Ciffichiella & Cashin Interview, 8-8-87

[Speaker 1]
I'm having a little trouble with my tapes. Conversation with Mr. William Cashin from Torrington, Connecticut, and Mr. Vic Cificiello from Yonkers, New York. Interview conducted by Dr. Charles Johnson, University of Tennessee History Department on the 8th of August 1987 at Cherry Hill, New Jersey. Reunion of Company A, 7th Armored Infantry Battalion, 8th Armored Division. So, start with either one of you. How did you get in the company?

Well, I was with the 8th Armored Division for a shorter period of time. That is, while Bill was with the 8th Armored Division almost from its inception, I guess. Not quite, but no.

Before we left for the East Coast. But I had joined the outfit in Holland, in Harlem. Oh, I see.

Yeah, in other words, I had been a replacement for almost two years, waiting for an assignment. And I was an ordnance replacement, and so it was very difficult to get an assignment. But when did you get into the Army?

Well, I went into the service quite early in 1942. I enlisted in the Reserve Corps. I had looked for a commission, but I'm red, green color blind, so I had difficulty with the Air Force, the Navy, the Coast Guard, what have you, but the Army, you'd be welcome with open arms.

So, I went in in September of 1942, and I was able to finish my senior year at college and went on active duty. Where were you in school? At Manhattan College in New York City.

So then, when I graduated in June, a week or so later, I went on active duty into the service, and I went through ordnance school at Aberdeen, Maryland, and my training was primarily with range finders and height finders, fire control equipment. And so, from there, we went over to Europe, waiting for an assignment, which never came through. Did you go to England first?

Yes, well, we went to Scotland, and then moved south to England. Did you stay with the same group, or were you sort of... No, no, we were very transitory.

That is, with a group of replacements, they would go wherever the assignment would lead them. So, I was in England from about May until the turn of the year, maybe about January or so the following year. Then in December, they had the trouble of the bows, you see, and so they were looking for riflemen, and so regardless of your specialty, I guess they called it an MOS number, we were primarily all sent to one infantry division or another, or another.

So, there were a large number of us that ended up in Harleen, Holland, and then eventually from there, we went to the 8th Army Division, after they had their men again. Yeah, after our first battle. Yeah, right.

I understand there were about 65% casualty there at that time, so a large number of replacements went over, and I ended up then in the mortar squad. When I first went into the makeshift orderly room, as some of the others before, I explained to the captain what my background was in Bartlett, and he said he was interested to hear all this. He said, why don't you go over and join the mortar squad as a rifleman?

Sort of like a PhD being asked to go over and wash dishes. There's nothing wrong with that either. Whatever.

And so, it was there, I guess then, that I met all the others in particular. I met Bill Cash at the... You were in the 2nd Platoon then?

2nd Platoon. I was in the mortar squad, and Bill was in a squad up ahead of him, a machine gun squad, and there were two or three rifle squads up ahead of that unit. That would have been the same platoon Jim McDonald was in then?

Yes, right, 2nd Platoon. But you came to the company a lot earlier? Yeah, I came in just before the port of embarkation.

Okay, but you weren't down at Fort Polk then? I was in Fort Polk. Oh, you were in Fort Polk.

Yes. What was your background before you came here? Well, I started out 13 weeks basic training at Camp Club, South Carolina, entered the Army in March of 43.

So, after the 13 weeks, I got shipped down to Camp Landing, Florida, into an IRTC, Infantry Replacement Training Center. I spent about a year down there. Then I went to Camp Robinson, Arkansas, spent a few months there.

Then got transferred over to Camp Howes, Texas for 9 weeks advanced training. That meant we were in the barracks one day, shipped out into the field, and we stayed out there for 9 weeks. This is the truth.

In pump tents, that's how we stayed for 9 weeks. In night tactics, map reading, and all that stuff, they were transferred to the 8th Army. I was particularly glad to get into an Army Division because of the fact that I had a very good friend who got their pants beat off over in St. Lowe in an Army Division. So, I was kind of glad because, and he was in the 7th Army Division, I was kind of glad to get in the sister division, the 8th Army. So, we left there and went to England. It was about 11 days, I guess, something like that.

For 11 days, I was sick. A lot of people were from the South. Yeah, and that ship that was sunken off, and it finally got sunken in the Mediterranean anyway.

[Speaker 2]
Oh, is that right?

[Speaker 1]
So, we had our first battle, well, in England, and left there, went to Luxembourg around there. And we started to cross France, and ironically, it was the first blizzard that they had in 50 years. The worst snowstorm they ever had, I guess.

In half-track, sliding across that continent, you know. Yeah, it was terrible. So, anyway, we had our first battle, and well, previous to that, I was always switched around, and I left friends, you know, different camps.

Yeah, and I was separated from all my buddies, you know. And I was sort of a loner until I got into the 8th Army. So, we got in our first battle.

Before that, though, you had been put in the machine gun squad?

[Speaker 2]
Right.

[Speaker 1]
So, you had a home? Right then and there, yeah. And we were close-knit group, you know.

And so, we had our first battle. I got frostbitten hands and feet, and I was sent down to the aid station. So, they says, I took off my shoes, and it was all ice in my socks and stuff.

I was kidding. We didn't have any, we didn't have any, all we had was galoshes and combat boots, you know. And these stockings about as heavy as this.

So, anyway, the medic looked at me, and he says, well, he says, I'll be back. And the guy next to me, I don't know who he was, and he says, well, he says, you're going to get baggies. You're going to be leaving the outfit.

I said, I'm going to be leaving the outfit? Now, this might sound funny, but as I was saying before, I was always a loader, and I was always on my own, because I left all my friends, you know. So, anyway, he says, you're going to get baggies.

He says, you're going to be leaving. I said, oh, shit. And I put my shoes back on, and I happened back out of the aid station, and went back to the line, you know.

So, corny, you know. No, but it's not, though. It wasn't, and it's not.

But it was the idea of, I'm leaving again, you know. No, this is where I'm staying, you know. I've been too many places.

Yeah, right. So, you've gotten, from the time from Polk up to Kilmer to England down there, you've gotten pretty well incorporated.

[Speaker 2]
Oh, yeah.

[Speaker 1]
And then we, it was only about, let's see, there was three, there was only five of us guys left in our squad. Then we went to Holland. That's where we picked up Vic, you know.

And he replaced us. Yeah. That was probably a little hard after that, you know.

Probably left out of 14 or about. Mostly all frozen feet, hands and feet, you know. Now, that seven days, I guess, in Manning was the most eventful period of time.

Of all the time overseas in Europe, right? Yeah, for the people who went through it, that's, I don't know if it's because it was the hardest or it was because it was the first. Well, I would say it was the most traumatic.

I mean, Manning is the one topic of conversation, you know, behind all the conversations.

[Speaker 2]
And part of the fact, we were the first company in the entire division. We couldn't have that first.

[Speaker 1]
It was hard to think. It was a close-knit group, it really was. Yeah, you can, I felt that as soon as I came in.

Usually, I guess, they would ease an infantry outfit into combat. But here, they met seasoned German soldiers and so it was hand-to-hand. Apparently, you were told going in that it was going to be a kind of seasoning a day or two in.

It turned out to be nine. That's right. And we never expected it to be like a switch position for the Germans, you know.

They'd bring all the troops here and bring the troops there and switch them from here to there, you know. And that was the central position there. Right, yeah, yeah.

What they called it, the switch position. All the training that, your training was very different from what you had to do, but your training was, at least in theory, um, apropos to what your task was once you got into combat, did you learn that the training that you had was useful or did you have to learn all over again? Well, I was only, I was a truck driver for a short period of time, like I say, in these two camps, you know, and we would probably get into the advanced training, what they call it, and fell right into it because I was primarily from right from the word go, I was in infantry to begin with, you see, and that's what it was.

I took infantry training, just a lot of bayonet practice. Like, geez, I guess I had over 100 hours of bayonet practice. I had none of that.

Did you ever bayonet on in combat much? Not too much, no, not too much. It's, uh, well, one time, when we were on top of the hill in Nimmick, we were in the 94th Division, so we were on the farthest point on this hill, and in the early morning hours, you could hear the Germans talking right across the valley on the other side of the hill, you know, and come to find out there were medics and they were taking care of their wounded, and then as it began to get light, you could see these guys over on the hill and talking. You could really pick them off.

We were that kind of, they were, but we weren't that kind of people, you know. They'd shoot anything in sight. So, anyway, we let them get their wounded back onto the thing there.

All of a sudden, we get, uh, we get bombarded, and, uh, our squad leader says, we're pulling off, we're pulling back, you know, back down the trench. Now, the trench was big. It was as tall as we were, practically.

Did you dug it, or was it? No, it was already done. It was done by the Germans.

So, we're heading back, then our lieutenant comes up and he says, uh, what are you doing back here? And he says, uh, we're holding this hill at all costs. He says, that's the order that I get, that's the order I'm giving you, and this is it.

We're going to talk to Keith. And our squad leader says to me, he digs me out, he says, he's cashing, he says, you're going back through the front of that trench, because we expected a counterattack to see, and we thought maybe the Germans were coming up the hill and in the trench. Coming towards us.

So, Bill Schmidt says, cash me, he says, you know what to do, he says, reconnaissance by fire. Now, that meant the trench was, you go in the trench this way, and it was zigzag this way. Every corner I came to, I would jump out and fire around, even when nobody was there, you know, and that's reconnaissance by fire, you see, and bang, bang, all the way till we get the other end, and now these guys are following me.

I was a thirty. So, we get back to where we were, and good thing we had lifts, good thing Bill had the presence of mind to pull us out, because we would have been mangled, because our entrenchment, we had a, with the 94th guys, they put logs over, and they put a carpet for one of the houses, and put dirt on top of that, just for shelter, you see, even from the snow. We get back, and that was blown to blazes.

So, it was a good thing, you know, presence of mind that saved us guys, you know. Q. Vic, what do you remember about your first time getting shot at seriously?

A. Well, that happened very quickly. After I joined the group in Holland, we were there maybe just one or two days, it was over a weekend, and it was on a Monday, about six o'clock in the morning, we moved along to engage the enemy, and it was very easy going for a while, and I thought, gee, there's nothing to this, until the first shots were fired.

Q. Were you riding or walking? A.

I think we were on a half track until the enemy was engaged, and then, of course, all the infantry would leave the half track, and the vehicles would pull over to one side, and the tanks would all amass and move forward. And so, it was slow going most of the morning, but towards the end of the morning, I guess we came to this little farmhouse, and there were a few scribers or snipers that were left behind, enemy snipers, and there was one in the backyard, I think this was where Kenny Strittenberg was killed. So, we jumped into this house, and we knew that there was a sniper, there was a long German soldier in the yard somewhere, and we knew we couldn't move forward until someone took care of him.

So, Ken Strittenberg and Herb Miller, whom you've met, went up to the second floor, and Herb didn't know where this man was, but, you know, we shouted up to him to be careful. I guess he was there with the eyeglasses, with the binoculars, trying to locate him, and wouldn't you know, the sniper took a beat and hit him right between the eye, and the poor man fell backwards, and there were no windows in this house, it was very blowy and cold, but I distinctly remember part of his brain hitting the door sill, coming down, but Kenny was a heavy fellow, and the blood just simply flowed, and the wind gave us a shower. I remember being covered with blood.

We couldn't move, we could not move, and then finally, somebody went around, and at this point, after he had shot Kenny, now the man suddenly decided it was time to give up. He could have given up a half hour earlier. He knew his position was overrun, so he came out, hands up, and a few people took him back to headquarters, and they came back very quickly.

Okay, he didn't get all the way back, probably? Well, I don't know. I'm surprised he even got in.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah.

[Speaker 1]
I mean, this is your indoctrination into it, and in a few hours time, you could see all this bloodshed of someone who was very close to you, but beyond that, there were casualties and scary moments. I've heard it said that with prisoners of war, if you're captured, and if you can get past the first 15 or 20 minutes, you're probably going to be all right with either the Germans or the Americans or the British, but it's that first 15 or 20 minutes that is the real dicey.

[Speaker 2]
Well, the British would call it dicey, too.

[Speaker 1]
I mean, you're geared up, you're all hyped up, the adrenaline is flowing, and there's the enemy, you see. And he's just killed somebody. And he just killed someone, and he has thrown up his hands before you've had a chance to retaliate.

Okay, everybody home free? Yeah, after a few minutes, things calm down, and things become a little more civilized than they ever are, I mean, under the circumstances. It's one of the kind of open-ended questions I ask.

Do you remember a time, looking back on it, when you think you were particularly lucky? Obviously, you got off that ridgeline before the artillery came, but I usually find that people remember it at least one time, when they could have gone one way and they went the other, and they made it. I can say that every engagement that our company was in through the war, until the war was in, I was in.

And at one particular time, I felt that I was near the end, and I was so lucky, you know, but how long can this last? And then I get to thinking after a while, which is bad. Yes.

But we were up in the arch mountains, and we were waiting in reserve. I think it was the 2nd Harbor Division was pushing across the Elk River, and they got pushed back, and we were held in reserve, and they were going to try it again, and if they didn't make it this time, we were going. And at this particular time, I felt this was it.

This is the time, you know. But fortunately, the war had ended, you know, and the Russians came into Berlin and stuff like that, and just everything was, and we were still held in the

arch mountains of St. Andrewsburg, and it was just the, like everything dreamed out of me when we found out the war was all over, and I said, well, I'm going to learn.

[Speaker 2]
I made it.

[Speaker 1]
Of course, there's still a possibility you might have got transferred to the Pacific. Absolutely. You know, we have to find everyone, that was behind everyone's mind.

In fact, that's where we were going to go. Yeah. Most of the people from that end of it, either across the Atlantic or through the Mediterranean, some approach to Japanese from the other direction.

In fact, it was at that point that the war had ended in Europe, and I thought to myself, I survived here, now I'm going to have to go over it to face the Japanese who were much more forceful and less wanting to give up or surrender, and so I thought, well, let me get a book in Japanese, and I started to study Japanese, at least as an interpreter. I was happy a rifleman. Sayonara.

So I got up to about chapter three, and it wasn't necessary to continue any further because the war had ended in Japan. Yeah. James Jones writes about World War II, and he talks about the unmaking of the soldier, the people who think, who understand that if they stay in it long enough, they're either going to be badly wounded or they're going to die.

That's what happened. Right. And Jones was in Pacific, and he fought on Okinawa, but he says, once the war is over and you realize that you're not going to die or be badly wounded, he said it takes a long time to get back off that.

[Speaker 2]
Yes.

[Speaker 1]
And you're never the same after that because you've come to terms with your own death in a very particular way. Yeah, and then that's not going to happen. And it's just like when you hear a bomb bursting, you hear a drop and stuff like that.

What do you like to remember is being home and a car backfiring, what do you think? The lampposts. I talked to a guy a while ago who said he worked in a grocery store for a year or so after he came back from the Pacific, and he's a Pearl Harbor Survivors Association guy, so he'd been in right from December 41.

And he said he hardly talked to anybody for a year. Yes. And he just was so turned in on himself that he'd make change and he'd do this sort of thing like there was nothing else going on, that it takes...

Of course, you guys had time afterwards. You weren't immediately separated, were you, from the service? How long were you with the unit after the war?

Well, not very long. The war ended in May, I guess, in Europe.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah, in May.

[Speaker 1]
And then we moved on to Czechoslovakia. No, to Pilsen. Pilsen.

And this was in maybe August, or prior to that, it was in July. Well, at that point, they were deploying the people over to the Pacific. So I left there, went to the 35th Division, other people.

Where did you go, Bill? Well, I went to... No, I came back to the...

No, first I went to the 4th Armored Division, then I got transferred to the 83rd Infantry, Engineers. And we're just hanging around, you know. And then I got put into the 56th Signal Battalion.

That's who I came home with. And seems sort of odd coming home with a unit that you... You're absolutely right.

There was only one guy that I knew there that was in my outfit that came home with me. And there I am separated again. You see all these different times.

So I guess from the war's end, which was in May, the following April, I was discharged. So you were in for close to almost a year after that. Yeah, yeah.

Something that's very amazing, Chuck, is that really I've never had the conversations that I've had in the last two days in 43 years. You really could not speak to someone else who did not experience the same sort of trauma that you did. That's right.

I mean, it's altogether different talking to someone else. You just don't communicate. He cannot feel and sympathize or empathize, whatever with what you're saying.

That's right. And so now when two people here get together, it's almost as though the clock had stood still for 43 years. You just simply went back and I could see Willie Cuff holding on to Dick Peter's arm.

He really, there was a bond there. Oh, sure. And even now when you meet him, you meet the guy you hadn't seen in 40-some odd years ago.

Well, actually you go up and give him a hug, you know.

[Speaker 2]
I saw that yesterday.

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, that's right. It's like this guy, he doesn't recognize me. I recognize him, though.

[Speaker 2]
I recognize you, Paul. Your voice on the phone.

[Speaker 1]
But yeah, these are very tense moments that we had undergone. Yeah, nobody ever shot at me with any intent. I was of the generation that was just a little too young for Korea, a little too old for Vietnam.

And so that's an experience that I never have had. And there's a part of me that says, I wonder what it would have been like for him all the way back. But I don't have any deep regrets that I haven't had a chance to.

You see, at this particular time, we were... Patriotism. It was gung-ho.

Yeah, right, right. 1942, 43, I mean, geez. And to go into the service was, geez, that was great.

Well, at least you were examined, you found out you were all right anyway. And the country was in danger. And not only that, but all your friends were gone.

You had nobody home. All you went to go to work every day and come back home again. A particular time before that, you used to go out at night and say hello.

The guys have a few beers and stuff like that. But it was on and on, and you were glad to get in the service. Bill mentioned the fact that he had jumped around.

You see, I had the same sort of experience as a replacement. And somehow or another, everyone looked for an association. Everyone looked for an assignment, in particular a division.

And it was surprising, as I say, the day that I joined that 8th Armored Division, how much pride it gave me. Put the patch on my arm. Yeah, you were in the 8th Armored Division.

You were part of a group of 12,000, part of a group of 13 million. People all engaged in the same activity, in the same time frame. And it was worthwhile.

Yeah, as I say, if I could avoid all the bloodshed and everything else, and all the sad experiences, I wouldn't mind re-experiencing the whole three-year bit all over again. I have no regrets. No regrets whatsoever.

Of course, you can't say that about a guy's poor recovery or Vietnam or something like that. But as I say, this whole country, it was a declared war, and we were all doing our bit, you know, and glad to do it. One of the things I wonder about is, because it's a debate going on with military historians now, how did you assess the quality of the weapons that you used in comparison with the quality of the weapons that you faced?

Now, that's a real broad question.

[Speaker 2]
You come at it in a lot of different ways.

[Speaker 1]

Well, you have to compare the 88 field gun, you see, against what did we have on the Sherman tank. There was no comparison. There were several times at that particular time.

In fact, the Germans had 88s.

[Speaker 2]
They had 88s.

[Speaker 1]
They had a super machine gun. And that Burke gun scared the hell out of you. The Tiger tanks, I think, were a little superior to the Sherman tanks.

Oh, yeah, because they were designed in such a way that when a Sherman fired at them with a 75, the shell would just bounce right off the airplane. You know, until they got, I guess, they got the 90s on there after a while. They came late with some of those.

Yes, right. It's just like the equipment that we had for shoes, you know. Like a lot of our guys used to think their shoes off, their combat boots off.

It's the galoshes with straw in the hand and then put a mixture pair of socks on. Yeah, there's always PBO circulating. I had a pair of socks under my arm all the time.

I'd keep them dry and just put them in my jacket when I was locked out. Then you had to change them. You had to change your socks if you didn't move them.

[Speaker 2]
That's right.

[Speaker 1]
I had to carry an extra pair of the belts. I hadn't thought about it all this time. But if you didn't change your stockings and you were going all this time, your feet would perspire and then you'd get frostbite.

Yeah, identical. When you start unlacing your laces, right at the time of your shoeing, it was all ice. But a Chinese soldier, you see, did not have the fine boot that we had.

But as you say, they would take some newspaper, wrap it around their legs, some straw and some newspaper. That probably kept your foot warmer than the best boot that the quartermaster Corps had designed here. But of course, it got wet.

But you know, ironically, after Nettick, after all that frozen foot stuff, we got these shoe packs. They come up to here. I mean, the issue was to put the felt liner in.

Well, I put them on. Well, I never suffered so much in all my life because my feet were starting to thaw out, you see. I couldn't move.

When I did, they ached. I can't describe the pain that was there. But the rifle that we had was a good rifle.

It was an automatic rifle. It was very effective. How about the light 30s that you had in the machine guns?

That was excellent. That was a good one. That was a real, real good one.

We had three of them on our track. But we stole one. We were equipped with two anyway, and of course, it could be counted on the rainbow.

But we stole another one and put it on the back of the half-track. So we had three of them. You were like a flurry fortress.

V-17 on the ground. The half-track pretty good? Held up pretty well?

Well, I used a car with a coffin with a motor in it. Purple heart box. So anyway, yeah, there was a few times that I guess ours could be shrapnel or something.

Oh, yeah, right, right. And I'm liking that mechanic work. It just kept going.

Just whack around the side of the thing until they got something. Yeah, but I enjoyed that. I enjoyed the half-track.

Have you ever gotten any reactions from the enemy on the other side? I haven't had a chance to talk with any German combat troops. I've only been on the project about three years.

Yeah, I imagine there are many, you see, who are here, who are living here, who were on the other side during World War II. So probably some research along that line would be helpful. Many history books of World War II that I've seen have made some presentations, you see, from this side.

And then in the same time frame, what was happening in the German camp or the Japanese camp, and you could get a history of really what was going on. There's a new book by Max Hastings called D-Day and the Battle for Normandy, which does that. And Hastings' contention is that it's controversial.

He's a British journalist. But Hastings' contention is that the Germans were better soldiers than the Americans or the British. Now, you're going to get a lot of argument.

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. They were superb.

[Speaker 2]
They were superb.

[Speaker 1]
They really were. I thought they were. It all depended on who you were coming up against.

That is, they had the People's Army, the Wehrmacht, and they were not as dedicated as maybe the SS troops might have been. On the other hand, you had some young kids fighting you who were 10, 11, 12 years old. You might even have had firemen when we captured.

We went over a hill and captured a group of these people, all dressed in military regalia, you see, and there was no fight, whatever. We thought we had captured the German general staff. It turned out they were firemen.

But the war was on its way out. It was waning, phasing out, I guess, maybe from the turn of the year on. You know, from what I've read, 8th Armored Division faced a whole different set of qualities of enemy troops from really good to not much at all.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah, because we were tossed around.

[Speaker 1]
We went from Luxembourg all the way up to Belgium and Holland, and we got attached to the British Second Army. Yeah, you replaced the British Armored Division at one point, didn't you? I don't think so.

Well, right, we were at least right on the 9th Army and we abutted the British Army. Yeah, and then we got attached to them. I'm pretty sure we got attached to the British Second Army for a while.

And then we went up through the Harz Mountains and then we came around back down to Kilkenny. So we got around. For a division, we moved, you know.

What did you think of the British? Did you have much to do with them, the soldiers? First of all, I couldn't understand what the hell they were saying anyway.

I'm only supposed to speak the same language. Yeah, and they were entirely different. As far as I'm concerned, Europeans are entirely different than the Americans, our way of life and our way of thinking, you know.

As far as the Germans go, too, they were, I thought they were bloodthirsty for Christ's sake. Some of them were. You read an interesting book on the life of Montgomery.

Towards the end of the book, he was saying, as Montgomery grew older and he was almost on his deathbed, I guess someone asked if he was afraid to meet his creator. He said, no, I'm not afraid. He said, but how will I explain all the men I've killed to the same people?

Yeah, there's a problem with being in any kind of command. Yeah, yeah. You're a soldier.

Yeah. What did you think of the, or did you have much thoughts in terms of the quality of life and the leadership within the company, in the battalion? Good officers, good NCOs, a bunch of losers.

Or did it vary from time and place? Geez, I don't know how to answer that. The guys that we had, they were pretty good.

I didn't get to see too much of the company commander, let's say. I had a little contact with the platoon leader. Yeah, but I thought they were doing a fair job.

But you didn't have any, you wouldn't have any contact with, say, battalion officers? No, no, no. From the time I joined the outfit in Holland, there was very little contact for socializing.

In fact, you can see in the photographs. I have a whole group of photographs, but they only involved the half-track up ahead. Bill's half-track or the track beyond that.

I really never got to know anyone else. There wasn't any time to socialize. So your relationships were really very limited in terms of the people that you had?

It was one-to-one, that's right, with your nearest neighbor. 10, 15, 20, 30 people, sort of? Yeah, and even a rifle platoon as compared to a machine gun platoon or squadron, a machine gun squadron was more stationary than a rifle squad might be.

You know what I'm saying? You're here. You provide a base of fire.

Yeah, and they moved around a lot more in their stories. And even though we were in the same platoon, I can't relate to them because they were gone into some other area while we were stationary here. You know, when they talked about something, he said, well, I don't remember.

Well, you can even see it in the alignment of these squads. You had them out of rifle squad or rifle squad, third rifle squad, then the machine gun squad. And then the mortar.

[Speaker 2]
And then the mortar, you see.

[Speaker 1]
So I saw the least activity. These people would flare out, you see, and we would be back up. But in time of a conflict, everything gets mixed up.

But the quality of leadership by our chiefs was great guys. They really did. Especially Bill Schmidt and Ken, George, who were our chiefs.

They were the greatest, you know. And they were helpful in all hell. They'd do anything for you.

They'd try to make things comfortable for you, explain things to you. You didn't know. They knew, you know.

Go here, go there. Learned a bunch of dummies anyway. You were at the bottom of the barrel so you made the last move.

So we were more private. We did everything that they told us to do. I noticed in the pictures that I saw that you had brought up a lot of ladies in those pictures.

Oh yeah, you constantly encountered the populace. It wasn't that you always faced the enemy face to face. In an armored division, I guess you never really did engage the enemy that way.

You were always at a distance. I still didn't know those women. Well, you would pause a while and then you'd be in a city more than out in the country.

You can't get them into a trap. I don't know. Some of the others, it seems that whenever there was a young girl around, to put your arm around the girl and have a picture taken of you and the girl.

And then you moved on, of course, and there was no contact. That's a fiction that we'll continue to preserve. Did you have done Czechoslovakia?

Did you have much to do with the Russians? Were you close enough? They were there.

They pulled out and we moved in? They moved in gradually while we were there because we knew that they were going to occupy that sector. They had their own place, but as far as going into Pilsen proper, everybody could...

Oh, we'd pull in with their guys and stuff like that. Took a couple of pictures with the Russian soldiers. I never liked them.

I still don't today. I don't like the Russians. Why did you feel that way then?

I don't know. I think mostly because it's communism. I'm against communism.

Typing the word go. Don't ask me why, but I know what they stand for in their communistic doctrine is to take over the United States. I don't give a damn what anybody says.

And you felt that back then too? Oh yes, oh yes. Oh yes.

You know, you read up and whatever's instilled in your mind you know. But in the course of time, you know, it's been happening. Things happen here.

Let's make an arrival and all that. You know, right at your own back door. Nobody seems to be talking about it.

Jesus, let's do something about it. I talked with a guy in the 35th division who did a lot of trading with the Russians across some river. They would trade watches for enormous rolls of money.

[Speaker 2]
Yes, yeah.

[Speaker 1]
He lost most of it all playing shooting craps when he was coming back. He said for a while he was rich. Well, some of the soldiers that you would meet would be simple, maybe peasants who were doing fighting.

So that it would seem that the louder a watch clicked, the better quality. Some people were trading Mickey Mouse watches for whatever the Russians had to offer. But the situation thing, I think there became political.

As a result of the conference, we were held. We were told to hold back at the Elbe River and go no further. But the American troops could have easily crossed the river and gone on into the capital of Germany.

In fact, I was at the Elbe River. I was in need of a pair of glasses. There was one particular day when the shelling was very, very intense.

I was in a ditch at that crossroad. It was February. I took my glasses off because I was perspiring so profusely that my eyes were burning from the salt.

And I thought, now where will I put these glasses so that I won't damage them? I put them in the gas mask. That evening, when I took the glasses out, one lens was shattered to a powder from the concussion.

I thought, God, I must have been lucky to pull out of that. But now I figured, well, gee, maybe this is a lucky break for me. So I went to the sergeant and I told him, I don't want to fight the enemy.

But I said, give me an even chance. I want to see what I'm shooting at, thinking that I would be sent back to England. Instead, they sent me to a MASH unit right up at the front of the Elbe River.

And they were getting ready to cross the Elbe. In fact, they tried to cross the Elbe. They had all these casualties that were coming back into this hospital.

So I was laying there. I had a cot. I had to wait my turn.

I waited several days. The doctor had to look at my glasses. But all night long, as the casualties kept coming in, see, the nurses would come around and give you a shot of morphine.

So I'd have to stay awake.

[Speaker 2]
And I would say, Do you know where, which room is Joe and Helms?

[Speaker 1]
Joe Helms. I know. He's on the floor somewhere.

So I would stay awake because, you know, tell the nurses, hey, don't give me that shot. I'm not wounded. I'm going to have my eyeglasses repaired.

So I went on all night. And that's, I think, where the conflict had stopped. They were held up at the Elbe.

Yeah, there was Ninth Army that was up at the Elbe. Yes. Did you, could you tell a difference in the way the fighting went or the way your world went when you were with Third Army or when you were with Ninth Army?

Did it seem to make any difference? Third Army with the artilleries. Your first courses, like Vic said, it was very traumatic at the beginning because there was a first baptism of fire.

Yes, yes. But now as you move on, you know, you know what to expect. You could hear artillery.

You know which way they were coming from. In going or out going. And you knew what to duck and not, you know.

There's only one way to learn that, unfortunately. Yes. You have to be there and you have to go through it.

But it seemed to be, it seemed to quiet down after a while, you know, whether they were out of steam or what was left of it, you know. It seemed to slow down after a while. Did you have more, say Patton was in command of Third Army and who was it?

Simpson was in command of Ninth Army. I don't know. Bradley was in command.

[Speaker 2]
Simpson was in Ninth Army. Yeah.

[Speaker 1]
Bradley was 12th Army group.

[Speaker 2]
Right.

[Speaker 1]
And historians looking at them, you know, talk about Patton's aggressive attacking spirit and sort of rap Simpson for being somewhat reluctant to push as hard as he might be. I was just kind of trying to get a feeling if there's anything that the people who served and because a lot of units didn't serve in both armies. I was just wondering if you sensed any difference in the way the units were running.

Probably not. Matter of fact, I wouldn't even have a thought, you know. But what did you say Patton was aggressive?

Well, there were personalities at the upper level, too, between Bradley, Eisenhower and Patton. And then there were animosities between the American Expeditionary Force and the British. There was a conflict there between Eisenhower and Montgomery.

And Montgomery had some very snide remarks to make about Eisenhower. He claimed Eisenhower kept changing his mind all the time. And he felt himself...

Was Eisenhower a responsible commander? No, that's right. That's right.

I think he was wrong. Yes. I think so, too.

I think he had more foresight than Montgomery had. How did you guys get fit? Did you have good enough food?

Did you have to scrounge for your food? Well, vaguely, of all my recollections of food is the last thing that I can recall. There had to be a mess crut that came along every so often.

But you had C rations and K rations. But as you say, you didn't live off the land. You'd go through a farm and there would always be jars of jelly and bacon and what have you.

Pulled out, we're going to have our first hot meal. And that was breakfast. And we didn't have...

Med Tech was a half-track. He was a mile down the road. We were on our gear.

We didn't have any mess kits. So we lined up on the mess line. They gave us pancakes here.

Three pancakes, butter in between. Now it comes with syrup over your hand. Now we're eating like this, you know, in a couple of clothes.

But the syrup dripping and the butter going... It probably started freezing before very long. Right.

You know, in an armor division, as far as food, but in particular, as far as liquor was concerned, you had this vehicle, you see, this was your home. And you could put anything into it you wish. You'd go through a big city and you would come across several cases of liquor, you see.

You would just put it in there or several cases of women's underwear or... That was sickening stuff. Whereas the foot soldier had to carry everything on his back.

So he went a different life, really. It was one advantage of being in armored infantry. Yes.

You do have a place to store things. Yeah, we had a rack on the back and all our duffel bags were in that, you see. And that was our worldly possession.

Everything you had, a change of clothes and everything was in that. And if we didn't have a change of clothes, then that was it. You know, you stayed for six or seven days in the same thing.

Then we had those long overcoats, too, you know. You'd get frozen on the bottom. Yeah, and it would bend however you sat.

I sometimes tell a story in the physics class where we talk about heat conductivity, about that heavy overcoat that the army soldier was asked to carry. It weighed about 20 pounds. And so when it got wet, it weighed a lot more.

Together with everything else that you had to carry, the smaller you were, the more you had to carry. Being a guy, you had to carry the more bags. But I pointed out to them that the American soldier, you see, had to be quick or he would be shot.

And at the same time, he had to be warm or he would freeze to death. You see, he didn't want to be shot to death, nor did he wish to freeze to death. So someone got the idea, being that you're carrying a second set of underwear and a second pair of slacks to throw away the

coat, you see, you would wear the two pairs of slacks and wear the two shirts and wear the two underwear, two sets of underwear.

And this kept you much warmer, you see, than that heavy overcoat. And of course, there were layers of air here. You see, air is a very, not a good conductor of heat.

So the quartermaster or the ordnance department, I suppose, picked this up after the war. And as a spinoff, we have the design of ski clothing. One layer of nylon, another layer, you see, and some insulation in between.

And so a few ounces, you see, replaced several pounds of heavy clothing. These spinoffs continue to occur time and time again. Talking about appropriating bad liquor or whatever else, how long did it take you to get used to the idea that you're going through some place and, okay, let's take this?

That isn't the way you were brought up, that you would go and take from somebody else. But to defend their belongings, the spoils of war. If they take from you, you take from them.

Further to the fact that we captured this Yuna, this town Yuna, and we came across, everyone was driving the hatchback up. We came across one of our trailers that the Germans had in the back of one of their trucks, you know. So it was abandoned.

And we pulled over, hey, let's grab this thing, and we'll put it back where it was. All of a sudden a general, I forget what general it was, he came by, he was a brigadier general. He comes by, he says, what the hell are you guys doing here?

And he says, well, there's a trailer here, and it belongs to the United States Army. And the Germans had it, and we're taking it back. He says, that's right, guys, you do.

Any goddamn thing you want in this town, you take it, he says. Well, most people really didn't steal per se. That is, if you took a bottle of liquor, it was for your own enjoyment, so to speak.

It's not that you took it and sold it to someone else. Yeah, we came across a lot of silk stock and food. Yes.

Handy to bargain with.

[Speaker 2]
Whatever.

[Speaker 1]
I mean, if you went into a museum and you looted a painting or something of this sort, it was another story. There were articles of war that dictated against that sort of thing. But if you came across a jar of strawberry jelly, no one was going to complain.

Oh, yeah. Or an enemy weapon. A lot of people picked up spouses.

[Speaker 2]
Yes.

[Speaker 1]
Yes. I can think of all of those shotguns and nicely engraved shotguns that were smashed against trees and stuff like that. We'd ask them, do you ever have any weapons or anything like that?

Oh, yeah. Smash them, go outside, smash them right against a tree. And I think now you really have those.

Well, if you could have gotten them back. Oh, yeah. And people did get them back too, I guess, you know.

People brought back all kinds of silly souvenirs. I had two hand pistols. Yeah, I do too.

And so one day there was an article in the paper that the police would pick these up, do you see, and there would be no penalty as far as you're concerned. We had the Sullivan Law.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah.

[Speaker 1]
I mean, if you're in possession of a weapon of this sort, you're subject to a felony charge. So they came and they picked them up and gave them to the FBI. They loaded the barrels with lead and then returned them.

But I suppose there was no as ridiculous to hang on that sort of thing. But there were all kinds of weird souvenirs. I can remember in Holland, the British had been in that little town where Kenny was killed.

And this British soldier had gone into this, I think it was a church, you see, and it had been blown apart and it was booby trapped. On a raft there was a hand, just this portion of the hand. That was all that was left to that soldier.

And I can remember someone within the group wanting to take it as a souvenir. How gruesome can you get? But to this day, I can see that hand.

I mean, I can see a dirty glove and envision that hand just being there. That's macabre. Yeah, but war is.

That's one of the things I've come to understand about it. That explosives can do terrible things to the human body. And most everything that can be done has been done.

And that the people who think that Vietnam was some sort of terrible war and worse than anything else, I think just don't know anything about warfare. Because what happened when you got hit with an 88 was as bad as anything that ever happens. Right there.

What I could not see at that time was the inhumanity in these concentration camps. I mean, you see body after body after body. Did you open any of them yourselves?

I think we had skirted one concentration camp. Remember, there was a wagon loaded with dead bodies. Yeah, there were bodies piled on top of one another, about 50 of them.

And when I look into this one person's eyes, I could not imagine that this person was one day alive and was healing. But I think they treated them invisibly. Yeah, towards the end of the war, some, a fair number of Americans was either opened or went through.

Concentration, extermination, most of the real bad ones were over in Poland. Well, I imagine these stories probably all have a similar tone that pervades them all. Yeah, but each set of experiences is a little different.

Because everybody brings different things to it. They come to the company at different times. Their background was different.

And as you said, you get, even in the same platoon, a real small number of people. The experiences of one squad is different from another. Absolutely, sure.

I think you can narrow it down to a squad and say they probably shared the same, pretty much the same experience. That's right. But to expand it to a platoon, then all of a sudden you've got a whole lot of different wars.

And they're all, they're individual experiences. There was one story that was real strange. You have a gradation of sort of braveness.

That is, there are some people who have nerves of steel and you would follow them anywhere. And there were others who were maybe at the other end that were real wimpy and what have you. But nevertheless, they did their job.

Now, in the second platoon, we had Stanley Roback. This man was ferocious. He had a handlebar mustache.

He had a sash. He looked like a German officer, an SS trooper rather than an American soldier. But you see, he was the bravest man I had met within the group.

And so this one night at a crossroad, I think there were a few German vehicles there and an American tank, you see. And the group, the company had been separated. Half was in the farmhouse and the other half was on the outskirts of town.

So now we had to meet every two hours or so on guard duty. We would come this way, you see, meet at the intersection and then go back. And then the next tour would come on.

Well, Stanley came back and he was completely shaken. He was out in the field. There were German soldiers there and he said he could hear the clicking of the barrel.

And I thought, my God, Stanley is shaken and I have to go up and follow him. So I was really shaken to the core. And I was with this big tall kid from Kentucky.

I was a little older. I didn't want to show him that I was frightened. But I tell you, the tour was for two hours.

Maybe it took an hour to get there and an hour to get back. We were back and forth in about 20 to 30 minutes. And when I got back, I felt I had pangs of guilt, I suppose, within me.

I thought to myself, why was it that I was so fearful? Why was it that I was almost cowardly? I asked the kid, you know, I said, let's take another walk back.

We went right back to that crossroad and came back. But as I say, it was just a peculiar experience to envision Stanley Roback being shaken and I had to follow his footsteps. But the thing is, you did.

Yes. In fact, you went back. Yes, I did it twice.

Just to prove to myself that I wasn't cowardly or whatever. It didn't do you any harm in your feeling about yourself. Because that's just one of the things that people can't know until it happens.

One of the things the Army's always very interested in is trying to predict who's going to be a good leader and who's going to be a good soldier. And they have yet to find any kind of foolproof scheme in doing that. Because the people you might figure back in Camp Polk who were going to be the heroes, maybe, maybe not.

Although Dick Peters said that from his experience, when I was talking with him yesterday, that before you went in at NINIC, he had a pretty good idea of most everybody in his center of attention and who was going to be able to rely on. And he said he was, in general, pretty, pretty accurate in his judgment. But he was a good leader.

[Speaker 2]
He was very active.

[Speaker 1]
He was very active. I could see this man flitting back and forth between the guys. And I thought to myself, this guy's going to get backed off.

And he did. Yeah, well, he had a lot of esprit de corps. And this is what Ollie North had in mind when he was describing the Admiral Poindexter, that I would follow him up any hill.

And this is what lies behind any soldier or any sailor or what have you. You have leaders and you have followers. Not every follower will make a good leader or vice versa, you see.

But you need both. You need a general and you need a private. You need good platoon sergeants and you need people who are, they're going to look around and see them right there.

It's, you wonder why, and I've had this again and again, and maybe it's just the people who come here feel this way. But there seems to be such unanimity of opinion that this was such a good company and a good group of people. And you felt at home when you got there and you did too.

And I talked to Jim McDonnell just now. And there was a sense that after you drifted around from place to place, that suddenly, this was home. And there was something very special.

And a lot of camaraderie.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah.

[Speaker 1]
It sounds as though it was a fairly rambunctious group and a little hard to handle and would tend to be out of line now and again. But at the same time, it was a cohesive and very loyal group of people. Yeah.

And some good times too. Scary, but good times too, you know. I like talking about good times.

Well, I think more of the good times were experienced here in this country rather than overseas. Oh, I don't know. It was a breaking in period, I guess, from civilian status into a trained soldier and so on.

Yeah, because we're trying to liberate and everything was new. You didn't know what Army life was going to be like. And they said, you do what you do, you know.

You squat, you squat. And you had better, you know. And then after you get into it, it's like combat too, you get into it.

But I found overseas was, like I was saying before, that they were quite different from us in the way we knew them and everything. And how we were taught, how they're taught, how they think, you know. That was what made me dislike one person over there.

This is me. And we were at Covent Garden for a day and I just happened to be sitting next to a girl who was a very attractive girl, but she was very mouthy at the same time. And she was, how she was blotting it over to all the American soldiers.

And for instance, she says, she says, I bet you some of you don't even know the name of the island that the Statue of Liberty was on. Good question, right? Wouldn't know it was that one.

And nobody knew, you know. Do you ever get any in your experiences, encounter the question concerning the dropping of the atomic bomb and the loss of life on Japan? Nobody was in the military.

I've oftentimes heard that. Some people would say, gee, it was immoral to have dropped a bomb. Well, you've got to talk to someone who was on his way to fight the Japanese.

Even though the Japanese had lost the war, they were still a very dedicated group of people there would have been many, many lives that would have been lost in the process of overtaking Japan, and it would have been overtaken. But it's a question of the loss of Japanese life as opposed to the loss of the foot soldier. Oh, yeah.

But I worked for the fellow in the meat market in Michigan when I was in junior college. And he was, I don't know, he was a, he was on 40 millimeter ground bomb, or on a half track, I guess. And he was scheduled to go ashore with the first group on Japan in the landings.

He was real convinced that he wouldn't have lived a day on that 40 because they were going to send those 40s in against block houses and entrenchments. And he said that nobody could talk to him about the dangers of dropping the bomb. Yeah.

Yeah. No, I think. It's regrettable that there's loss of life on the part of women and children and what have you, but who instigated the conflagration?

It's the, and certainly, I don't know, one way to look at it is simply say that it's another weapon in a war that had terrible weapons that did terrible things. And there are an awful lot of women and children who died at Hamburg and Dresden and Coventry and a whole lot of places. And this is just an extension of it in a terrible way.

Now, but for the people, everybody I've talked to who were combat people, the war is over. Now I can go home. You got home, you said, in April of 46?

Yeah. And what happened then when you left the unit? I was pretty much at a loss of what I wanted to do.

Of course, that particular time, I didn't have anything. Things were tough at home. I never came from a rich family or anything like that.

Things were tough. I was pulled out of high school by my father to go to work to support the family because he wasn't feeling good. So then I got into the army and when I got out, I was at a loss.

I was, you know, you don't know what the hell you want to do and my father said, if you go to the fire department or the police department, he said, I can do that much for you. I said, no, I don't want to get back into uniform again. You know, I just got out.

Give me a break, you know. But then I had a cousin who was in the National Guard in a town not too far away and they were in tanks or stuff like that. So I got, you know, it gets kind of interesting.

I went over and got to talk to my cousin. He was a tank commander and he tried to induce me to join. So he induced me to the company commander and he talked to me and he wanted me to get in.

He said, I'll make you a tank commander right off. He said, I'll give you a good... I said, Jesus, I don't know.

He said, take this home with you. Think about it. So I took all the papers home and I read them over and I looked at them.

I don't know.

[Speaker 2]

Tore them right up.

[Speaker 1]
You know, I said, that's it. No, I'm not going to do this. But then I went to, I went to have, my uncle had a dairy, pasteurizing milk and making ice cream and stuff like that.

I went to work there. I wasn't happy there. I met my wife now and she was a nurse and I met her at the hospital and got the going together.

Then I finally decided we were going to get married after five years of that, and then we got married and I went to work at Seth Thomas and I worked there for 10 years. I was making clouds and stuff which was interesting. Interesting as all hell.

Then I had a chance to go to the fire department up in the town where I was living. So I took that. What the hell?

There's no future here. What have I done? What am I doing?

So I started looking forward to security into this. Back in the uniform, stayed there for 26 years and finally got out. I retired last October and that's it.

I had to get out then because I got a knee injury and hurt in a fire so I couldn't go back to work. So that was it. And you got back when?

Somewhat earlier. I was discharged. I returned back to this country in September of the previous year, 45, and then I had a 45-day furlough so I was discharged in November.

So I was out in November the following week or two. I went down to graduate school and started in January, spring semester. I started teaching in June, the following June.

Where did you go to school? Manhattan College. I started teaching there June of 46.

And so I taught there for about 10 years, got married, thought it was time to make some money. To leave the teaching profession. Not that there was ever any money in the profession, but within the profession.

So from there I went down to the Glenn L. Martin Company in their vibration section, senior mechanical engineer. And we were working on Navy planes and Army B-57s.

But then we didn't particularly care for the Baltimore area. I was from Yonkers. My wife had yet to move down.

So I left there after about six months or so and went with IT&T, with the Federal Laboratories in Nutley, New Jersey. Now this is the equivalent of Bell Labs, New Jersey. I stood there about six months and wasn't too happy there.

So I went out to Republic Aviation and we worked there with civil engineer and express analysis on the landing gear of the airplane. So I was there about a year or so and then they had a big setback in that they lost a major contract that they had on the 103 airplane. And so at that point I thought I had my hands full of engineering.

I went back to teaching at the Maritime College and this is where I am today. So after all these years it's almost time to become an American. Did you use GI Bill benefits?

[Speaker 2]
Oh yes, yes.

[Speaker 1]
My GI Pell was paid for all the graduate work and the textbooks and the slide rules and everything. Did you use GI Bill? No.

I thought about it but I must say that when I was in the Army I liked the action. I really did. And that's why I get back I think I get back into the fire department to do that.

And it was always something. My brother-in-law was in the Marine Corps in Vietnam came back and joined the police force at Pontiac. And I think I needed that that drive all the time.

I felt the same sort of thing at the Glenn M. Martin company with all these airplanes. I mean I could have ridden myself in one of these five.

And then I did a lot of hunting. I've hunted all my actually all my life. I just gave that up about two years ago.

Then I found out it was nicer shooting with pitches than with a rifle used to be. It's a deer. They walk away?

You just carry a camera. You gotta carry the deer out. Johnny Carson was talking about deer hunting about two nights ago.

He said, I like to hunt too. He said, but I went up to this deer and this deer stared at me with these pretty eyes. He said, I proposed.

Anything else that I really need to know that you need to tell me? That other people need to know a hundred years from now? Well, I guess really no one looks forward to a war.

But I guess if you have to defend your country and the principles are there and you were ordered into the conflagration, well, I would say, don't shirk your duty. It's nice to have your freedom, but there's a price to be paid. Because you love your country.

Be a patriot.