

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

CHARLES ASHERMANN

Radio Operator, 87th Infantry Division, Army, World War II

2003

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Charles Ashermann., (b. 1923). Oral History Interview, 2003.

User: 1 sound cassette (ca. 36 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master: 1 microcassette (ca. 36 min.); analog, 15/16 ips, mono.

Abstract:

Charles Ashermann, a Chicago, Illinois native, discusses his World War II service as a radio operator for the 87th Infantry Division reconnaissance unit. He details his first experience with combat in Metz (Northern France) and his unit's role in the Battle of the Bulge (Belgium) during which he earned the Bronze Star. Ashermann describes the mentality and conditions of being ahead of the front and the weather conditions on patrols. He recalls the German surrendering once the Armistice was signed in 1945.

Biographical Sketch:

Charles Ashermann (b. 1923) served with the 87th Infantry Division during World War II as a radio operator from 1943 to 1945. His unit began in Metz (Northern France) and made its way up to the Czechoslovakian border in time for the Armistice.

Interviewed by Mark Jaeger, 2003.

Transcribed by Mitch Arnold, 2013.

Transcription checked and corrected by Ellen Brooks, 2014.

Abstract written by Rebecca Cook, 2015.

Interview Transcript

Jaeger: I'm with Charles Ashermann of Port Washington. Mr. Ashermann, can you tell me a little about your background, where you grew up and your family life?

Ashermann: Well I was born and raised in Chicago. I had one brother and one sister. I went to high school in Chicago, and started college there.

Jaeger: At what school?

Ashermann: It was Chicago Junior College.

Jaeger: Okay.

Ashermann: And I went into the service when I was 19 years old. I was drafted.

Jaeger: And what year was this?

Ashermann: March, 1943.

Jaeger: And what branch were you drafted into?

Ashermann: The Army.

Jaeger: Where did you go for basic training?

Ashermann: Basic training at Camp Fannin Texas.

Jaeger: Can you repeat that?

Ashermann: Fannin, F-A-N-N-I-N, Texas. And then I went to college in the service for about six months at Pennsylvania State College.

Jaeger: That's different than Pennsylvania State University, is that right?

Ashermann: No, no, I'm sorry Pennsylvania State University, right. State College Pennsylvania, that's right. I remember them talking about it being a Nittany Lion.

Jaeger: Exactly.

Ashermann: It was a very nice school, very nice campus.

Jaeger: What were you studying?

Ashermann: Pre-Engineering.

Jaeger: Was that what you were studying in college before you--

Ashermann: Before entering the service, yes.

Jaeger: After six months at Penn State where did you get sent?

Ashermann: Then I was assigned to the 65th Infantry Division in Camp Shelby Mississippi. It's Fort Shelby now but at the time it was Camp Shelby.

Jaeger: At what state was that?

Ashermann: Mississippi. Yes, my wife and I were down in New Orleans a couple years ago and the 65th was having a reunion at Camp Shelby. But I was with some of the fellas in New Orleans, they was wanting me to come to Camp Shelby. But that was not my infantry division anymore.

Jaeger: So you didn't go to the reunion?

Ashermann: No, I didn't.

Jaeger: Your group was not there.

Ashermann: Well, that's another story. I was transferred to the 87 Infantry Division. While I was in the 65th, I had--I was inducted into a basic training as a radio operator and radio repair man, in this reconnaissance unit. I didn't even know how to spell reconnaissance when I was assigned to it. I was surprised I didn't end up in a rifle company.

Jaeger: Did they say--they don't tell you why they do it, they just tell you what to do, is that correct?

Ashermann: As far as assigning, yeah. I didn't exactly say – hey, I was trained in the infantry, I'm going in there. It seems like a new experience. Not only was I a radio operator, but I was trained in all different weapons and demolitions.

Jaeger: And then were you transferred to the 87th?

Ashermann: The 87th infantry division, yeah.

Jaeger: Were you a radio operator with that group then?

Ashermann: That's what I was assigned. I was all boxing gloves when it came to being an operator [laughs].

Jaeger: I gather it takes a certain sensitivity that you hadn't quite acquired.

Ashermann: I still remember the Morse code.

Jaeger: Was that a big part of being a radio operator was sending Morse code messages? And receiving?

Ashermann: Yes, Morse code and verbal. When we sent Morse code, we sent it directly, we didn't have any secret code.

Jaeger: Nothing was scrambled?

Ashermann: No, it wasn't scrambled. It was all straight code. I went overseas with the 87th, landed in France, maybe September, something like that.

Jaeger: September of '43? September of 1943?

Ashermann: No '44.

Jaeger: Oh that's right. Do you know where in France you were?

Ashermann: Pardon?

Jaeger: Where in France?

Ashermann: I don't remember the name of the place.

Jaeger: Was it in north or south?

Ashermann: North France.

Jaeger: And what was your duty there or what were you working on?

Ashermann: As a radio operator.

Jaeger: What was the 87th doing? Were they reinforcing or were they--

Ashermann: They went in as a total combat unit. The 87th was called the golden acorn. It was the ugliest looking yellow acorn on a green background. Nothing you would think as a combat unit. Called ourselves the nuts. [laughing] We started in northern France in Metz, was our first real combat.

Jaeger: Metz? M - E - T - Z?

Ashermann: M - E - T - Z, yeah.

Jaeger: Was there heavy battle going on there or was it more gouge reconnaissance?

Ashermann: No, we were doing some reconnaissance, yes but there was some forts there. I understand Metz was ringed by five forts. Now this was something I looked up, I believe, afterwards in history. They were some German units in there that were being stabilized, you might say. And all of a sudden we were packed up and headed north to Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge. We thought we were going to get a chance to recuperate a little bit until all of a sudden we found ourselves in combat. We weren't really seasoned troops at the time, we had a lot to learn. That was in the Ardennes. In fact, I remember on Christmas we were promised Christmas dinner, but didn't get it. There was a lot of confusion. I would say that is where I had my heaviest combat training.

Jaeger: On the job training?

Ashermann: On the job training, right, yeah.

Jaeger: Did you say your unit fought in the Battle of the Bulge? Or you were heading in that direction?

Ashermann: No, as I said before, when we got there, we didn't even have time for our Christmas dinner. We all of a sudden found ourselves directly in combat. That was a very fluid line. It was hard to find the line of demarcation. I can remember one day, we were on foot patrol and we ran into this artillery unit. The lieutenant said they were supposed to be there. I said, well there is nothing here, I said there is no body ahead of you. And when he checked he found he was in the wrong location. They could've overrun him, that's how confusing it could be.

Jaeger: Oh yeah, you weren't the only one who was lost.

Ashermann: I belong to this organization, the Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge. And I get—oh, it's supposed to be monthly but some months they don't print it and some months they do. Depends on how much they got to write. I read stories that people tell and everybody seems to be of the same impression that I am. Sometimes you didn't know what was going on with us unless you read the Stars and Stripes. "What's going' on out there?" You'd read the Stars and Stripes. You say, "Well, it's like this." And for some reason or other, somewhere between there and the time the war was over, I think it was in there, I received the Bronze Star, for valor.

Jaeger: What were the circumstances for that?

Ashermann: I don't know. I really don't.

Jaeger: But you weren't going to turn it down [laughs].

Ashermann: It was five points for discharge. One thing, my younger daughter, I was talking to her on the cell phone one day, she said, "You never talked about the service, dad." I said, "I guess I never will." She said, "A lot of you don't." It's funny that it's opening up now. She said that we were almost like a cult, a secret cult. What went on that nobody would ever know about.

Jaeger: Only amongst themselves it seems. Veterans typically talk about the war between themselves.

Ashermann: Yeah, right.

Jaeger: With people that were there.

Ashermann: I know, I heard stories from World War One, veterans all talked about it. Veterans from World War Two did not share too much. I mean that's what I assume myself. The thing is if a book was published and everybody's stories was in there and one of the families said "Where's yours dad?", "Oh I didn't tell it." [inaudible][babbling noise].

Jaeger: There's a certain peer pressure then.

Ashermann: Yeah, right.

Jaeger: During your time in Belgium and North France, were you on the front lines?

Ashermann: In reconnaissance?

Jaeger: Yeah. Or were you ahead of the front?

Ashermann: We were ahead of the front. Yes.

Jaeger: That was your job, right?

Ashermann: Yes, a lot of it was foot patrol. Sometimes you knew the enemy was there and they knew you were there. You sort of just let the other person be. You didn't want to stir up a hornets nest. That's one thing I learned in reconnaissance was intuitively to hold my fire. Not to fire my rifle. I never thought of that before. Sometimes we were told to take our clips out of our rifles so we wouldn't—

Jaeger: Avoid temptation.

Ashermann: Yeah. That was cold. It was the coldest weather I ever--

Jaeger: Colder than the Midwest?

Ashermann: Oh yeah. I don't know. I didn't carry a thermometer around. We were outside most of the time. I remember my feet were always cold. I found a pair of goulashes when we first got over there. I wore them back now. It was kind of muddy. I saw there was a whole bunch of goulashes laying out there in a field. I says to the guys, "I'm gonna to take a pair". And I am glad I did because trench foot was rather rampant at the time.

Jaeger: Oh, yeah?

Ashermann: Yeah. Just before Belgium. I see some of these geese wallowing around I thought you lucky devils. They were enjoying it.

Jaeger: Fit for a duck I guess, right? How long were you in North France or Belgium?

Ashermann: Well, from there we moved eastward, right out of Belgium through Luxembourg. I have a burn from a piece of shrapnel. I never got the Purple Heart because I got pneumonia and that was the only thing they recorded. I found somebody from the 87th division. They have their own organization in North Carolina and I'm going to write to him. I did spend some time in a, I think it was the 38th Center [??] near Luxemburg. And I went to the 6th Convalescent back in Metz. From there my units had moved out of the area, so I was sent to Sedan.

Jaeger: S-E-D-A-N

Ashermann: Pardon?

Jaeger: S-E-D-A-N

Ashermann: S-E-D-A-N.

Jaeger: It was after you were treated?

Ashermann: Yeah. I forget the town. I was telling my wife about this the other day. This fellow was collecting cigarettes and he had been at the replacement depot, he just decided he wasn't going back to war. And he was collecting cigarettes from all of us to survive there. And we all stood around awestruck. He was a real hero.

Jaeger: This was an American?

Ashermann: Yeah.

Jaeger: He decided he had enough of the war? Did they arrest him?

Ashermann: I don't know.

Jaeger: You didn't stick around long enough. But you liked his notion though?

Ashermann: Yeah. Well the reason I got into this Metz story, I put a bunch of toilet paper in an envelope and made it real look official. And walked out of the replacement depot towards mess like I was on a mission. I shouldn't tell stories like that. We ought to scratch that out.

Jaeger: You're probably safe by now. Statute of limitations [laughs].

Ashermann: But then I got back to my unit.

Jaeger: From Sedan you found yourself or you found the 87th again?

Ashermann: I was back in there again, yeah. We were one the Maginot Line at the time. Siegfried Line! Siegfried Line. My god, those pill boxes were—

[interruption][00:19:13]

It was still cold.

Jaeger: Now the Siegfried Line was a line, a reinforced line the Germans had set up.

Ashermann: I understand, I never saw anything like that, but I understand they had railroad tracks underneath ground they could move personnel and supplies.

Jaeger: I gather the fighting was pretty intense there?

Ashermann: No, it was sort of a mop up. They had broken through in other places. This was just preventative maintenance, you might say. Then we--when that was over we finally got billets in a house. One more thing, when we were in Belgium, we got to this house in the town of Saint-Hubert, Saint-Hubert. After patrolling around, we were invited into this house and they make by burning grain. That was—but anyway, getting back to the rest of this story, we had it pretty easy going all the way to the Rhine River. We got to Koblenz. And that's where to Rhine River and the Moselle River, that was a confluence. They both ran to the North Sea, right. And why we

didn't go north of Koblenz, directly across the Rhine River, I don't know, but we crossed the Moselle River south of Koblenz. It was a short hop to the Rhine. There was some pretty heavy fighting going on there. We ran some patrols across the river here and there to try and find out what was going on. But they say in reconnaissance, you know they're there and they know you're there. You'd rather paddle back. After we crossed the Rhine River, things were pretty easy going then. That was when we really were mobile. A mobile unit as opposed to foot patrols and things like that. In reconnaissance you had to go find the enemy wherever you could and every once in a while we would run into some 88's firing and we had to scout out and find out what was going on then. Then they said they were pretty well defeated at the time. The only thing, I'm going back to the Rhine and Moselle Rivers, that was toward spring and that's the first time I noticed anything really beautiful. I mean, it just seemed there wasn't a war at all, it was so pleasant. But we got--it was skirmishes all the way up until, we got up the Czechoslovakia border and we weren't allowed to go any further.

Jaeger: You were really moving then, gee.

Ashermann: Yeah, well this was about a month before the war ended. We were running patrols into Czechoslovakia. Foot patrols. Nothing really happened. Then there was the armistice. We stayed there a couple weeks after the armistice until the Russians came. I don't know why the Russians hadn't come to that area but they were dancing around it. I never did see a Russian soldier. But the day they surrendered; you'd be surprised that the Germans that were in Czechoslovakia they came out and surrendered. It was—I know this one major saying, “I don't know what we're gonna to do with all these people.”

Jaeger: They wanted to surrender to Americans, right, I gather rather than to Russians.

Ashermann: Yeah. Then we pulled back. Now I don't remember where we were or anything. Yes, the town's name was Plauen. P-L-A-U-E-N. Our unit occupied the town. It was really funny or sad, strange, funny how the people in the government, local government, went on about their administrative duties. We had to contact them sometimes. I had four years of German in high school. My little knowledge of German I was pressed into listen to conversations. Not that I got much out of it. We were pulled back into Northern France into a camp. I think it was Camp Lucky Strike or something like that. I know it wasn't Camp Chesterfield. But Lucky Strike seems to stick into my mind. And from there we came back to the States.

Jaeger: So when was that? That was probably June or something.

Ashermann: Yeah, I was home when the armistice was signed in Japan. Our unit was first in Newport, Virginia. We went home from there. Those of us in the immediate vicinity were supposed to report to Camp Franz[?]. And from there they got to report back to Fort Benning, Georgia. So at Fort Benning, Georgia, the division was decommissioned. Somewhere around August, I think. And I was sent to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. There I was a fierce warrior in the accounting department. [laughing] Some of us were sent to school to use the adding machine. The lucky ones were getting discharged. The ones that were getting discharged, the Air Corp discharged them by the thousands. We weren't too happy with it. We were assigned that duty.

Jaeger: So how long were you there then in the accounting division?

Ashermann: Hey [inaudible]. About four days before Christmas I was discharged.

Jaeger: So, total, how long were you in the service then?

Ashermann: From March '43 to December '45, yeah, okay.

[break in recording] [00:29:32]

Jaeger: Did you go back to Chicago or--?

Ashermann: Yes, I went back home and started my education.

Jaeger: Studied engineering?

Ashermann: How'd you guess?

Jaeger: Because you started in engineering way before they war.

Ashermann: I graduated from the University of Illinois in 1951. GI Bill of Rights.

Jaeger: What was your specialty?

Ashermann: Metallurgy engineering. My name is Ashermann. I went from reconnaissance to metallurgical engineering and now I live in Port Washington.

Jaeger: Where did you end up working?

Ashermann: Pardon?

Jaeger: Where did you end up working? Or did you start your own company. What did you do after you graduated from university?

Ashermann: I went to work for International Harvester.

Jaeger: Okay. And how long did you work for them?

Ashermann: Let's see, we were married in, oh God, here I go.

Jaeger: Your wife's not listening, it's okay.

Ashermann: Yes, she's listening.

Jaeger: Oh, I'm sure.

Ashermann: 1951.

Jaeger: So that's when you started working at IH?

Ashermann: I thought if I changed jobs I was moving upwards. I finally ended up in Northern Michigan. I loved making steel. I worked in a steel mill. And I got a job--it was this new concept, basic oxygen furnace, where we were turning out a ton of steel in about fifty five minutes. Of course it was all hot metal that was prepared before hand. [inaudible] From there I had four children. From there we got a phone call one day asking me and my wife to come up to Calumet, Michigan. And I went up there on a job interview at Calumet and Hecla Mining Company. That was a [inaudible] right there. The company was going belly up and I was laid off.

[interruption] [[00:32:42]

[Inaudible] My superintendents had come here to Port Washington to work for [unintelligible]. And from there I went on to various and sundry jobs. I never retired I just became obsolescent. Unfortunately, I'm still working. Or fortunately, I'm still working. But I'm going to school also. That's about it.

Jaeger: Any feelings about war or about your time in the service. When you think about your time in the service, what are your thoughts?

Ashermann: I could have been more ambitious I think. I don't like war. I was glad I served. Right now, the Secretary of Defense, Rumsfeld, he sort of irks me. When I saw pictures of the troops in Iraq, fighting in Dessert Storm, he was sitting in a nice cozy room in Washington saying, "Right on schedule." I was not too happy with the news as I see it and what I am being told by the government.

Jaeger: The same thing was probably going on in World War Two, right? The Department of Defense was doing their--

Ashermann: I really don't think so. I think they were above board in that war. Because one thing I understand that really surprised me was Franklin Delano Roosevelt did not want a battle scene shown until all the bodies were cleaned up. I always wondered about that, you know. I see that was his edict. That's about it. Here I sit talking to you.

Jaeger: That's good. And how old are you now?

Ashermann: Mentally, physically or chronologically?

Jaeger: Let's go chronologically.

Ashermann: Okay, um, that's a good question. I just turned 80.

Jaeger: I'll do the math if you give me the year you were born.

Ashermann: I just turned 80.

Jaeger: Very good. Well that was very painless I hope.

Ashermann: Yes it was.

Unidentified Woman: You didn't tell him about the nuns in Belgium?

Jaeger: Oh, did you have a nun story?

Ashermann: Yeah, oh yeah. Do you have the tape still going?

Jaeger: Unless you you'd rather have it off the record.

Ashermann: Um, we weren't dating then. We were trapped in this convent. And the nuns hid us while German patrols were coming. We were down in this basement, there was a bunch of straw. And I remember being fed Belgium waffles. Oh God, were they good. Thank you, honey. That's about as far as that story goes. Yes, I was scared, I think.