showed up behind us, and one night, without anyone being aware it was even going to happen, there was a huge artillery barrage. You could read a newspaper!

This was Allied artillery?

Yes. Huge. Incredible. Shells were landing on the other side of that river, and there were enough of them so that it lit up the whole sky. I mean, it was just incredible. And a Division of infantry went through us on the attack.

A Division of Allies.

Yes. I don't remember who it was or what it was. I assume they were American, but they could have been British. Anyway, that duty kind of ended there. Subsequently bridges were thrown across this river – you'd think I could remember the name of the river, but I don't. And we crossed over the river on bridges – what were they called, the steel bridges, the floating ...

Like a pontoon?

Yes. But it was still pretty quiet. It was Germany at that point. Resistance at that point was zip. Nothing. And we took part in what was called the counter-offensive at the river pocket, because the Ruhr Valley the industrial area of Germany had been bypassed north and south, but they were still there. So we were involved trying to clean up that pocket. And it wasn't bad duty. I mean for us, really, the war was over. The Germans didn't know it, but in effect slowly the war came to an end.

So basically you kept advancing east clearing out these pockets.

Yes, and without a lot of difficulty. Sometimes you'd go in wooded areas where there'd be significant resistance, and you'd have to toss some grenades in what were then – I don't think now you even have them – called pillboxes. And there would be two or three krauts in there who had been shooting at you. We didn't take many prisoners at that point. As soon as we crossed into Germany, really all holds were barred on what you could do. I mean, you could walk into a house and tell everybody to get out, whereas you couldn't do that in Belgium or Holland – you wouldn't want to. But in Germany, if you wanted to use a house to sleep in for a night or whatever, and there was somebody in there, you would just tell them to get out.

So it was a difference between being in friendly territory and enemy territory.

Absolutely, absolutely. And we did our share of looting as best we could. There was no reason to have pity on these people. The mentality is hard to explain, because you look back at it and you had that mentality, too. But killing people? It didn't mean a thing – civilian or uniformed – nothing. If they were in the way you shot them – Bang.

It was like the mindset of everything black and white, enemy or friend.

Absolutely. There was no pity, no concern, nothing. And when you've seen enough of your friends killed ...

You have less pity.

You have none! Your mental set is you guys asked for it, you got it. Bang. It didn't bother me mentally one way or the other.

[When the tape ended] You were talking about the mentality of ...

You look back at your own and you say, Wow. I was part of that, and willingly so. You just stand back and wonder at your own mentality: how did you get into that state of mind that you were doing what you were doing.

So it was like you were looking at another person.

Yes. Yes. But really, the war was in effect over. The resistance in these small towns that you'd go through – white flags hanging in the windows as soon as you walked down the street. All the armaments, panzer a (?) and guns and ammunition and all would be piled in the middle of the square.

Just letting you know, We're done.

From town to town it was done.

Now, while you going through all this, and seeing all the changes in these towns, what about your families back home – were you in communication with them at all? Were you able to receive mail or packages?

I think my letters to them got through. They were all typed up, and I've still got them. My Dad's secretary typed them all up and they're in a loose leaf book.

Were they censored?

Yes, presumably, they were censored. You didn't have a lot to say. I could remember describing some of the architecture of some of the buildings we saw (chuckles). I can remember when we were backtracking down to the Colmar Pocket, we were housed in a barnyard somewhere. And one day we had mail call, and I didn't hear anything for months. One day I got 30 letters. The next day I got 40 letters.

Oh, my gosh!

Don't ask me why that happened. But it did. And I think most of the letters that we would write probably came through. But we had no way of knowing. There wasn't a lot of concern about what was going on in the States, I don't think. I don't remember any traumatic instances of people having the feeling they had to go home or whatever, other than Murison.

The guy who shot himself in the hand?

Yes. And then, after we crossed that river, whatever it was – it could have been the Rhine, but I don't think it was – anyway, we went as far as a little town in Germany by the name of Allentown, which I remember because of my name. And really, that was maybe a third of the way to Berlin. And we just, really in camp, we just sat and waited.

This was 1946, 1947?

Yes. And that was when VE-Day occurred, while we were there.

What was it like for VE-Day to be announced while you were there?

Not a ripple.

Really.

I mean, somebody said, The Germans have surrendered. All I can remember saying was, Good deal, let's go home. There was no celebration. There was nothing. It was just another day at the office. And then, when that finished up, we were sent to what we called a Repo Depot – replacement depot.

Where was that?

It was outside the Rheims Cathedral. Into camps, which were all under canvass. There was a New York camp and a Chicago camp, and they all had what regiment was in what camp. I mean the countryside was just covered with canvass while we were waiting to find out what was going to happen to us because the Japanese war was still on. It was during the summer, and it was a hot summer. I managed to get myself attached to the regimental service officer. I don't recall exactly how that happened. It started back in the States and how we got friendly. Anyway. And I can recall, I was his jeep driver is what it was. And I can recall there was a hospital there – a French hospital, a big building. And I can recall at night (chuckles) the officers would have parties every weekend. And there would be screaming and yelling. I could remember telling myself, Okay, you bastards, you have your good times now because I'm going to be your boss when I'm finished. (both chuckle) And that's okay. As far as I'm concerned the war had a big effect on my life because there was nothing going to stop me when I got out. I didn't care what I had to do, I was going to do it. I don't think if I hadn't gone into the Army and had that experience, I don't think I would have had that attitude.

It made you very determined.

It promulgated in me a great desire not to get into this position again, where people were telling me what to do all the time. Anyway, because I was a friend of this regimental service officer, I got sent down to Biarritz American University. Biarritz is a town just north of Spain, on the Atlantic side – very much like Atlantic City. They took over big hotels, turned them into classrooms, physics classrooms and what have you. And you got to go to – there were, I think, only six or eight guys from a whole regiment who would get to go, and I was one of them. So we lived there in hotels and went to class. I took French, calculus and physics. So you'd have a class or two a day, and they had taken over one of the big hotels which was the mess hall. The food was good, the beach was right there. You'd spend the afternoon on the beach. It was very nice. So, for eight weeks I had that. And then my orders had been cut round trip, so when my eight weeks was up I went back to join the regiment, and the regiment was gone! This field outside Rheims, France – Suippes was the town, right near Rheims – which had been covered in canvass. There was nothing! Not a soul! I couldn't even find another guy in the Army of any kind.

They had cleaned out fast!

They had cleaned out the whole thing! I don't know, and I still don't know to this day exactly what happened. I presume they got shipped back to the States. But they left me behind in the process. I had to pay a cab to take me up there because I couldn't believe there was nobody there (both chuckle). I did! I got a cab at the railroad station, and he kept trying to tell me there was nobody out there. And said I had to go see it. So I went back to town and I took – in those days they ran trains, if you were a GI you could get on a train going anywhere and get off, period; there were no tickets, nothing. So I got on a train to Paris. Because there was nothing doing where I was. I mean I could have spent the rest of my life there, and nobody would have known the damn difference.

Kind of like “Home Alone.”

Yes. (both chuckle) It was really something. I don't know if they ever would have found me or wondered where I was. I could have deserted on the spot and I don't think anybody would have even thought about it. I could have just disappeared. Anyway, I took a train back to Paris. I can remember I paid to spend the night in a French cathouse, I guess it amounted to. And the next day I walked into, not a recruiting office, but an Army post where there guys with typewriters and all that stuff and said, Hey, here I am, send me home. So they sent me out on the outskirts of Paris there was a town by the name of Etampes, where they had a repo-depot. And I was sent out there and I ended up as a KP pusher there, which is a kind of non-com type job, for maybe a month or so. I made a few friends. I ended up getting shipped back to Germany.

The wrong way! (both chuckle)

Yeah, the wrong way. Mannheim was where they shipped me back to, I think. I spent maybe a week or so in some old SS German barracks that were there. And they put a shipment together and sent us to LeHavre, and we got on a boat and came back to New York. And that was that.

It must have been a very different boat ride back than it was out there.

It was slower. I think it took us a couple of weeks to come back.

So this was 1947?

This was 1946.

This was still 1946?

Yes. Somehow, that's the way I remember it. I was in for just about three years even, from beginning to end. We landed in New York, which was interesting because everyone was up on deck. And you would have thought you heard something. You could have heard a pin drop on that ship!

What was your first sight? Was it the Statue of Liberty?

Probably the Verrazano Bridge, but I don't remember. But you could have heard a pin drop. Everybody was so emotionally charged that they couldn't even talk. It was just dead silence. Anyway, we went from there to Fort Dix, which is where I was discharged, and went to New York City and flew home.

So, again, you went in in 1942 ...

I went in in 1942 and I got out in the winter of 1946 – January of 1946 or something like that.

So 1946 is when you were discharged. When they discharged you ...

It was just routine.

Routine – sign your papers, good luck?

They asked you what you wanted to be rated as – you had your choice (both chuckle). They asked me how I wanted my rating. I said they could call me a truck driver. I was saying to myself that I didn't want to walk anymore. Next time, if I have to go I'm going to be a truck driver (both chuckle). So on my discharge is truck driver. But you had your choice of what you wanted to be – nobody really cared.

So what happened when you got home? Did you call your family as soon as you got here?

I called them from Fort Dix. Any my father had a little business for me. I picked up some paperwork for him in New York from one of his customers. I got on a plane, flew home.

To Rochester?

Yes, to Rochester. And I can remember – my father's plant was in the upper two or three stories of a manufacturing building in Rochester, downtown Rochester. And I can remember climbing the steps up to his floor, and I knew his desk was on the far side over in the corner of the office – it was a big, open office. And when I got to the top of those steps, he couldn't look up ...

He was too emotional.

He was afraid to look up. It was interesting. So. That was the end of that.

So you stopped at his office before you went home.

Yes. And then I went home with him.

How was your Mom when you got home?

I guess she was fine. I don't remember. I think the fact that my father had been in the Army, and my mother had married while he was in the New York National Guard, I think, so she had been with him through his various stations in the States during World War I. I think it kind of provided her some sense of what was going on – even though vague as it had been and disconnected really totally from World War I to World War II. Still, it was something she could handle. So I don't even remember that, would you believe.

Well, when you got home, what did you do? Did you go to school, did you go to your Dad's ...

I took the summer off – I went to summer school immediately and took a math course.

On the GI Bill?

Oh, yes. Took a summer course and enrolled in the University of Rochester and went full time and graduated.

What was your degree?

Chemical engineering. I don't remember, I guess it was another three years and I lived at home. But that's where I wanted to live. I wasn't about to live in a dorm. And then I went, still on the GI Bill, I went to the Harvard Business School and got a degree in business in a couple of years. And during that period the GI Bill, in effect, kind of ran out. But it just about covered the whole thing, which was terrific. And what surprised me, because since that time we've had reunions – not a Division reunion, nothing official from the government or the 75th Division – just the guys in "N" Company – our little group of thirty guys. We had our own reunion.

Every year? Every couple of years?

Yes, it's been every year up until last year when the guy who was really enthusiastic ran them – he died, and nobody else has been willing to spend the time to do it.

How many men are still around?

Oh, a dozen. I can't remember what I started out to say!

So you've had these unofficial reunions of "N" Company.

Yes. But we don't do that any more. I did call my Lieutenant – Harvey Erwin – a little guy from Tennessee (chuckles). He's a nice guy, a college graduate. But the Company

Commander through the whole thing – Captain (?) -- was a real hillbilly (chuckles). And a lot of the guys in our company were hillbilly's. They were from Mississippi. There was mule-skinners. I mean, I got to drive a vehicle frequently because I was the only one who had driven a vehicle! Would you believe that? I mean these guys said, You've got a driver's license? I mean they came right out of the trees. But they were a hard working group, and we had an interesting time. Anyway, Harvey Erwin. I called him just about a week ago. I was kind of worried about him. He's 91 and lives in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. He sounded good! 91 years old.

You said that your time in the Army sort of fueled you for the rest of your life, insofar as you were going to be the one giving orders and not taking orders.

You got it!

And so that's what you decided to do, and that's what's taken you where you are in your career.

Right.

How did your experiences affect the way you think about the military, the way you think about the situations we're facing now in the world?

Oh, I would have to say I'm a hawk. I think that we are – I think the Administration has done a lousy job in bringing the populace into the conflict; of not making them aware of the gravity of the situation, which was built into World War II – everybody was “on board.” Not so now – of course, it wasn't in Vietnam either. And it's not so now. And the Administration has not done things that would permit the public to take part in the effort. For instance, they should have gas rationing. If gas prices went crazy, which they did, why don't we have a 55 mph speed limit, like we did at one point? I mean, that would make the country aware of what was going on every day. There may be other things that they could do. But they've been unsuccessful in getting the public behind them because they haven't permitted to take part in any way, in my opinion. I also feel that if you're going to do it in Iraq – they talk about a surge now – I would be inclined to send 200,000 or 300,000 guys over there, and just absolutely clean them out.

Just overwhelm them.

Bang. Either do that, or get out. And the Administration and all the politicians are sickening. All these guys sitting behind desks, pondering this and that, and asking the same questions over and over and over. It's a very sad, political football. And it's too bad. I don't know if it was right or not to go in there to begin with. I don't know enough about it to know.

But, basically it was that fuel to go and do something that you feel in your own life is what you see missing now – willing to do something one way or the other.

Right.

Is there anything we haven't covered in this interview, anything that you'd like to mention or add before we go off record?

No, I don't think so. I think you know as much as I do (both chuckle.)

Okay, Alan, thank you very much.