

Eldridge, R.C. "Dink" Interview 9-19-90

[Speaker 1]

3, 2, 1, testing, 2, 3, 4, 5, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, over. William B. Fitt, right there.

Today we're interviewing Mr. R.C. Eldridge of 1157 Royal Hills, Royal Concord, Tennessee, or is that Knoxville? Knoxville. Knoxville, Tennessee.

And he'll give us his experiences of World War II. And I'll call Mr. Eldridge to start here in just a second. Okay, Dick, if you will, let's start back at UT and take it from there.

Okay. Well, I was born and raised in Chattanooga, Tennessee. And I got mixed up in the football and was the manager of the 38th, 39th, 40th, Orange Bowl, Rose Bowl, and Sugar Bowl teams with Naylan.

And after I graduated, well, I took advanced ROTC to UT. When I graduated from UT, what I was going to do, Naylan sent me to a telephone company to show the film of the Sugar Bowl game. And they hired me on the spot.

Anyway, subsequently, of course, I was called to the Army like everybody else. And I went to Fort Knox and then Texas and the California desert. And I went up there and Naylan was there and was forming the Army football team.

And we went to Yale University and a whole bunch of us, whole Tennessee players plus a lot of pro football players. We stayed at Yale University and played for Army, Navy, and Relief. We played the New York Giants on Sunday, the Brooklyn Dodgers on Monday, and the Chicago Bears the following Sunday.

After that, we disbanded and I went back to my unit. I was transferred to Cadbury to another battalion in Fort Knox and subsequently ended up in Europe. Okay.

Tell me a little bit about your training here in the States. In the States? I trained at Fort Knox, of course.

Everybody went to Fort Knox in the Army. And we were in Texas, which is in Brownwood. And I stayed there in a regular Army outfit about two months.

And we went to the California desert for General Patton to train for Africa. We were at Indio, California. We were there about five months.

And I cadred out to, I came back to Hood, which was then brand new as Camp Hood then, which is now Fort Hood. We trained there in a tank battalion with school troops for the tank destroyers who were there. I then transferred to Fort Knox, Kentucky.

What kind of tanks did you actually have? At Hood? At Hood, we had light tanks, the small ones.

When I transferred to Fort Knox, we had the medium tanks, M-4s. We were on the Armed Forces Board, which tested all the tanks that the Army was trying at that time. We had Fords, Chryslers, Deese, and Radials.

And what we would do, we would take, we had ten of each, and we would run. A company would take them at 8 o'clock in the morning and run them until 3 o'clock. And then we would put gas and oil in them and run them, testing rubber and grease, and see what would break down.

And it eventually ended up that it was two diesels and one Ford running. And they took the gas to the top, chipping all the hundred octane gas overseas for the bombers. And then we went to Tennessee Maneuvers, Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and went to Camp Miles, Standish.

And we shipped out to England. We stayed in England all of 24 hours and went to land in Omaha Beach in July. And you were only in England 24 hours?

We just landed in Southampton, went to Liverpool. Southampton, went straight across on a train to Liverpool and got on a Canadian freighter and landed in Omaha Beach. We staged at Malone, above Sturberg, until we got all our equipment, got all our tanks.

And then we drove from there to Brussels and joined the 104th Infantry Division, who were with the British. We stayed with them up to Breda, Harlem. We got orders then to come back.

We came back to Brussels, went to Aachen, Germany. Through the Hürtgen Forest down into Eschweiler. We swam along there from November the 14th to December the 16th.

You know, the Battle of the Bulge here on the sea. We got orders at night to load up and go to... My orders were to go to Eupen, which is this side of Le Havre.

I said, yes. He said, turn left. That's all.

We didn't have any maps. We didn't have anything. We went down and it started...

It was snowing sideways. Got down to a little... Well, the roads got to bad and the tanks were having trouble with steel tracks.

So I left my outfit and got in the Jeep and went to a place called Sawy, S-O-Y. I ran into the colonels from the 3rd Armored Division Combat Command on the ridge and watched the Germans in the valley below the whole column coming up. And they turned left and went into Hatton, a little town called Hatton.

All this was about 10, 15 miles above Bastogne. It froze and it got to about, I guess, I believe, and then the course effect was about 25. The 75th Infantry Division, which was the ASTP troops, they trained over here in the United States.

I talked to them about putting them in the line. We were out with flashlights, looking for hanging a string in the wire with flashlights. You better put that out.

You're going to be dead. Anyway, I told them I'll be down the road about a mile from here. My whole company got in one farmhouse and it was freezing.

And from then on, we went from there. We went to Stavelot and St. Vilsomme, looking right down on Bastogne. We were blocking the Germans so they couldn't get out.

Tell me again what unit you were in. I was with the 750th Tank Battalion then. This was a separate tank battalion, which we were attached usually to an infantry division.

We were attached to 104th Infantry Division up in Germany. And then we came down and they brought the 75th in. And we were with them for a few days.

The commanding general got relieved. We were attached to the 78th Infantry Division, the 82nd Airborne, the 3rd Army. We all got in there together because it was, you can imagine, it was chaos.

Fortunately, I was a company commander, captain, company commander of the tank company. How many men in the tanks were involved in the company? In the company, you had 17 tanks in the company with five men in each tank.

And then you had a headquarters and you had a maintenance mechanic. In the tank companies, there was one light tank company and a headquarters for gasoline and that sort of thing. The one where you said it was a war had erupted, you said it was chaos.

It was chaos. We didn't have any maps. We didn't have anything.

And, of course, in the thrust the Germans had made, they had destroyed the 26th Infantry Division. They had captured a lot of tanks, the 7th Army. They were running around right in the middle of their columns, American tanks and everything else.

They were dropping paratroopers all over the place, behind the line, dressed in American uniforms. And they changed about five times a day. So they'd stop you and blow your brains out and say, Who won the World Series last year?

What was Dave Neuse's name and all that sort of thing. And if you'll recall at Stavelot, they caught these Americans, tied their hands behind their back and killed. Shot them in the head.

So from then on, things got real, real sticky. There wasn't too many prisoners taken on either side. The biggest thing we had was weather.

It was terrible. Unfortunately, I assume it was January the 1st. It was the 82nd Airborne, and my tank went down in the league to a little town called Houghton, which was surrounded by the Germans.

They wouldn't let us advance. We were blocking. I guess they were wanting Patton to come up from the south and get all the glory.

About that time, the weather broke. Cleared off, and the air force, they just plastered us. They pulverized us.

I know one day we were sitting there, and I saw my first jet I ever saw. It came down that valley, and I said, God, what's that? What's that?

Of course, they were running out of gasoline and all. But that was the first jet I ever saw. We were sitting there watching.

They were dropping parachutes and stuff into Bastogne. Some of those photographs of yours seem to be where you captured some of those jets, those first ones that were ever used.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah.

[Speaker 1]
Well, that was later on, Stan. Was it? After that, we stayed in that boat until they got the lines straightened out until February.

We went back to Eschweiler. We crossed the river there at Duren, which is right below Gulick, and went on to the Cologne Plain. We fought across there and took Cologne.

This was all with the 140th Division. We were attached to them. The way they operated, they'd take a tank, and then one regiment would have A company, one regiment had B company, one regiment had C company.

And the B company light tank would be used for reconnaissance and go real fast. We would work hand-in-hand with the infantry right down there, house-to-house. After we took Cologne, we were regrouping, of course, and we were figuring out how we were going to cross the Rhine when they captured Remagen.

We got orders at night to get down, and everybody just took off and went south to Remagen. We crossed the railroad bridge and got on the other side of the river, the Rhine. And from then on, we fought.

You'd run into some Germans. They'd fight you for a while. We went in there and went up toward the Cologne.

Yeah. Paderborn, and then we went south through the Harz Mountains into Halley, Leipzig. And when we captured all these airfields, there'd be brand-new jets sitting there, out of gas, beautiful things.

And, of course, we notified the Air Force, and they came with them. And if you'll recall, the first American jets that we had looked exactly like that jet that they used there. We continued on to the Elbe River.

And we said, well, we crossed it, in fact. They stopped us and said, well, wait for the Russians. So we sat there two weeks waiting for the Russians to come.

And we met the Russians the week before they had the big celebration there. And, of course, we'd been with them all. Here are some of those pictures.

They were taken a week before they had the big meeting. Then we got orders to occupy what had been captured by the Germans that had worked the farms. We got them, put them in lots of cars, lots of boats.

We got orders to go to Berlin for the Hotstell Conference. And we went to Berlin. At V-E Day, you know, you had 85 horses supposed to come home.

And we all had more than that. The general play said there's nobody going. Get out of here.

Relax. I came up there, had a big parade. 6 o'clock in the morning.

They transferred the combat engineers, and I was leaving at 6 o'clock. We left and went to Reims, France. Played volleyball for a month.

Went for a shift. And when the shift came, they came up one day and said, We've got a freighter down here. We've got beds and a hole.

That's all. And everybody said, We're going anyway. So we came home on a tough victory.

When was that? This was in November. And I was discharged in February of 1946.

It was all my leave. And consequently, four years later, I was back in the Korean War. Oh, you were?

Oh, yeah. Interesting. And I had frozen both feet.

And when I got back from the Korean War, they shipped me to Seattle to go to Korea. And they gave me a physical. They said, You can't go.

And I said, Yeah, I'll go back home. So I came back home. I bet you was high.

You still stay in contact with some of the fellows you were overseas with?

[Speaker 2]

Oh, yeah.

[Speaker 1]

At my company, we've had four or five reunions. There's not many in this part of the country. There's one boy that lived in Maryland.

The biggest majority of my men came from up in Chicago and Minnesota and places like that. Of course, a lot of them had died. And some of my men talked to some on vacation.

What do you remember most about your time overseas? The Battle of the Bulge, everything else? Oh, of course, the Battle of the Bulge.

It sticks out more than anything. And the Hurton Forest was very, very bloody. The poor infantry were working right with us.

If you went, some days, a hundred yards, you were really flying. When we went into the Siegfried Line, they had taken us the hell out of Stolberg. They'd taken it about ten times and lost it every time.

That was one of our assignments. And we took the thing. And I'll never forget the British.

We didn't lose 14 tanks. I was 17. And this British major said, Oh, good job.

I said, yeah, sure was.

[Speaker 2]

Sure was.

[Speaker 1]

Anyway, the people in that part of Germany were a lot different than the people when you got more over to the rural valley. They were a different type of people. Got in from Hopkins to wherever.

There wasn't anything there. They just all left and went toward Cologne, of course. We'd be out in the field, working in the field.

How were your relationships in general with the civilians? We, of course, at that time, we weren't going to deal with them at all. And we didn't.

Now, in the Bulge, we were back in Belgium. And we would feed them. They didn't have anything to eat.

They had food and so forth. But when we got up in Germany, we didn't give them anything. You know where you put the garbage.

Sunk. Here's this old man out there, digging in that stuff. He must have been close to 70.

Had a lieutenant that could speak fluent German. And I told him, I talked to him. He was a barber in the Hitler class up at Hitler's headquarters.

And he cut my hair and shaved me every morning straight away. Is that right? But anyway, talking about Berlin.

We went up to Hitler's dugout, the dungeon where he died and all. And I took a lot of pictures and shipped them home. And never got here.

Never got here? Never got here. I'm sure when I went to the APO, they took them.

They were taken down there. Dugout. I haven't seen anything.

Where he was burned up and everything else. They just mutilated that town. They tore it all to pieces.

Anything. There's some, I'll tell you where those jets were. Beautiful, beautiful.

Engineering stuff. Tables and draughts. They came in there and just busted that stuff up into axes.

Why? I don't know. What did you think of the Russians the little you saw of them?

I really didn't think much of them. Of course, they hadn't been paid in years and years. And they paid them off.

And they'd come over and buy candy bars. And you go tell the MP he stole it and all that sort of stuff.

[Speaker 2]

You know how the GIs are.

[Speaker 1]

And steal. They steal everything. I told his colonel one night that they'd go down to our tank part and they'd steal shovels and picks and axes and canvases.

I told him we've got to keep an eye on it. He said shoot them. So I fired at them.

Down there stealing. They don't care. They didn't have to feed them.

What did you think of the English? Oh, the British? I was with the British in Holland.

Of course, they'd been fighting how long? Goodness. This was a brigade of theirs.

And they were continuing it. It was teatime. Down there going down the road.

And they were good fighters. And they'd been fighting a lot. And I was with them again when the war was over.

I was with the North American unit. The British were right next to me and I got to be friends with them. Did you have any relationship with them?

Just when I went through France. We ran into a lot of them down at the farmers down in Cologne. They were making what was so sound.

They'd make that talidose and bring it up in the cellar. Put your cigarette lighter down in it. It was about 120, 130 percent coke.

I was big on this French. When you were over there and doing that heavy fighting, did you ever wonder about why in the hell you were there? We knew why we were there.

It never did enter my mind. I mean, we always knew. I'll tell you one funny thing.

I forget where we were. And they decided everybody got to vote. Roosevelt had already been elected anyway by the time we got there.

But we still had to vote. Everybody voted. Remember we voted in four down ranks.

Everybody had to vote. But we knew why we were there. And, oh, incidentally, I skipped some.

That was at the Harts Mountains. We went down into Nordhausen and captured a concentration camp. You see those pictures of me.

They said, well, that didn't happen. Don't you believe it didn't happen. There was at least in Nordhausen alone, not like Dachau and all those others, but it was still a concentration camp.

And we went through the fence. I'd say there was at least 2,000 to 3,000 dead just laying everywhere. And it had them stacked up like wood.

And the smell, you can imagine what the smell is. And the people, we didn't know this was going on. Of course, I took a lot of pictures.

And then I was the first, so we left. But it happened. I'll guarantee you it did.

It's funny, talking to other veterans, that you always get the same answer about did you wonder why you were doing what you were doing overseas.

[Speaker 2]

Everybody knew what was there.

[Speaker 1]

And there wasn't a doubt in their mind that that's where you belonged. No, not at all. What did you plan to do after the war?

Well, see, I had worked for the bail system. That's right, yeah. And when I'm back, I went back to, of course, 50 again for two years.

How did the war affect you? I don't know that it hardened you as death a concern. Nobody knows that death is.

I guess the main thing, the first thing you see, the first soldier you see that's killed is kind of bothering you. But you just get, I guess, into it. World War II changed the country.

I think it changed the world, yes. I think it changed the country. I just wonder, though, today, if we fight now like we did then.

Of course, Vietnam was a disaster, and COVID much better. But they fight again like we did. Of course, everybody fought.

[Speaker 2]

That's right.

[Speaker 1]

They didn't kill anybody. And everybody, we didn't like to read about all these consequences we'd get. There wasn't any consequences we got there in World War II.

You'd hear one or two for religious reasons. All those guys over there that's sitting on their ass for how long, they're going to have problems. Oh, yes, they are.

Big problems. That's one thing a soldier can't stand. You can't stand sitting on your butt.

Somebody asked me, he said, what do you reckon they do at night? I said, they don't do a damn thing. And all it's going to take, somebody get liquored up and start shooting, and that'll be it.

Of course, during the war, you stay busy when you're fighting. You fight all day and come in at night and regroup and get ready for tomorrow. A little pointer for us here.

In Night Rose, we got news about 2.30 in the morning. We were up in the harsh mountains. What are we going to do?

What are we going to do? I said, we're going to attack the area. That's what we're going to do.

I said, it don't make any difference. We're going to keep going. I'll tell you, I hurry up and wait until you get where you're going, just like us.

Hurry up and wait. When we finally got where we were going, they flew in at night and day. I'm sure they did.

We used to have what we call suitcase drill. Pack up. We lived in those primal tents down in Texas.

Well, they came in one day, okay, load up, we're going to go. Hell, you tear everything down, pack everything up and sit. Well, I'm not going to go today.

They didn't put it back. I figured out later, hell, they'd be doing that to keep us busy. Probably.

You flew the thing at Buddy Lewis, that baseball player. Did he fly the C-47? I don't know.

I flew 46s mainly. I'm not familiar with what he did. You flew 46s?

Well, 47s at first and then we got 46s so we could get a lot higher with a lot more tonnage over. They used them for ambulance planes too. And I remember, basically agent to the hospital once.

I'm bringing the how to fly an airplane. And these guys, some of them have been in there. What are you doing?

What are you doing out here? I said, I guess he's going to find out how to fly. And he'd evidently been an ex-fighter pilot because we got over and he laid down, you know, like this.

But, uh, I used to watch this paratrooper jump in here. I don't know. Go ahead.

Talk about these airplanes. I got quite a bit. We had 47 pilots that supported us a lot of times.

And this major, he was kind to us. He'd get down in that bag and I'd just shoot that guy. He said, come on.

He said, we're going to fly in the morning. Come on. I went up there.

He wanted me to bring a piggy back. Anyway, he took off. He came back in about 30 minutes.

That son of a bitch, he must have had 5,000 holes. Couldn't get the wheels down. He came in and barely turned it and flipped.

Jumped out and said, I got to go. Give me another airplane. I got to go.

You want to go? I said, hell no. They could knock out more stuff than we could.

Oh, Lord, hell. They got more stuff than we did. They'd catch them on the road, just blow them to hell.

Look at the shells they got now. You say you played three football games. They played the other game.

Three days. Played the New York Giants on Sunday. This is all farming they really did.

Went down to Virginia. Bill Hickman. He drank a quart of whiskey a night.

Couldn't stand that gale of whiskey. He didn't want to be there in the first place. He didn't want to be there.

No, he didn't want to be there. He said he was stranded in the front of a truck. It was a truck.

A full car. It was. They knocked on the door, but it was me, who shut the door.

I'm sure it cost him a damn star. That sounds like him. Yeah, that's him.

I don't know. It's a battle for oil. There's not much doubt about it.

I can't understand why we can't come up with something. They don't even use it. They use synthetic oil.

They use jet. Well, they tell me. I got to playing with these people.

This guy said, come out to my place this Sunday. When I tell you, he had catalogs, he had oil wells pumping, and that's when they started up gas lashings. He said, man, we're just going to secede the Union.

We got all we need. He said a lot of things. Yeah, he said a lot of things.

But that's the Army Force Corps. How did your tanks compare quality-wise to the German? You hear so much about the German tanks.

[Speaker 2]

They were good.

[Speaker 1]

They're firepower. The 88, what I did to mine, on the front slope, if you look at some of it, we enforced those with about eight inches of concrete.

[Speaker 2]

Is that on the slope?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. You see some in there where the 88s went in them. I know one that's there.

That thing ricocheted all the way around that street. You ever know Charlie Boswell? Yeah.

Charlie was a good friend of mine. Alabama?

[Speaker 2]

Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

I know him when he played with Alabama. Yeah. He was blinded in the Battle of the Bulge.

He was an Italian tank commander, I believe. I saw a lot of them for years and years. Charlie was really a tickle.

He's a character. He'd come up here, and he'd sit in the stands with his radio. Yeah.

And have just as much fun as anyone. He was a hell of a football player. He was good.

He was a good player.

[Speaker 2]

He learned.

[Speaker 1]

My brother had a place out on the lake, and we taught him water skiing. He was a national champion golfer. Yeah.

Yeah, he was. He was a heck of a good golfer. He was, the other day, just a pro golfer.

He played with some blinds, and they blindfolded him. The blind people said about 40. He said 90.

[Speaker 2]

Is that right?

[Speaker 1]

He said, hell, I couldn't do anything like that. Yeah, I knew Charlie Boswell. Charlie liked the women, too.

He says, you know, I get to bump up against them, and I just call it a society for good people. Yeah, he'd give me a little good thing. He'd take it way to that.

But, uh, I can't do everything on it. Yeah, but it doesn't mean you never fail. If we were going to move them to Paris one night, it's to Rockyville town.

We were going to have to take these men and move them out to the middle of Paris. Of course, there's a lot of that hit goals that told German people that when the Americans came, that's what they were going to do, rape them and all this stuff. It wasn't even that way at all.

I love it, but it wasn't right. He just flat ran out of soup. Yeah, they interviewed one fellow, and he was telling me about the first ones they captured in North Africa.

And then they thought, they're going to win that damn war, and they whipped the rest of it. That's right. Regiments lined up on the street to surrender.

We just marked down the road bomb. But in the bog, they killed those guys. The sergeant was taken aback.

That's the only one of them. The biggest thing about the bog, I don't know if you understand this, but they might take that. I was up with a solid G.D. He was just, and he couldn't just make it down. I said, it's not going to be possible. Well, you could slew the North, but there's a lot of... You get your share of them, wherever you are, I guess.

I got one man killed. Knocked. Maybe I was riding a motorcycle, a mule or something, but I got him killed.

And I had two, three men. One guy stood here, got him and took his \$150. You don't have R&B on time.

We were going to get him. He had a strap on and had a flag. He was going to another meeting.

There was a tree, and there was a meat market. And he had a bomb. His bomb was flung like that.

That's how it fell in that damn... Charmed my eyes, didn't you? Yeah.

I think so. Oh, sounds like it. Well, I tell you, you know, I always...

I used to watch those guys on the ground, in Burma, in particular. Those troops over there. I knew what they were up there.

I took them down to those damn... Whether I get killed or not, I'm so thankful I'm up there and ain't down there. That's right.

I'll tell you the answer. It's the worst place to be. They'd have...

We'd take off and attack and they'd have a full complement. Officers and enlisted men. And in 20 minutes, a damn sergeant would be in charge because everybody else was gone dead.

And they'd be walking inside the tanks with us. Well, in the modern army, like Sylvia and I, if we got him in a tree, those guys are volunteers. We had to pick the branch.

Well, the 82nd Airborne, they're infantry. Patrick was their infantry. They are?

Yeah, they're infantry. Now, the number was 51. And 50 to 1 in actual infantry.

Soldiers are 100 to 1. Oh, yeah, they just... I never heard of them.

Yeah? No, what... You know how they're people.

They're a value of life over there. Yeah, I heard of them. People in this country don't believe that.

I had an interview with one who could speak English. And I said, you know, a lot of people get killed on both sides. He said, yes, it works.

So what? So what? Yeah, yeah.

It did. It did. Like Pat did say, don't take any prisoners, you can't feed them.

Is that right? Yeah. They didn't take any prisoners, those guys fighting in Burma because they couldn't feed them.

[Speaker 2]

All they could do was feed themselves.

[Speaker 1]

They fought the damn weather, the damn climate. And Vietnam, I guess, was the same way. God, that's all.

You know, that's... At least we didn't have to fight that. Yeah, that's right.

And I feel sorry for those guys again. Lord. Terrible.

Okay. That'll do it.