

# Miller, Francis H. "Herb" Interview 8-7-87

[Speaker 2]

This is Herb Miller from New London, New Hampshire, an interview conducted by Dr. Charles Johnson, University of Tennessee History Department, Knoxville, August 7th, 1987 at Cherry Hill, New Jersey. What I try to do with these is just just forget that's there as much as I can and it takes me a while and you probably longer, but just get some background first on the person before they went into the service and then a kind of quick summary of their military career and getting out and then going in whatever direction.

[Speaker 1]

Of course, my memory on dates could be bad.

[Speaker 2]

Well, I can fill in a few, I think, but I started out in the, went in very young.

[Speaker 1]

Actually, I was 18, graduated on the 18th birthday from high school and was drafted seven months later.

[Speaker 2]

You were from New Hampshire originally?

[Speaker 1]

No, I was just going to New York, which is just a county area of New York and before I was drafted, there was six months time I spent in Bullard's defense plant in Bridgeport, Connecticut and then I was drafted went on into the 97th Infantry Division, Camp Swift, Texas. Is that where you took your basic training? Basic training and while I was there, I saw the opportunity to apply for the Air Force Cadets, which would give me college training in Indianapolis, Indiana and I passed the exam and 20 of us from that particular route that left and went to Butler University.

And by the way, Pappy Dears, I'm pretty sure is one of them. Ragsdale, who went all through combat with us, was another. Van Hoeven is another.

There must have been maybe 10 of us and while we were at Butler University, we completed maybe three months of very strenuous training mentally. Archimedes principle all the way to I don't know what and then also started into flight training and after I have one hour in the air and at that time the Battle of Bulge had taken place and we lost so many men that the government went down through our records and found the ones who had the basic training in certain guns. Mine was a mortar, 60 millimeter mortar and like a dope, I guess I had won a few contests with it.

Anyway, we got hit with the news that afternoon. The general got up from the Air Force and said all previous infantry trained men as of a week from next Monday are no longer in the Air Force training program.

[Speaker 2]

It's a real kick in the head.

[Speaker 1]

And we had our eyes on everything that went along with it. I was then scheduled to become a bombardier after certain tests would tell them what you're going to be. Anyway, I won AWOL that afternoon and I'm not ashamed to say this and interview anywhere else.

It hit me that hard and they didn't do anything to us. I wasn't the only one that went. Quite a few guys just took off.

[Speaker 2]

Where did you go? Do you remember?

[Speaker 1]

Down in the city of Indianapolis, which I'd never been down there before and I guess I did get lost and they got us fast enough. And that following Monday we shipped out and wound up in the 8th Armored Division. Did you were sent directly to Europe or?

No, we were sent to Texas to join up with them, which they had already started in what we call bivouac training, which is done just before you go into combat. We took our 25 mile hike with them and incidentally, the 25 mile hike, we had two men die on us and it's very strenuous. It's full pack.

It puts you in shape.

[Speaker 2]

Two of the ASTP men?

[Speaker 1]

No, we weren't ASTP, we were Butler University. Oh, okay. This is regular Air Force training, not ASTP.

Then we shipped over and... You went over to Kilmer and then went to England? To England.

We went to England and then of course my best buddy was Kenny Strittenberger. We went all through this together from England on. Nennig, I guess that name was propped up before, was our first taste of combat.

You were in the 2nd platoon? I was in the Company A 1st platoon mortars, 1st platoon mortars. Interesting story in Nennig, a lot of the men got hit.

You probably have this already. Happy Beards is one of them.

[Speaker 2]

I have a few pieces of it.

[Speaker 1]

He got knocked out right there in his back and all and I didn't even know this. Things happened from then on so quickly that it was hard to keep up with it. Nennig was a very small town and we were in the first house of the town and the child trucks couldn't even come through with food for quite a while.

Then we had a crazy cook who didn't realize the dangers up there and he showed up one morning with two kettles full of pancakes, which I'll never forget. We devoured those very quickly but every time one of our men would go out the door, whether to go to the bathroom or to go somewhere, they'd get hit. We had a very well positioned sniper and we couldn't find out where he was because up the street was a church and the German sniper seemed to like church steeples and that was too far away.

But I can't think of his name and if I do, I'll say before I'm finished, was looking out the front window and in the garden was a row of cabbages and all of a sudden I had a cabbage move but he caught it and I forget who this was. So they commenced to call in a tank or a tank destroyer, now this was a tank this time, and they ran right over. I took care of that sniper and we had another one in the church which I was just asking Al Metcalf, who was it, it wasn't Al, I was asking the other fellow there, who went in after him and he can't remember but he remembers one of the men did go ahead and get him and took care of that guy.

The best thing, well not the best thing, right after that we moved from there up three houses, our mortar squad, just our squad was in this one house and the next house was a machine gun squad and the Germans came down that night in their tank, their big one, big Tiger and thank God they were loaded, I mean they were, if they weren't drunk I wouldn't probably be sitting here and each night they would come down but we weren't told this, our first night there was quite a thing and the Tiger tank would come down and they would take their big gun and I don't know why they did this because they never fired the thing but they'd stick it in the doorway of the house which the doorway now was on the second floor equal to the height of the tank and at which we're standing in the back in the corners looking at this.

So we had one guy pulled up, I won't use his name, he just crapped up right down there, we had to slug him to keep him quiet because we didn't want the Germans to know we were in there and thank God they didn't hear us, they figured there's no sense in doing anything so they moved the tank on up the road again. Next door we had a machine gun squad and I won't mention his name, was caught asleep the night before on guard duty and was threatened by our dear lieutenant that he was going to get him. The lieutenant actually told him, you know we laughed at this death penalty bit because anyone listening to this will agree with me, we knew we'd never shoot him but the idea was to scare all of us, any more people falling asleep that's going to be it.

This was an Italian friend of mine, not to bring nationality here but he did have guts and ever since he got caught asleep we all felt bad for him because we saw him do some other things that was real bravery. Well anyway he crawled out of the cellar window of the house next to us and ran up behind that Tiger tank and followed it and this took guts and of course the guys in the tank are all looking ahead, they're not thinking anybody's behind them and he followed it up to see where it went because he ducked in the doorway and a tank went into a barn and the Germans put hay over the front of the barn, over the front of the tank and at daytime the Germans felt that they were smart and they wouldn't show up or do anything, their tactics were nighttime. So Carbone came back down the road, sneaked back of course and told his head man we know where the tank is and up came a tank destroyer and we all watched this happy happy episode, the West was happy to see the Germans try to get out of the tank and fry it to a nice crisp.

All right, Vietnam they called it crispy critters. The one thing I left out of this that was interesting and it is a favorite part of our squad story is that the Germans did this every night and this probably happened maybe the second night of scaring the hell out of us. So what I didn't do it but one of my men dragged out one of our men that was dead and see they couldn't come and pick up the bodies either because there was no way to get up there and sat him in a rocking chair on the front porch of this house and we still think that that's what saved us.

When the Germans came back the second night and saw this person sitting in a rocking chair they're probably just drunk enough to figure we'd better get out of here or something. I don't know what it was but we did it for that reason. It sounds eerie but combat's an eerie time.

We were hoping it was going to work and I think it did. In the meantime they got theirs two or three days later and we went on up through town and didn't get too far and it came over the radio and the jeep that the Tigers were coming would be there very shortly coming back as counterattack and I'll never forget the lieutenant coming by and say dig the foxholes and dig them deep enough because that's where you're going to be probably. Meaning we didn't have a chance, not a chance.

And thank God something happened and the Tigers never did show up. They were not supposed to be too far away. They withdrew us out of that town and then we went on from there.

And the other bitter experience that I had was Kenny Strittenberger and myself were the best of friends and we went to the next town which I just came back from the Netherlands by the way and I have pictures of the town and everything else. We had another sniper which no one could find and Kenny with his binoculars searched. He and I were up in the attic and he's swinging around like this and the sniper got him.

The binoculars gave him the light, the sniper, the light and I really got torn up because Kenny was our squad, the squad leader and blew the top of his head off and I completely cracked up and said I want out right now. And Hammer which is Lieutenant Hammer Schmidt ran up the stairs and pulled me together and said you're, you take over as of this minute and we're moving out because we just heard there could be more troubles tomorrow morning and we had to keep going which did work incidentally because we went up and out flanking the Germans and turned around and got a good many of them. The thing that I'm relating here and I was just telling the happy downstairs that as of that moment I was then of course promoted and two days later Hammer Schmidt got into a jeep with my promotion in the shirt pocket and he got blown up and by the way I just saw his grave in the Netherlands two months ago.

Much to everybody's surprise here because he came from a fairly wealthy family and we would assume they would have brought his remains back. I'm jumping the gun here but I never did get my promotion and I'm the kind of guy I'd say forget it. Now I'm 63 years old and I'm seeing the hearings on TV and hearing a few other things and I, my friends, one of them being a lawyer friend of mine has told me to go after it but you can't go after something like that after all these years and last night before I left I got a call to get a letter

from each one of my squad that will be here tonight verifying the fact that I was a squad leader.

Sent those letters to somebody and who knows but I don't think I will do this. I don't know yet.

[Speaker 2]

You would have been promoted to tech sergeant or staff sergeant?

[Speaker 1]

Staff sergeant which would have meant now a lot of money with interest and so forth but I'm not after the money. I don't need it but as they just told me downstairs it's a principle of the thing. Go after it.

So I don't know. Anyway we got the Germans on the run and in March 10th of 1945 in the same story you just heard the shrapnel started coming from all over the place and we had driven many miles that day and all of a sudden somebody opened up on us and I reached out and dropped the windshield and so I protected our half-track driver. The other one you heard that story that that's one chance in a million to someday get through that.

Anyway I got my left arm and I got pushed into an ambulance and I haven't seen many of these men since and I'm looking forward to seeing Willie Wynn who was the one that put me in the ambulance. He was the machine gun squad leader at that point. He later got a battlefield commission along with others.

In fact the man that took my place got a commission which made me more frustrated not that I would have stayed to get it just the point of the thing. Like Al Metcalf just said he probably said it in an interview he never even got a Purple Heart and he shut it for it. No not Al.

It's a fellow. Dick Richards. No the one.

Oh George Wheeler. Yes he definitely should have. Sure a Purple Heart is the principle.

He never got it. You know things like that. So I don't know what else I can tell you.

[Speaker 2]

Well you went back to.

[Speaker 1]

I did feel about the inspection of the general breaking me down and everyone else that particular day. That was General Coulson. That was General Coulson.

That's about all I can think of. I went back to England and they kept the wound open for quite a few days. They were doing it on purpose to make sure infection was gone and they went in and gave me an ulnar media nerve operation.

Took five and a half hours and it was something new. In fact the surgeons learned a lot in those days. I had Captain Wolfinger was a surgeon five and a half hours and he told me that would have cost eight thousand back in the states in those days.

Real money. And I had to stay awake so that when they grabbed the right nerve I told them when they had the right ones. It was quite painful.

I had 34 stitches and they had given me so much novocaine I guess I recall.

[Speaker 3]  
Probably novocaine.

[Speaker 1]  
That wore off near the end of the operation so I was jumping around. They had a trip back home after that. Did you get pretty much the use of your hand?

I was like that. I'm still the median nerve runs here. The ulnar nerve is here.

This is still numb but I did get it back but I'm missing quite a bit of muscle. I had to take it. I went through here splintered the bone when I went through.

But I got a dollar a day for scars only. Standing on my head trying to tell the doctor I couldn't do the normal. And of course the doctors in the work in the VA hospitals here I shouldn't say it but they're usually not flunkies but they're didn't get their vet's papers either.

I mean and they were kind of mad at the world. I haven't met a nice one yet and I I don't mean to sound bitter but it's true. Any VA any veteran that goes to a VA hospital will tell you the same thing.

[Speaker 2]  
It isn't just Korean Vietnam War veterans who feel that way.

[Speaker 1]  
Oh all right good I'm glad you heard that. So now that of course with all the increases that go by each year I'm up to maybe 105 a month but it still says for scars only and I never fought that. I was told by a good friend of mine not to fight it because if I did they'd have to take everything away.

And yet another friend of mine after five years they decided he wasn't getting enough and he got one heck of a big check. But there again I guess I'm going out kind of bitter but there are some things that have to be straightened out.

[Speaker 2]  
Yeah and it's their principles that ought to work and if they don't then it's wrong. Yeah that's about all I can say I guess. I've got a number of open-ended questions I frequently ask.

One of them is do you remember any time yourself when you think of yourself as being particularly lucky?

[Speaker 1]  
Very lucky. The very foremost moment would be when the Tiger tank put the gun and aimed it right at us and one shot out of that and the whole second floor of the house would have gone. And here they are yelling and singing and laughing at German.

Now I know German now not very fluent but in those days I didn't and it seemed to us at the time like monsters. And then we asked ourselves what are we doing here? And that was the one time that next when a tank destroyer came and destroyed that tank I knew there was probably death was still up around the corner.

I mean we all had realized it then. See we all went into Nennig a bunch of wild playing cowboys like when we were kids. I was 19 and a half years old and a lot of the men were 21, 23 but wild and they had us this way on purpose.

Now we think back now we realize we were brainwashed this way. And guns, now we had real guns and all this kind of stuff. But after seeing Sergeant Patekary got killed immediately and couldn't even get his body in.

He's over behind a wall. Anyone going over the wall to try to get the body to get in. And I hope someone else you're interviewing could give you some more names.

We had another man shot and for a night and a half a day we all listened to him call for help. Laying there in the back courtyard. No one could get near him.

The medic tried to get over the wall he got shot. So naturally another medic's not going to try it. And thank God he lived.

Otherwise he didn't bleed that much. That's surprising. But you know things like this.

And the snipers were the one that we captured. Abner, Abner is a school teacher from Kentucky. And he and I used to do a little hunting on us on the side.

Not that much but enough. And we captured three Germans. One of them pulled a grenade on us.

Had it in his lining or something. And we shot him. Either I or Ab doesn't matter.

And we brought the three young men. And this man that we shot was holding his guts in. And I was reminding Papi of this story.

And what happened was that our lieutenant, I forget his name now, was killed two days before that. So our new lieutenant was our chaplain. Nice guy.

And we brought the three prisoners in for interrogation. And he saw the guy with his stomach hanging out and asked him who did it. And of course the guy turned right around and pointed to me.

And the rules of war you know. And boy we didn't have a chance to say a word. And the lieutenant said I'll talk to you guys later.

And they took the three in the back and interrogated them. About two days later he met us out on the street and he said it's too bad he didn't finish the job. In other words we didn't know what was going to happen.

He didn't want to hear about the grenade or you know anything else. But that was just another experience that I had. Nothing important.

[Speaker 2]

The 60 millimeter mortar that you used in your squad, how did you feel that American weapons generally compared with German weapons? I liked the 60 millimeter.

[Speaker 1]

We used it effectively twice that I know of. One time from a ditch we had to get out of the half track in a hurry, set up the mortar. And our sergeant at that time, I was a gunner, and the sergeant at that time yelled back the figures.

And we bombarded a small farmhouse very effectively. And what happened was that after we lobbed a couple of shells and made a hit, the occupants of the house ran out quickly. And as they ran out some of our rifle squads here and now opened up and took care of some of them.

So it did have its effects. It's just the way it's supposed to work. Very, yes, exactly.

The only problem is it's dangerous because you've got to be out in the open to fire this thing. The 80 millimeter, I'm sorry, the 80 millimeters of American are much more effective, longer range. But we could almost, a 60 millimeter is just a stovepipe.

They're light, they're easy to carry. Relatively. Yep.

And very accurate. We never had a dud. And knock on wood, we never did.

The only bad part was we had the half track full of the shells and we're always waiting for that airplane or something else. But we were very fortunate. No, I was very happy with the mortar and I was very happy with the carbine.

Now you'll have, our arguments used to be the riflemen with the M1s thought that was the cat's meow, but I wish Abner was here. We did some tricks with that carbine at short range, but it's fast, it's easy to use in a hurry. The M1 was very heavy, accurate at long range where we weren't, but for churches and houses and things like that.

Then a hundred yards, say, or? Less than a hundred. 75 is very effective.

The grenades, no, there were some duds.

[Speaker 2]

I think you'll get that from some other people. Somebody mentioned that they thought that the German hand grenade, the potato masher was more effective. Very effective.

That was something we didn't want to see.

[Speaker 1]

And we had two, I remember two American grenades at the time rolling around on the floor, you know, without the pins in them where they were used the day before. And we'd go into

the room to get out of the fire and there they would be. And of course you never know when they're going to go off, but they never did.

And that's the only thing I remember that I didn't like too much. And that's bad because if you're going to, if a man is in a predicament where he has to use his grenade and it doesn't work. He's in real deep trouble.

He's in real trouble. But the potato mashers were good. The German sniper rifle was very good, very accurate.

I was amazed at that thing. I came out of combat with a Mauser, but I didn't, I couldn't keep it. Someone took it.

Yeah. The machine pistol, the German machine pistol was a remarkable whip because they could give a short burst or a single, single shot, but very accurate, extremely accurate.

[Speaker 2]

I've heard of people modifying the U.S. carbines, filing the sear down to make them fully automatic. Did you have any of that? No, no.

This was just... Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

We could get rid of the, in a hurry enough, especially if someone was running away from us or coming at us, we could get them.

[Speaker 2]

Radio communications, did you have much of that?

[Speaker 1]

I didn't have, we didn't have much, we didn't have any of that in our area that I can think of. Just used field telephones? The only time was the, was a jeep coming up to tell us that the Tigers were coming and dig in.

This was the one time that a jeep with a radio pulled up with all the... In fact, it's the only time I remember seeing one. Otherwise we had our own telephones and our radio telephones.

I call them portable. In fact, if we only had then what we have nowadays, electronic devices, we'd really add something.

[Speaker 2]

Did you, did you have the sense that the people in the company and in your platoon had a pretty good idea of what the objective was, what you were trying to do or?

[Speaker 1]

Yes, we did at the beginning and then when we were transferred there again, I wish I remember, you'll get this or already had, we replaced English troops.

[Speaker 2]

You were transferred to the 9th?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, 9th Army. 9th Army, and when we replaced the troops, we found out, we weren't told until the second day that every night the Germans were dropping paratroopers, not too many, maybe one, two, three, and the English with their leather heels were click, click, clicking on the stones. And I shouldn't say this, my wife always gets mad at it because I'm actually from English descent and I came back very bitter about these guys making the noise with the heels on purpose so that the Germans wouldn't put the knife on their back.

And they were out well exposed and none of them ever got it, but because the Germans liked this, they would just sneak in around behind them and do their thing, mainly planting dynamite to blow up something or whatever. And I still say that's why we were called in there, because I didn't personally, but I don't want to name the men, maybe they'll tell you when they talk to them, they caught some paratroopers because we were taught not to walk out there on the sidewalk, we were taught where to go and hide to catch them. And there were a lot of tactics used in this particular thing, but afterwards I was told that the British that we replaced were there or away from contact with their families and everything else for like two years.

We never were, I mean, it was always a way of getting a little, I never got my leave because I got wounded, but some of the rest was given to American troops where they weren't to the British. So as I realized later on through life, the British did their share. I was wrong in thinking that they were cowards or what have you, but the guys were actually doing it.

[Speaker 2]

We were witnesses to it. I've talked to a number of people, not from this unit, but who said they would have just as soon, well, they were unhappy enough with the British and with the French as allies, that they said they'd just as soon fight on the side of the Germans against the British and French. The British were, they rubbed me the wrong way.

That's unfortunate, you know, because you're on the same side and it's supposed to work better than that, but it frequently doesn't.

[Speaker 1]

Well, we had our experience in London before we went into combat. I was given a three-day leave in London and did our Piccadilly Square a bit because we didn't believe it, and then we went to, or I went to a ballroom and there were the colored American troops with the nice-looking British gals. Now, a 19-year-old boy like myself would have appreciated a night of femininity before he went into combat.

I went out on the dance floor, which I consider myself a good dancer, and well, I finally got to dance with one gal for about five minutes. I said, what are you doing hanging around with these guys? It hit me right between the eyes, and she said, well, he told me he was an American Indian, and that's a true story.

You'll get this from other people. Now, I'm not anti-black, I'll be truthful. One of my best friends happens to be colored today, but to have them come in and brainwash those girls back in those days, and it worked.

Because let's face it, if there were plenty of whites, what were they doing hanging around with them? And I'll never forget that. So, that made me kind of, I don't know, anti-British, I guess, in the very beginning.

But then, of course, I read, I know my history, and the British sure did their part, so I can't say anything.

[Speaker 2]

Probably by the time, by 44, 45, I just finished reading this book by Max Hastings on the Battle of Normandy and the D-Day Lineage, and he's British, and his conclusion is that by 44, 45, British troops were getting pretty used up in terms, they'd been at it either since 39 or 41, 42, fighting down in North Africa, and then some of them fought in Italy, and then they come up in the Normandy invasion, and units like the 51st Highlanders and units that had done tremendous service had just taken such horrible casualties that the people who were left, just statistically, were not the best anymore. And the units that you could have depended on to do anything back in North Africa, you couldn't depend on for anything in Northern Europe. And he said that's one of the things...

[Speaker 1]

I don't want to keep her waiting.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, whatever. Let's see, anything else? Well, I'll probably talk with you again.

Oh sure, feel free to do so. But I appreciate the chance.

[Speaker 3]

All right.