

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ROBERT L. BEILMAN
Communications, Army, World War II.

2001

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Beilman, Robert L., (1925-). Oral History Interview, 2001.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 90 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 90 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videocassette (ca. 90.)

Abstract

Robert Beilman, a New York City native, serving in the Army discusses his World War II experiences which include several anecdotal stories. Beilman recalls being at a New York Giants football game the day Pearl Harbor was bombed and an announcement being made for all present active military to immediately report to their bases. He enlisted in the ASTP (Army Specialized Training Program), studied engineering at Syracuse University (New York), and following radio communication school, was assigned to C Company, 1st Battalion of the 242nd Regiment, 42nd Division. Beilman talks about meeting his parents on pass prior to departing for Marseilles on the SS General William S. Black. While on duty in Marseilles, he describes the patrols and several air raids. As a communications sergeant, Beilman discusses his use of call-signs, radios, walkie-talkies, and stringing wire to outposts. Beilman describes preparing for patrols, dangers they encountered while on patrol, and dangers they faced. Beilman relates a story of capturing a German soldier in France. Beilman describes fighting the Germans in a typical French village. He talks about his battalion being surrounded at the battle of Hatton in the Northern part of Alsace to which Beilman credits the 79th Division for rescuing them. Beilman describes battling German tanks and their tactics. Participating in night patrols, Beilman recounts the need for excellent night vision and describes the numerous ways soldiers could be spotted by producing the smallest amount of light. Beilman describes the engagement he led resulting in him receiving the Bronze Star. He relates the story of General McOlive giving the order to drive up to Brenner Pass with lights on. Beilman attended Fordham and Columbia University upon his return to the United States using the GI Bill. After completing medical school, he chose to settle in Madison (Wisconsin).

Biographical Sketch

Beilman (1925-) enlisted in the Army in the summer of 1943 and served with the 42nd Division in France during World War II as a communications sergeant. Beilman vividly describes participating in night patrols. Beilman used the GI Bill to attend medical school at Columbia University before settling in Madison (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2001.

Transcribed by Michael Chusid, 2006.

Transcription edited by Hannah Gray & John McNally, 2007.

Jim: It's the ninth of October in the year 2001. Where were you born, sir?

Bob: I was born in New York, N.Y.

Jim: New York, N.Y. And the date?

Bob: November 8th, 1925.

Jim: 1925. Going back – high school and education and all that was in New York City?

Bob: I grew up in Hollis, which is a part of Queens. I went to high school in Manhattan – Regis High School, which is an all-scholarship Jesuit school. You had to take an entrance exam. And it was free. And then I went – After that I went in the Army.

Jim: And what were you doing on December 7th, 1941?

Bob: Funny you should ask. I was with my father and my brother. My father used to take us to the New York Giant football games. And they were all on Sunday afternoons, and we would go from Queens over the 125th Street bridge across Harlem up to the polo grounds. It was on 150th Street and Ninth Avenue. And we'd park, and when the – watch the game. Well, at half-time -- At this time, don't forget, the war had been on for a couple of years. There were a lot of British and French ships in the harbor, being repaired or refitted, and a lot of our own guys were in the Army – the Army defense forces were organizing. And at the half, there was an announcement. And there always a couple of thousand military at the game – they were given tickets, free tickets, whatever. And there was an announcement: "All military personnel will report to their respective bases or ships immediately." Immediately. And we thought, "What's going on?" So –

Jim: Well, that's what everybody was –

Bob: So we got back to the car, and then we heard people muttering, "Well, there's something going on, something about the Japanese." We got back to the car at the end of the game – which I think was the Eagles – and my father put the radio on, and they announced that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. So all the way back home – probably a forty-five minute ride – we listened to the radio. So that's what I was doing.

Jim: Right. So when did you enter the military?

Bob: Entered the military in the summer of 1943.

Jim: Where was that?

Bob: Well, it was in New York. I went through –

Jim: Did you enter the Army? Were you drafted?

Bob: The Army. No, I enlisted.

Jim: Because you figured you'd have a better choice –

Bob: Better choice. And then about a month after – I enlisted, although I wasn't called up right away. I got a letter that the Army was forming this ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program], which was like a V-12. And I was supposed to report for a short four-week, five-week training, and then a series of examinations which would determine whereabouts I would go in the ASTP. They started out to send me to an area language school at Yale, but apparently they had filled up so much there was no more room in that program. So then I ended up at Syracuse University, studying engineering.

Jim: Under the ASTP program?

Bob: Yeah, I was in military uniform, I was in the service, but I was – right, right [in response to garbled comments by Jim] – it was the same they had here: they had V-12 and they had ASTP here at the U during World War II. So I did two semesters, and – engineering, right – so even though I'm a medical doctor, I had all kinds engineering credits which he couldn't use: strength of materials, engineering physics, machine shop, that kind of stuff. It's true. And so –

Jim: You, at that moment, were not thinking about medicine?

Bob: No.

Jim: Good.

Bob: In fact, I had arranged to go to Georgetown University, and then this chance came to get in the ASTP, so I took that, and after the war, I could have gone back to Georgetown, but my mother had had cancer, which she – she lived til she was 92, but she had cancer, and was fighting cancer in 1946. And I – which – she survived obviously. And I thought I would go to Fordham University, which was right in New York City to be close to home. But getting back to going in the Army –

Jim: You had two semesters at Syracuse, and then what?

Bob: Right. And then again they cut that program short, because they – Well, actually, you know, then things were going a little better for the aye-eyes [navy?], and there were too many guys in this program, so they shipped all of us – our whole outfit – were shipped out either to the Air Force or back into the Army. Actually the Air Force was par to the Army in those days. It was the U.S. Army Air Force. Yes, the American Air Corp. And we were sent back to – actually to the Second Division. The Second Division had just been formed in the summer of '43, and they had moved into their quarters in Camp Gruber, Oklahoma where the 88th Division had been. The 88th Division went over and served two or three years in Italy. We took over their positions. Now in February or March of '44, I joined the 42nd Division. And because there were so many of us that had

come in from various -- You know, guys had come in from the coast of Chile, they had been in the Galapagos Islands for two years or three years. Air Corps guys, these college guys -- they all came in, and they gave us a six-week, two six-week cycles of basic infantry training.

Jim: This was when?

Bob: This was in the spring of '44. And then we had all kinds of maneuvers, regimental maneuvers, divisional maneuvers and so on, running around Oklahoma, and then in October --

Jim: Where was your duty by that time?

Bob: By that time I was in communications, so I had passed -- When you go in the Army you take these little tests, and --

Jim: Sure. Improving your skills.

Bob: Yeah, actually this is a funny story. I got into -- They had these IQ tests, and you had mechanical aptitude, and you also had, and then you also had like a radio aptitude test. And the mechanical aptitude test -- we all got to spend one whole day on the IQ and one day on the mechanical aptitude and the third day on these other specialty tests. So I got back to the barracks and my name was called out over the loud speaker -- go up to the [unintelligible] leader. And he said, "Something's wrong. You had 100 on the mechanical aptitude test. Got to retake it -- we think it was a fluke."

Jim: Obviously thought you were cheating.

Bob: So I took it again -- got 100 again. They finally gave up. But that didn't do any good. It's just a good story. But it's true.

Jim: It didn't help?

Bob: No, no.

Jim: Didn't make you a general or anything?

Bob: But I did score high on this radio communication-type test -- Morse code and everything, even though I had never been exposed to it in my life. You know, I was attuned to that. So because of that score, I was put in the -- after I finished the basics, so to speak -- I was sent to Fort Benning for a four-week communications school at Fort Benning, Georgia. And I learned all about signal flags, Morse code, telephones --

Jim: Four-week course?

Bob: Four-week course, right. And I came back, and I had been assigned to C-Company of the 1st Battalion of the 204th Second Infantry Regiment, and –

Jim: What was the regiment?

Bob: 2 – 4 – 2. 242nd Regiment. And we were – We had about two-and-a half months after I came back from communications school to really get things organized that we hadn't. Then I made corporal, then finally I made sergeant.

Jim: Still in Oklahoma now?

Bob: Yeah. Actually, no. I didn't make sergeant until I was overseas. But I was a corporal when I went overseas. And then the communications sergeant was also the platoon sergeant for headquarters platoon men. That included the messengers, the radiomen, the wiremen, the thrivers, the cooks, supply room guys. It was about, I don't know, 16 or 18 people. So when we fell out in that period, I was the platoon leader. Then we trained all around – training attack and defensive. At one point we thought we were going to go to the Pacific, but then orders were changed, and in October we basically got our orders to go to the European theater. And in November we shipped out. Went up through port of New York. And there was a Camp Kilmer. There was a series of –

Jim: There was a great shipping out place.

Bob: Right. There was a Camp Miles Standish up in Boston Harbor, Camp Kilmer was in New Jersey for New York harbor. There was another camp down in the Newport News [?] area. They were not training camps – they were just staging camps.

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: It was bizarre, but I was just – We stayed about a week in this Camp Kilmer. And I was in Barrack No. 67 or something up on the second floor in the corner. And they assigned you a bed up there. And so everybody was putting little tiny – They were carving their initials in the walls, which I did. So when I came back from overseas two years later, you wouldn't believe it – I was assigned the same bed in the same – My initials were still there. It's true. But that's bizarre. Anyhow, I was able to get a pass –

Jim: To go home to the folks.

Bob: I was about an hour-an-a-half – I took the bus into the Port Authority building. My father met me, took me home, we had dinner. It was about – it was a one-day pass, I had to go home on the same day. And of course, I couldn't say what I was doing and nothing at all, but they knew damn well that I was shipping out. So we were – As soon as I got back from that trip home, they made us take all of our insignia off. Not insignia, but our division patch off. It was a rainbow division [enlistees from diverse states]. But we had to take our patch off, so that no one would know –

Jim: Until you boarded the ship?

Bob: Right. Yeah. So we --

Jim: A lot of people [unintelligible] but I don't recall anyone having to do that..

Bob: Yeah. Cut them off. Then we went to -- on the SS General William S. Black. It was a boat that was built as a military transport. And it was run by the coast guard, of all people. It was just like a naval ship, but it was run by the coast guard guys. The coast guard took care of the navigation and the sailing and the mooring and the motors and everything -- engines, but the Army transportation corps took care of everything else. The feeding, food, whatever else we were doing, and they would give us "abandon ship" drills, which was a really fun thing and all the guys [?] and emergency drills.

Jim: [Unintelligible] and they could do it faster than that.

Bob: They could do 16 knots. And it was pretty fast. It was faster than -- It was twice as fast as these cargo, you know. But we were up on deck twice a day. Once in the morning, once at night -- Just to get air. And you could see dozens of escorts around us.

Jim: Oh, you were moving in a convoy?

Bob: Oh, sure. Absolutely. There were probably twelve or thirteen big ships and then there were probably twenty or so escorts. They were all over --

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: No, no, no. We had about 2500 -- almost a whole regiment on that one ship.

Jim: There were other ships with the rest of the division?

Bob: I assume so, though they never told us. I assume there were other division mates on the other ships. And the convoy went all the way across to -- well, it would be within two-hundred miles of Spain, and one part diverted north up to the British Isles. Well, it actually diverted -- I only know where they left us. We went to the Straits of Gibraltar. And went over to -- And landed at Marseilles.

Jim: Right, well, you know that first landing was in July, so you got there in October.

Bob: August. August 15th.

Jim: And then we got there in November.

Bob: Right. Now there was a big reception -- It was almost like Camp Kilmer in reverse. There was a large staging camp, called CP 2. And either the 100rd or the 103rd Division had just gotten out of there -- we got in there. And then other divisions came in behind

us. The 99th was behind us. As I told you earlier, our regiment was the first one over there. And the rest of the division didn't catch up to us until a couple of months later. So we were used quite a lot as extra MPs, water police, extra guards down in the port area of Marseilles. So every day we'd have -- A couple of platoons would get different helmets, you'd get MP helmets, you'd get the black and white thing with an arm band, and we'd start -- I can remember we'd even have to patrol some of these night streets where the brothels were. And we were told to keep the guys out of there. [Laugh.]

Jim: Don't stay.

Bob: And about twice a week we would pull duty down in the port. Guarding the docks, or standing guard at the headquarters, or else patrolling around different things. There were two air raids -- the only real air raids I ever went through. They were bombing the dock areas, and the first one we were about four or five miles north of town, up on the CP-2 place, where you could look out -- and you got a receiver to see them -- and the anti-aircraft going off and you could see the bombs blasting. The second raid, we were down in the port area, and you could see -- they had searchlights, they had anti-aircraft going off -- they had a lot of anti-aircraft there. And the German planes -- that was the first time I heard German planes, but I heard many after that. They had this grrrrr! They had a funny, grindy noise. You could always tell a German plane versus an American plane, which had a smoother sound. And the German planes always had sort of a grrrrr! I don't what it was -- whether it was the muffler, whether it was the way the engines were built. You could always tell -- they had a different sound. But you'd see these -- now I don't think they were low enough for these forty millimeters to hit, but they were like fireworks. They'd all had -- every other round was a tracer round. You'd see this "whoosh!" Just like Roman candles going off up there. And yet you'd see burst of 90 mm anti-aircraft fire. You could see, well, the bursting of it -- there was a huge flash. And they got one plane who was hit and shot down at that point. You could see it spiral down in flames. But I never had a -- We were fired on and attacked by many single German aircraft, maybe two, tearing out at ground level, coming in with machine guns and maybe dropping a small bomb, but we never had a real raid like this thing with the fancy anti-aircraft and so on. Then we, we started to go north, again ahead of the rest of our division, on the railroad. On the French SSCF.

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: Right along the Rhone River. We passed all these towns when we went over there, and you read the "Forty and Eight" from World War I -- they still had them on there.

Jim: Right.

Bob: Well, they still had them on there. Hommes 40, Chevaux 8. Forty men, eight horses.

Jim: All the POW films talk about those. They were stuck on there.

Bob: Stuck in there. And it was cold, and these – the floorboards had holes in them. And we stuffed rags, straw in those holes to keep ourselves warm. And we ran out [a couple?] in three days, and we then got to – either Charon Seyschellon [?] or Dijon, I forget which -- and then we got off. And then we went on trucks – 6x6 trucks. [Unintelligible.] We were at this small town, and our battalion was drawn up. We all sort of heard this first talk by our regimental commander. “Well, men, you’re valiant.”

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: Well, he said, you’re all – we’re all assembled now, and we’ll be committed to – at this point we were assigned to the 45th Division, which was one of the – there was the Second Corps, which was the -- they came up from Italy, they were the Anzio [beachhead in Sicily] divisions: the 36th and 45th. And they were all very experienced, tough outfits. So we basically did a tag-along behind them for the best part of a month. Helping out. We didn’t see any – You know, we were on guard duty and freeing up their guys for other stuff. We felt kind of isolated, because we didn’t have didn’t have our own support people or our own anything. We even got our food from them. Well, this was – One day on the Vosges Mountains, it was late November, and it was a sunny warm day: it was like 55 degrees. Sunny. And we were in this large field – I don’t know what the hell we were doing there, there were about 100 of us. Some practice maneuver or something. And we heard this giant rrrrrrrrrrrr – a tremor. The earth seemed to shake. A tremor. Then somebody said, “Hey, look at those planes up there!” I looked up – I had binoculars – and I began to see 60, 24,100: there were 600 planes – late afternoon, the sun was getting real low, going over into Germany to bomb.

Jim: These were bombers?

Bob: Bombers, yeah, but you could see pilots up there, too. But it was unearthly, really an eerie feeling and it hit me, to see this field and hear this tremendous noise of all those planes up there. Just imagine having 600 bombers, and some of them were aluminum, shiny, and some were dull, you know, camouflaged. And you could look up – I couldn’t say if they were B-24s or [?], probably both. We said to ourselves: jeez, you know, with all these bombers going over, thousands and hundreds of bombers over there, things moving along – the world can’t last too much longer, because look at the power we have. Well, we still have a half a year to go at that point, and a lot of fighting. But that’s just a little memory of seeing that thing up there, those things. Then we went into the Severan Gap. I remember we took a long – what was it? Route Nationale 6, you could tell it by the route signs.

Jim: You were [?] now?

Bob: No, this was with trucks. Trucks. And then we sort of got out of the boxcars and formed up back into our platoons, you know, companies. Everybody got assembled, we were under heavy command again like it used to be. Trucks were very organized up to probably an all day ride. Through the Severan Gap and then the –

Jim: You're still in France?

Bob: Oh yeah. And then our regiment of the 45th – can't even remember what the number was – came in, and they plus the French armored division took Strasbourg. It was a big victory. So we followed on maybe the next day into Strasbourg. And then, as I told you before, we went north of Strasbourg and we actually went into these Maginot-line fortresses. And we could see how they were five or six stories underground with special blowers that [?] with ventilation for gas.

Jim: Describe walking down that [?].

Bob: Well, yeah, we went in this – there was a hatch, locked. Went through it. There was a long tunnel – I would say about 300 yards. It went eastward toward the Rhine, and we popped up in like an observation cubicle there – it was maybe the size of, half the size of a ping-pong table. Maybe a couple, three guys could stay there. Popped up, and there we were in the bull rushes on the banks of the Rhine River. This was an observation post that they used. But the eerie thing was that the Germans had had five years to study these fortifications. They knew every inch of it. So did we and so did the French. There was no surprise. And our captain did not want to ever use any of these fixed Maginot-line bunkers or pill boxes, 'cause he thought they were death traps. And indeed, I told you before, a couple of our platoons were captured, because the Germans came up on top of them, started throwing [charcoal?] down the breathing pipes, and they had to surrender. So that was into December.

Jim: You were still in Strasbourg?

Bob: Well, I was still in Alsace. All of our fighting for the first three months was in Alsace, which is a pretty large province. It's everything from the Vosges Mountains to the east of the Rhine, and from Basel all the way up to the German border up there at –

Jim: Tell me about your first contact with –

Bob: Well, the first contact was – I was back at regiment headquarters and I had gone back with our captain. He had gone to some conference, and I had to go to some conference at Mission Center, 'cause I was the communication sergeant. And we also had to change some of our radio commands. We could never use the word "Repeat." 'Cause repeat was a firing command for the British artillery. I said, "Again." We always said, "Again."

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: We had – Every platoon had a handy-talky. Either I had it or the captain had it. The captain also had an SCR-300, which was a backpack thing, and it had a little telephone handset, and it would also have a key on that frequency and code. CW. And that had a range of about 10 miles. I mean the backpack. But the handy-talky had a range of maybe a mile, at luck. And that was about the size of a small loaf of bread. It was fairly heavy,

because of the batteries. The batteries lasted – it depended on what manufacturer it was – but those had ever-ready batteries. They were really well-made, and they would last maybe a week, ten days.

Jim: What?

Bob: Not constant use, but you'd be on the move, you'd be using it on and off, and it just seemed that every week or so we'd get a new shipment of batteries up.

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: Then we had a lot of telephone handsets, which were sound-powered – ordinary light-weight little handsets, and the power of your voice would send a message through the wires to the next [duty?] on the network, so we would invariably have three or four blue-string wires out to the outposts in the afternoon, if you would –

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: Yes. They were connected by landline. Real thin wire – even thinner than this. They were connected to – Those lines would go back to a central spot, usually in the company.

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: We had guys out five-hundred yards sometimes. So we had these spools – it was really thin wire: a lot of distance on one spool. That was the most unpleasant part, going out, stringing the wire to these outposts.

Jim: But you were a sergeant then: you could get some of those [unintelligible].

Bob: Well, we had two teams, because to do it right, you had to do it right. In the two teams, the guys that would do the wire-stringing was me and another guy who was a PFC and another guy who was a corporal and his assistant. And we'd go out there – the hardest thing was coming back through our own lines. Because everybody – every day you'd have a new sign and countersign. And you're supposed to memorize them. And that was a command responsibility. You'd have to go down at noon, you'd have to sign and countersign for that day. Supposedly.

Jim: [Unintelligible.] lasted for the rest of the twenty-four hours?

Bob: Right. So you'd always have a new crypt [?] for the nightwork. So invariably we'd come into someplace and dig in and it would be dark, it would be dusky, and by the time we came back we'd be dark. So we'd come back, rustling through the bushes, you know, and leaves, and we'd say, "Argentine," which was the sign. And they'd supposed to say, "Constantine," which was the countersign. They never knew it. So they'd say, "Are you GIs?" And we'd say, "Yeah!" And they'd say, "Whose Joe DiMaggio's brother?" "Domenic." All kinds of things. "Who's Betty Davis married to?"

Jim: That was much more reliable.

Bob: Much more reliable. But, I mean, that was the sign –

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: We know -- I'd say, every other time they'd – Because they never knew exactly where we were going to come back. We knew we would be in the first platoon or second platoon area. And we knew roughly, but we never knew the particular guy, 'cause at this time they were all in foxholes, maybe 20, 25 yards apart. So that was always a little funny, getting through the [?]. Once – And the other problem was that there were always animals out there – deer, various things running from the forest. It was always spooky, particularly at night.

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: It's not that deer would hurt you, but I mean it was confusing when you were out there – what's that! Was it human or what? We were rookies at this time – we didn't really know what the hell we were doing. That's one thing I remember, going out stringing the wire out to these outposts. And my position was usually back at company headquarters. And I usually stayed with the captain, with the company commander.

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: Yeah, we'd bring the wire back -- We'd hook it into the platoon headquarters, and then we'd have another wire and we'd go back to the company. So we had our own network of five or six or seven phones. And then the company – see, the higher unit always strung to the lower unit, so the regiment would string to the battalion, the battalion would string to the company, and the company would string to the platoons. So we would get a regular – we'd have like a leather-wrapped billfold with a ring around it: it had batteries in it, but those batteries lasted for months. And we had two of those regular telephones, wrapped in a big leather box, so to speak. And the cuts were inside, and it had a handset and a ringer. And that would be hooked up to the battalion network. And that was real wire, I mean, you could run – That stuff we had, if a truck ran over it, it would be done for. We were so far up front, however, there were no trucks up there. If we had to go over the road, for example, we'd find a post – we swing in a pie –

Jim: -- so it'd go over the road.

Bob: Right. So it'd go over the road.

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: Right, but the other stuff – an occasional car or truck or whatever wouldn't hurt it. Like a tank or a half-tank-trailer [?] might. So at night then, we'd hook up, we'd get back to the battalion.

Jim: Who was out there – a recon platoon?

Bob: No, no. There would be two platoons on line and one in reserve. And each platoon – There was usually an observation post – There were two or three observation posts up front. They were out – whatever.

Jim: And so you put the line out to them?

Bob: Right. Right. And they know that the men will be out here in an hour or two with the phone. So then to get attention, you could go: [blows as if into a microphone]. You blow into the thing and you hear it. You only hear it maybe a couple of feet. You're paying attention, and you have the thing next to your ear. You say, "Yeah, what is it?" You whisper and it goes through – the sound power flows. It works. The worst thing you could ever have out there was a telephone with a ring on it out there. Ring. Wake the dead out there. Wake up the neighbors. So that's – But then –

Jim: You were impressed that the quality of the equipment was pretty good?

Bob: Yeah, very good. We had good uniforms, our rifles were very good -- better than the Germans'. Our machine guns were good, but they weren't as good as the Germans'. The Germans' had a much higher rate of fire. But on the other hand, they went through ammunition much faster. So where we thought we were really short were the small – like the burp guns. We had the Tommy gun which was very heavy. It was .45 caliber ammunition, and the grease gun, which we got from the tankers, they were just as bad. And then –

Jim: But the communication equipment which you had?

Bob: Very good. Our, I think it was, SCR-296 was the little handy-talky, and the walky-talky was very reliable. And our phones were good, radios were good, and there was another thing which was called the mission center. You send messages back and forth through the runners. And the runners sometimes – they could go back as far as battalions.

Jim: Where were the runners?

Bob: Company headquarters. And they did guard duty, and they, of course, would sometimes even go on patrol. Remember my talking about night patrols? Well, we had good instruction on this back in the states, back in Oklahoma. And we were given objectives – we knew ahead of time where we were going on patrol. And there'd be three or four, five guys who would make up the patrol. And the first thing you had to do is review your uniform. You didn't have any steel helmets – they'd scratch like crazy or you'd go through – They'd make too much noise. A limb would scratch it. And many times we'd even put heavy wool socks over our GI boots.

Jim: Took the helmet off and just kept the lining?

Bob: Well, no, just a little mid-cap, a little brown mid-cap. [Unintelligible.] So we'd jump up and down to make sure nothing rattled. Guys who'd had stuff that rattled. And we'd paint, you know, black, cork under our eyes on our face. Unfortunately, I had glasses on, but nothing to be done about that.

Jim: [Unintelligible. Re: replacing glasses]

Bob: No. 'Cause back at battalion, they had a second set for everybody. At least, once somebody stepped on mine and another pair came up in about twenty-four hours.

Jim: Where was that?

Bob: When we would look at these – I was showing Jim these French coordinate survey maps, which were extremely detailed: both elevation, distance and so on.

Jim: You were issued these [?]?

Bob: Issued. Yeah, I mean, we would have one to plan with. We'd go to headquarters, and actually we'd use the same maps that the company was using – the company commander was using. And we – He'd say here's our objective, we go over here, we think there's German, enemy activity over here, and we would make sure the guys on the outposts knew we were coming. In other words, if they heard people walking up behind them, which could make some noise, they say, oh, that's the patrol going through. So everybody had to know – I mean, all the platoons had to know there was a patrol going up that night around eleven o'clock or whatever. And they're suppose to rehearse their sign and counter-sign. And we'd go out. Since I was the communications guy, I often went out – I was sort of the odd man out. And they said, "Beilman, you're going to go." And I would be sort of nominally in command of this thing. And we would – When you walk, you put your foot down slowly, in case there's a stick there, it would make a noise.

Jim: Heel first?

Bob: No, toe first. You'd walk along slowly and everybody would try to walk in the same line. The Germans were -- There were a lot of shoe mines, but you couldn't do much about them. We tried staying off the beaten track, if we could. But there were these tripwire things. And I never ran across one, but other patrols did. And what that would do is that it would totally – the tripwire would pull a grenade out of a can and it would explode. A number of guys were wounded them with shoe mines.

Jim: Blow a foot off?

Bob: Blow a foot off or dead or something. But there wasn't much you could do about a shoe mine or anything – was just there.

Jim: Is the term "shoe mine" American?

Bob: No, it's S - c - h - u - [h] is "shoe" for German. I mean, it's the German word for shoe.

Jim: That's what I assumed.

Bob: And I mean we called them s - h - o - e, but they were Schuh mines. So we creep around, we go maybe $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile, and except in the - we didn't - you had to be, you know, really - a long time before you string barbed wire. You'd be moving ahead two or three days here, day or so there, but to string barbed wire, it was too much. We'd rather dig in -- Spend the time digging in with good foxholes, and find which engineers are gonna string the stuff up. And then invariably you get stuck on the stuff itself. So we rarely if ever used barbed wire. But the Germans did. If they were retreating they could always leave it behind them - they didn't have to worry about it. If we found barbed wire and we couldn't identify it, we'd clip it. We had clippers. And we'd look for it. The Germans - I could smell the Germans. The Germans use this - The GI issue of cigarette was a Turkish tobacco cigarette. It has a rancid harsh odor and smell - just awful. And if the Germans were in a bunker, you could - they all smoked like fiends, which we did too - you could smell it, you could smell the damn cigarette smoke. The cigarette odor. And you'd sort of know there's something around here. I could smell it. One of the problems in communicating is that you had to kind of tap people and whisper [whispering]. Once we got a German guy who went out to take a leak. One of our guys captured him, put his hands over his [lips?], and we brought him back as prisoner. At one time we were supposed to get prisoners if we could, but we got this guy and got the hell out of there in a hurry. We dragged him with us. But -

Jim: Did you take him back?

Bob: Yeah, took him back to the lines right away. We stopped - We had orders: if you got a prisoner, take him right back immediately.

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: Right. And somebody else would question him about what was going on. We had our small arms - pistols, rifles, whatever. We used either the 30 mm cartridge or the small carbine cartridge or the .45. All of our powder - in the daytime it smoked and in the nighttime it flashed. We were always afraid to fire our weapons at night, because you could see the metal flash. The Germans had almost smokeless powder, and very little muzzle flash in my opinion. So we depended a lot on these patrols on grenades. Be in any kind of trouble, we had guys who could throw these grenades seventy yards - I mean, they were really good. God, they could a grenade seventy yards at a target the size of a ping-pong table. They were really accurate. Plus, you never knew where it came from. There was no muzzle-flash. So the few times we got into scrapes, we used grenades. And that way no one knew where the hell it was coming from.

Jim: They could tell [unintelligible] several seconds.

Bob: Pardon?

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: No, it would just explode. And with a mortar round, if you're really quiet, you can hear it rotoring around coming in. [Whistles.] You hear a little whistly sound, and if you're really alert, you hit the dirt. Which we did a number of times. But getting back to the nighttime things, we would actually sometimes – if it was hilly country – we would use these coordinate maps and get little, make a little paste out of flour and whatever, and build little hills to simulate what was out there. Get some idea of what the terrain was. Where the valleys were, where the hills were. And get some – Once in a while, there'd be a light, be moonlight out and you'd get some idea of the terrain. But we used the maps a lot. And there's a giant one here. I was showing Jim that you could – It would show like a road mender's hut, or what roadside chapel, the size of a – maybe 10x10 chapel. And very detailed. And you could actually navigate by those things, if you had a good compass. And you could –

Jim: You couldn't look at it at length out in the field.

Bob: No. No one used it for preparation. But it might obviously – You wouldn't bring it with you. Of course the Germans had the same thing as we did, because they used the French.

Jim: What about smoking?

Bob: We couldn't smoke. On patrol? Oh, absolutely no, no. The biggest fight we ever had with the frontline guys was smoking. They'd light up at night – they weren't supposed to be smoking anyhow, but they would sneak a cigarette –

Jim: They were GIs.

Bob: Yeah, GIs. They weren't supposed to, but they did. You'd see a flash come up – it would actually flash through the – They usually put the shelter half sealed up, supposedly so that no one could see it, but you could see the flash easily through the shelter half.

Jim: That would invite a mortar?

Bob: Well, it would invite something. If someone was really watching carefully, he would see that. And, um, we went through a lot of routines about when to get into your foxhole, when to get out of it, what to put in there, how to keep warm if you could. It was cold as hell – December and January. Snow – if you tried to put your shelter half over the top, and just keep a slit to look through, and hope that you kept as much snow out as possible – and rain. Rain was even worse.

Jim: I forgot it rained in that winter too.

Bob: Yeah. Particularly in the spring, rain. We had a lot of – I mean, the first serious battle we had was the battle at Haton , for us, which was in the northern part of Alsace. And that's – our battalion was surrounded. We held out for about a week.

Jim: Totally surrounded?

Bob: Yep. And finally --

Jim: How did that happen?

Bob: It's a long story. But if it wasn't for the 39th Division, I wouldn't be here today. They broke through to us and saved our –

End of Side A, Tape 1

Bob: necks.

Jim: [Unintelligible] running out of [ammo?].

Bob: Yep. And that's –

Jim: How long were you surrounded?

Bob: Oh, best part of a week. Once in a while, a truck would get through or something. And then a truck would hit something and blow up, so it was not easy to get in there.

Jim: And the communication was gone?

Bob: Fortunately we had a big supply of batteries. And we could fortunately call out quite easily, because we had radio and we could tell them exactly what's going on.

Jim: So people on the outside knew exactly what was happening.

Bob: But that's enough for the patrol business. It was the smoking and the way we would prepare ourselves, especially: be silent, and often we'd put thick woolen socks over our shoes – it wouldn't make any noise. And we went out mainly to see just what we could see. Mainly to see where we thought there were German positions.

Jim: Now if you found something that was worth reporting, how could you do this without attracting attention with your voice?

Bob: Only whispers. You whisper like this. [Whispering.]

Jim: And they couldn't pick it up?

Bob: And your senses were attuned like crazy, when you're just listening carefully, looking at everything. Another thing. I was tested – everybody was tested for night vision back in Oklahoma. For some strange reason I had excellent night vision. There was another reason I was put on –

LONG PAUSE

Bob: But enough of the patrol thing. We were in these Maginot Line positions. Then we went up north about 50-60 miles to a position that was about ten miles from the Rhine River and wasn't too far from the German border. You know, the German border went northwest as it left the Rhine, with the Rhine-Palatinate and that area up there. So we went up pretty close, with Germany to our East and German to our North. And then we had – it was connected to the battle that we had.

Jim: That was your major battle of your military career?

Bob: Yeah. We had many smaller battles later on, particularly crossing the Siegfried Line and on the approaches to the Rhine River. There was a lot of fighting there.

Jim: One of these times someone was going to shoot at you.

Bob: Well, we were shot at all the time. We had -- Between killed, wounded and missing, which were captured pretty much, we had about -- We started out with 191 men and six officers, and when the war ended we had about 55 guys that had never been wounded, captured, killed or whatever. Now a lot of guys had been wounded and came back, but they were out with trenchfoot or frozen foot, and they would come back but they were still a casualty. We had probably 30-35 guys that were actually killed. We had one platoon that was just captured outright – not the one that was in the bunker I told you about, but another platoon down the road. So we had a lot of casualties, but the fiercest fighting –

Jim: [Unintelligible] had a problem with the phones and then repelling the attack.

Bob: Well, all night long we had people monitoring what the runners, and some of the radio- and wiremen – we'd take turns in two-hour shifts on the phones. Both phones – both the one from battalion to us and then from down below. And you know, every night there was always something going on. Always somebody heard something out there. Or –

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: Well, it depended. If there was – Particularly, once it really got cold – a lot of snow on the ground, you could see much better. And they could actually see – At Haton, we could actually look out – There's a typical French farm village, where the farmers lived in town, but their houses were also stables, barns for their equipment, tools and so on. Tractors and whatever. Horses and cows. And you could go into the front door – living room, dining room type of thing. And then go out the back door – it was the barnyard or

out into – The barns usually weren't heated, and a lot of them had – most of them had doors, but they also had slats that went across. Like fence posts – what goes between posts? Fence rails. You had rails type of thing that went through. They'd have a little notch – you'd look through them. We'd be there with our guns at night, and you could look out, and you could actually see – The Germans had these flashlights, they were square, with like a little light thing in the front, which was concave. We had the long ones – they had square -- And they had little filaments [film in it?]: they could put red, green and yellow – a couple of different colors they could put in there. And you'd always see these weird lights, blinking at night. And these were the Germans signaling to each other with these lights. So we begin seeing these lights out there – By this time we'd put a lot of tripwires. We would take a grenade, pull the pin out of it, but keep the handle on 'em, shove the whole thing into a C-ration can, and tie a string on it. You run a string across, maybe 15 feet at maybe ankle, shin height, and then anyone who'd pull that, the grenade would pop out of the can, the handle would fly off and the thing would go off in three seconds. So that was our – So once in a while, one of those things would go off. You knew damn well – You know, American grenades sound typical, and the Germans used concussion grenades, so-called potato measure grenades, which had a whole different sound. So if you heard a lot of activity and a lot of lights flashing around, and funny shadows out there, you could – and once in a while you heard one of the grenades go off – you knew damn well that people were out there. They were patrolling. And we'd start throwing grenades out there like crazy. We rarely used our rifles. Until we could actually see our target out there. And then in the morning you'd see a couple of dead bodies out there. You'd hear wounded men crying and yelling. They'd try to pull them back themselves, sometimes they couldn't, and then when daytime came, we'd go out and pull them in. But this snow on the ground, it's amazing how light it is. The Germans had white everything – white things for the helmet, white capes they were carrying to put over them. And then you see these very ghostly things. They also had compasses, wrist compasses, with great big dials on them, about three times the size of an ordinary watch, American watch. And they were heavily dotted with radium. So help me, some of these bright nights, you could see these damn compasses, but you wouldn't see anything but these ghostly, sort of yellow, ethereal thing. And it was the watch! I mean, it was the compass – the wrist compass. And there's all kind of stuff you get –

Jim: really?

Bob: It was! I mean, there's all kinds of stuff you can kind of hone in on. This time we were surrounded, there was a main square with a church and city hall and so on. We were constantly battling back and forth – the other company was up by the square. We held a long – maybe a two-block long – section of the main street. There were houses on each side, and then the [phones?] went out. And the Germans at one point, came along, got through the square. There were like five roads opening up from the square and three of them were controlled by us. We had tank destroyers on those streets, aiming at the square, so if a German tank came – occasionally we would get a tank. But one time some Germans Panzerfaust guys got a tank destroyer and blew it up. And we only had two left. And this was an African-American battalion, and they were very good. And they backed the thing down our street, about two blocks and still aimed up at the square. And a

German tank came along. Now by this time, we had guys posted up at the street level, looking up out of the cellar windows, and we had chicken wire on the openings there, because the Germans used to throw grenades down there. So we put chicken wire down there. But we could see this tank coming along. So fortunately those sturdy Alsatian farmers had regular cellars, and they had root cellars down below that. You know, two-level cellars. So that the German tanks – Well, this one German tank came along, not on our side but on the other side of the street, and they would depress their cannon as far as it would go on the side – maybe an angle of 20 degrees – and they would shoot: they would shoot an armor-piercing round, and then follow that with eight [GI-closure?] rounds, and you know, they were giving us fits. Fortunately, our engineers had given us a little explosive charge, so we blasted holes – maybe 3’x3’ – between each basement, each house’s basement, so we could go back and forth with those – So when the tank was coming along, the guys would rush one way or another. And they never did – We’d be deaf for a week, with those shells going off, in the basement, but at least we survived. Now we never did have that happen with us, but we would – We did have a pretty good supply of petty tank grenades, which fit on your rifle. We were out of bazooka ammunition by this time. And we had about forty of these rifle grenades and the tank grenades. And if you just hit the tracks, you could paralyze – You couldn’t destroy it, they still had the guns there, but you could blow the tracks off. So we were up on the street, and there were two or three disabled German tanks, and one or two half-tracks. They blew the treads off.

Jim: Did the Germans get out of their vehicles?

Bob: Well, I can tell you that the half-track guys got out in a hurry. They had a back door – they went out the back door, about six of them. They ran as fast as they could.

Jim: [Unintelligible] not much protection?

Bob: No, they weren’t very armored. They were just [?]. They could take 50 caliber – [unintelligible] but that was about it. So those guys got away. But as these Germans were climbing out of these tanks, we’d start shooting. We kept them in there. This was about two days before we were basically rescued by the 79th Division. By that time the Germans had sort of withdrawn. We were attacking, they were withdrawing. So there were still guys left in those tanks. So we started yelling at them. A couple of guys spoke good German: “Alright, buddy. Your guys are all gone, you better surrender, ‘cause we got you covered,” so to speak. And they said, “We can shoot our cannon!” And we said, “Well, go ahead, you’re not going to hit anything.” ‘Cause we were on the side. And then we said, “Well, we’re going to take a gasoline bomb and burn you right up.” So they came out. They used the top, though most of them used the hatch underneath.

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: Well, they could all get out the bottom hatch, if they wanted to. I saw – In a field outside of Haton – you’ll see this written up in one book – there were twenty-eight dead tanks out there in this giant tank battle with this 14th Armor, which was booking with us [?] for the whole war. They were probably 1/3 American and 2/3 German tanks out there. These

are huge tanks – you could hear them fighting out there. Now the Germans used 88 mm rifles – some of them were anti-aircraft, but some of them were on tanks. And for some reason they made this screeching sound – it was such high velocity. The gun would go off and you'd hear some kind of shrieking sound – you could tell it was a tank battle, 'cause you'd hear those guns firing back and forth. Our regiment had an anti-tank company. They had 57 mm anti-tank guns, which were decent but not really good. The Germans used mainly captured 75 or 76 mm Russian anti-tank guns, that they were using at that time. And they were better. But ours had very high velocity. And they could disable a German tank – you could get them on the side, but you'd never get them from the front.

Jim: Never in the front.

Bob: No. After Haton, we withdrew through this forest of Hagenau I was telling you about, which was like a national forest, about 20 miles across.

Jim: And this happened?

Bob: After the big battle in Haton.

Jim: Yeah, when you were surrounded and then –

Bob: We were relieved and got back, and then we were told – we decided – we had – You know, everybody was tired, we were exhausted, we hadn't eaten well for a week. We just pulled back and basically marched one night through the forest of Hagenau, about ten miles back to where we were supposed to go. It was a brilliant moonlit night and I could – you could see blood spots – the trail where it was spotted with blood. The wounded guys, you know, were bleeding. You could see that trail at night, you know, the blood spots. The Germans had been at this for years. They were very good, you know, on artillery. Let's say you had two towns, and you were sending messengers and troops particularly at night, so you couldn't be seen. The Germans were masters at interdiction fire, which means that at odd times, they would just zero in daytime so they could get a crossroad, and at 11:00 pm they'd shoot two rounds at that intersection. Maybe at 3:45 they'd shoot one. Unplanned – it wasn't any schedule thing. And many times we'd be traveling around at night, and these rounds start coming in from nowhere. The Germans didn't know we were there – they just took a chance that we were there.

Jim: They remembered from when it was daylight.

Bob: Yeah. And they would zero in on these intersections. And we lost some vehicles and some people from the interdiction fire. There was no way they could see us, 'cause it was dark. We had – There were French people there, and there were underground, like, guerillas that were – When we got there they were working through the – We had a French liaison officer. FFI – French Forces of the Interior. And they were pretty good guys. They would tell us, we're getting reports that the Germans are here. And they had a lot of intelligence that they through their own tom-tom network. It was very valuable.

But the French Army itself we didn't work too well with. They weren't that much help. They weren't that bad, but they weren't that good.

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: Well, this one night was the first night that the Germans came in and captured what had been the battalion command post. I think the command post came south about a block. And these tanks – They barely used tanks at night. But the Germans – and we could hear this rumbling around, had no idea what was going on. So they asked for some volunteers to go up and see what was going on. So another guy and I – I could speak pretty good German – and I had been up there many times, because I was always going up to the command post and I knew the layout – I also had a map. So we went mainly through the backyards of these – backyards. We didn't go into the street much. But we reconnoitered up there, and we each had Thompson submachine guns with us. That was the only thing we had – lot of ammunition, modern guns. And we got near the square, and we could see there were all Germans up there. And there were huge artillery – there were half-tracks with artillery pieces in – what do you call them? – armored artillery. And they set up in a big graveyard back there. You could hear them talking back there, cooking and so forth. It was dark, but you could see they were cooking out there. And they acted as though they didn't know anybody else was in town.

Jim: Is that right?

Bob: And we didn't want to cross any guards, so we were up there maybe a half hour. I figured, there must be at least a company, maybe an artillery battery in there, maybe a squadron of tanks, a huge bunch up there. So we went back, and on the way back – we knew we were going back through our own lines, so to speak – we got a guy – this was earlier on – who had a bazooka, with one shot. So we said, Come on. There's a bunch of dead shots up there. We'll all go up there – we'll show you where to shoot from. And we were in one of these farmer's backyards, back barn things, with the transverse wooden slats. And this guy got a big tank – whoosh! – and got out of there. I didn't shoot it, but I organizing getting the bazooka there. That's what I got the medal for.

Jim: Did all the others get medals?

Bob: Yeah.

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: The guy that -- No, I got a Bronze Star.

Jim: You got a Bronze Star.

Bob: The gunner got the Silver Star. Right. 'Cause he was out there more exposed than I was, right? [Laughs.]

Jim: Did they attack you?

Bob: Oh, they were going nuts – they had no idea where the shot came from. They were all running around like crazy and getting in their tanks and starting the motors up and so on. And we just –

Jim: They didn't know where the mortar was –

Bob: Coming from, exactly. So we got the hell out of there. Back to our – Plus, there was smoke and burning buildings – just complete chaos. So we got back, and we told them our report, told them this is this, and we – it looks like our own guys up this whole block. The next block is sort of no man's land, but by the square it's all Germans. But if you can imagine, even the daytime we would – we had one platoon on our side of the street and the other platoon on your side of the street. And we could talk through the little handy-talkies. And you could look out and see all these guys out there – there must have been 150 guys walking around out there. So, you know, we obviously gonna to say [?]. But we were able to block that road off. Because we got -- between these small grenades that went off, that shot off the front of your rifle, and other things – we were able to block – unless they had a wrecker, they couldn't have gotten down that road: it was basically blocked. That was one – And then, before those tanks got disabled there, there was one – The worst thing that I ever went through was watching these tanks come through and shoot down into the basement. And hopefully, you know, fortunately this guy –

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: Remember I said this tank would come along, stop, turn the turret, lower the gun and shoot into the basement. Well, fortunately the guys got wise to that and they were running ahead of us.

Jim: House to house.

Bob: Right. And we had blown a passageway between each basement.

Jim: You were surrounded – did you run out of food?

Bob: We had plenty of food. We had all kinds of preserves and potatoes down in those basements. Turnips.

Jim: You'd run out of rations though?

Bob: Nah, there was always something around. We had eggs, some people – There was chicken still down there. We had a lot of potatoes, turnips.

Jim: So food was not a problem.

Bob: No. Water was. All these houses had cisterns, mostly. And I'm not sure – I don't remember if there was a central water supply. There must have been a central water supply, but we had problems with the water supply in this period. But what we always used were the Halizone tablets, 'cause they were iodine, no, chlorine. And you put two tablets for each canteen full.

Jim: Did you move now into Germany at this point?

Bob: Well, from there we moved back in reserve for about two weeks, filled up, got a lot of replacements, did some training. And in about two weeks we were back up, just short of the Maginot line. That's with all the patrolling. We were up places – Wingen, Wingenau, these were all towns in Germany. We were on the French side, but the Germans were on the other side. And we actually patrolled and attacked through the Maginot line, I mean – excuse me – through the Siegfried line.

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: Pardon?

Jim: You finished the war there?

Bob: No, no. Then we had a lot of fighting all the way across Rhineland-Palatinate. We crossed the Rhine near Wuerms on an engineering bridge, engineer's bridge. Had a lot of fighting going up –

Jim: The 42nd Division was [?].

Bob: Yeah, I'll tell you. Soon as we got back from Hagon, we were activated as a complete division. And that would have been about January 10th.

Jim: And you were part of the Seventh Army?

Bob: Seventh Army, right. General Patch. We had a divisional commander, General Collins. Harry J. Collins. And he was called Hollywood Harry, 'cause he had some connection with Hollywood, and when the division was first organized, they had some big movie stars out there, big shots taking movies of the division's formation. We never saw him. I never saw him once. General Alexander Patch was the Seventh Army commander. I saw this one five times. He would come up in his jeep with a driver and his body guard, and he would come up and look at the terrain. They had a canvas cover over his three-star thing, but you could tell – he was a very distinctive looking guy. And he'd ask you, soldier, how are you doing? Are you getting enough to eat? And he'd look at the terrain, talk with the officers and so on. When I saw him – at least three times, like as far as I am from you – he was always looking up over the terrain and scooping things out.

Jim: [Unintelligible.]

Bob: Yeah, well, the reason I'm around is here's Patch up there. He was the conqueror of Guadalcanal. I was under him, Patch. Seventh Army.

Jim: He had really fought a war.

Bob: Right. He really did. And that's – we had a lot of fighting with attacks, where we used mortars and – We used to try to attack at night, or at least at dawn. It was really tough to attack in daylight. So we would usually attack –

Jim: Was it an advantage for the Germans to attack in daylight?

Bob: No, it was an advantage for us. No, we didn't want to attack in daylight because you could see us. So we did dawn attacks. If we were going to make a move, we'd try to do it at dawn. Or at night if we could. Lot of night stuff. The problem is the road network. The Germans were heavy miners. You had to actually go on foot with the engineers and mine detectors. Every foot, and it took forever. If it was a mile, then it might take 25 minutes or a half an hour to walk that thing and check it out. The next round. You couldn't go anyplace.

Jim: If you found one, you just dig it up and put it on the side or explode it?

Bob: Another story. One day – this was probably in early February and it was getting warm now – warmer, and it was Sunday, and the engineers – All we knew is we had to go to this one intersection and stop and wait for further orders. So we waited there. And half the guys were tired – we were up there on a tank. So half the guys went over to get some sleep in a ditch. A ditch on the side of the road which was covered with old plant debris. And we kind of bedded down on that. And I was one of those guys who was going to take a nap. All of a sudden, the loudest thing I ever heard in my life went, "Boom!" The engineers had cleared like ten mines, and they had taken them – it was about maybe 200 yards ahead of us -- all to one point and detonated these mines, on purpose. But they didn't tell everybody to get the hell out of there. So there were about ten of us lying in the ditch here, asleep. So it was crazy, and that was – talk about communication. But, yeah. Clods of earth raining down on us, and everything from these –

Jim: And you had no idea where these –

Bob: No, no. We had no idea what was going on. So our captain was absolutely furious, and he just raised all kinds of hell, and he wrote this guy up. But that's the kind of stuff that went on. I literally – my whole body just bumped off the ground.

Jim: Raised off the ground?

Bob: Yeah, I distinctly remember it.

Jim: The explosion was one hundred yards away?

- Bob: Oh, maybe 150 yards, 120. Something in that realm. It was really weird. And there were a lot of mines there. They just decided to – They did want to fill ‘em out [?] – demine them or defuse them. They just exploded them.
- Jim: So when you finished, did you have occupation duty?
- Bob: Yeah, we went – Lot of fighting after crossing the Rhine up the – this one river, I can’t think – the Main River. We had fighting in Wuertzburg, Wertheim, and then we – we went about 750 miles in one day on trucks. And the next thing we ended up in Furth in Nuremberg. We had a lot of fighting there. They were telling me before, they were like cadets.
- Jim: Children.
- Bob: 500 cadets, fifteen, sixteen years old kids, and we had a fierce fight there. And there were flak towers outside this – Furth, there was a huge German air base there. And there were these 75-foot-tall flak towers there, with forty- and twenty-millimeter guns up there. And these kids knew how to work those things. And they just gave us hell up there. So we got these tank destroyers, and they could shoot – they could hit a target the size of a waste basket at a thousand yards. They just go, “Bang!” They shot those things out. But that was kind of crazy. But then we went down and crossed the Rhine at Donauwert [?]. And that was the last – No. A couple days after that we were going along a big field. And we heard there was still fighting up there. And we had orders to go up this one field – it was probably about 400 acres [?]: it was a large field. Fortunately, our captain sent out flank guards – the main body of us, maybe about 125-130 guys, were walking up, and there were two patrols – one in the front and one in the back, and then the captain was up in the front. And I was with him. But they sent out like half a squad on the right – maybe two- or three-hundred yards out, just to watch the flanks. Well, there was this Sergeant Chester Sprigato [?] – I’ll never forget his name. He was a staff sergeant from Michigan -- Port Huron, Michigan. And he was out there with four or five guys. And they could see Germans dug in, completely camouflaged with one light machine gun and two heavy machine guns in waiting for us. They could have mowed us down. Obviously, we would have hit the turf, but they probably would have gotten ten or twelve guys. So Chester and his guys opened up on these guys right away from the side. You know, they were so concentrated on looking at us that they didn’t see the flank guys. And they started firing. And one of them had a BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle], and the other one had a – and they were all good shots. And they got these guys – they got these Germans. There were five guys, and I guess they got four and the last guy surrendered. But that saved our necks.
- Jim: Yeah, the machine-gun would have cut you down.
- Bob: That’s right. We would have walked right into them. You couldn’t see them. Absolutely – They were excellently camouflaged people. Because they had been at this for years. And in the wintertime they had the right stuff. Fall, summer, spring – they had everything taped. And then the day the war was over – we kept getting false alarms.

You know, it was May 4th, May 5th, it's over. And finally May 6th was the real time. And that night we were on the shores of the Chiemsee in Southern Bavaria – huge lake. And there were anti-aircraft outfits along the edge of that thing, and they started shooting off the 40mm guns. Star shells –

Jim: They thought the war was over.

Bob: Yeah, just like the Fourth of July there. And I could tell the officers were going nuts: “Stop that right away!” you know. They were shooting off these 40mm anti-aircraft guns, but they were shooting all tracers. It was just like fireworks. And this went on about a half hour. Everyone was probably all drunk or something, but I'll never forget that. And our guys were just – we had realized pretty soon that the war was gonna end in a day or so. Then – final story – That's must have been the day before the war was over. That was the false alarm that the war was over on May 5th, but it wasn't. So that night – the night that the fireworks went off – we were moved – our regiment – we got on trucks. We moved on into Austria, which was about probably a sixty-mile drive from where we were in Germany. We went on up to Innsbruck, and basically we just – I don't know what we did – we just – we were up most of the night traveling. And I remember that at seven o'clock the next – no, at ten o'clock the next day, there was a platoon leaders' and company commanders' meeting at the high school there. And our regimental commander was there. And you know who else was there? Our assistant division commander had – sorry. General Collins had gotten ill: he had acute rheumatoid arthritis, so General McOlive became our division commander at the end for about last two weeks. And he said, “Gentleman, we're going up –“ There had been rumors for weeks that there even though the regular German Army was defeated, there was a bunch of SS and Nazi hold-outs way up high in the Alps in Austria. And they were going to hold out forever. They had food for three years, and they were impenetrable and everything. So General McOlive said, “We're going up tonight with our lights on.”

Jim: Lights on?

Bob: And that was a very brave and ingenious idea, because the Germans, when they see the lights, would think the war was over. So we went up the Brenner Pass, we were maybe 25 vehicles from the front of the column, got to the top – nothing up there. We had good maps, just like this, and they were talking about fortifications to the east. Actually to the west of the Brenner – So we starting going on these mountain paths, and we went in about three or four miles – by this time it was daylight. And we radio back, “Nothing up here.” It was not a hoax, but there was nothing up there. There was no German military guards up there. But I'll never forget it. And did you know Mel Houth from Bariboo? Dr. Mel Houth?

Jim: No.

Bob: Well, Mel was our division surgeon, and I didn't know him at the time. But when General McOlive said, “Men, we're going up there with our lights on,” a voice rang out and said, “Did you say, ‘Lights on,’ General?” Everybody was aghast, because nobody

in their right – no line officer would dare say anything against the general. But it was the doctor. Mel Houth. And later on I became – you know, he was a colleague of mine, and we got talking about the last days of the war, and he mentioned this, and I said, “Son-of-a-bitch! I was there myself – I heard you!” So just a coincidence. That’s the final story.

Jim: He probably didn’t respond to that?

Bob: Well, he kind of – he could see the [Kadushas?], these guys don’t count, they don’t count – it didn’t get him too upset.

Jim: After the war, did you join any veterans’ organization?

Bob: Just our division organization. I went to maybe four or five meetings over the years – nothing much past the late ‘50s. I didn’t keep up. There’s one guy in town I did keep in touch with – Raymond Brumm, whose sons – they have one of these dump trucks, you know. I used to talk to Raymond on the phone, see him once in a while.

Jim: Did you use your GI bill?

Bob: Oh, and how! I had an academic scholarship to college, but then I used it for medical school?

Jim: Wait a minute now. Now how did you suddenly decide to go to medical school? You’re an expert engineer.

Bob: Well, no, I knew from my two semesters that I didn’t want to be an engineer. So when I came back, they gave me sophomore status in college, which was kind of a gift.

Jim: Where did you go to college?

Bob: Fordham. Yeah, I had intended, originally, I was going to go to Georgetown, but, as I said before, my mother had an illness, so I wanted to be around locally.

Jim: Where is Fordham?

Bob: It’s in the Bronx. They have a campus in Manhattan and one in the Bronx, but I was in the Bronx. It’s a small Jesuit college. And at that time they had a very good football team. Vince Lombardi and all, right? I won an academic scholarship when I left high school, so I used that academic scholarship for college.

Jim: Just L & S [Letters and Sciences]?

Bob: Yeah, an L & S college. You could have used it in any college – it was a New York state regents scholarship. And then I used the GI bill for medical school.

Jim: What inspired you to switch? Did somebody encourage you?

Bob: Well, this doctor my mother used to go to – we got very friendly with him. My father was a big encourager. He was a great – he didn't push me, but he encouraged me: what do you think about medicine? I was interested in science, but not on the engineering side, but I was interested in chemistry, biology. But I wasn't focussed heavily. But then I said, "Well, why not?" I had good marks from my college, and I thought, "Well, let me give it a try." I said, okay, what I'm gonna do, I'm gonna take half a year of inorganic chemistry, because I had taken some chemistry in the first year at Syracuse. And then I said if I did okay, I'd take organic chemistry. If I get a good mark in that, then I'll go premed, which I did.

Jim: You finished medical school there?

Bob: Yeah, I went to Columbia University. College of Physicians and Surgeons.

Jim: That's a good medical school.

Bob: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: Then after that?

Bob: University of Rochester, for internship and primary [?] residence, and I finished up in Boston at the Boston VA. That was internal medicine. Then I came to Madison to practice.

Jim: A lot of work. Big question: you were totally oriented to New York, east coast and all that. What the hell are you doing out in the middle of nowhere?

Bob: Well, I had a relative who was here in V-12 – Bill Vane, first cousin. And I went out to see him. I was very fascinated by Madison. This was in 1944. '43? No, I was down in Oklahoma, I came up here, I came up to St. Louis and I came up to Madison. I had a three-day pass. And I was always interested in Madison, because it was a beautiful city. And then – I don't know if you remember Ed Ryder? Dr. Ryder?

Jim: Of course.

Bob: Well, he, through a friend, wanted to know if anybody was interested in practicing in Madison. And this friend of mine was a friend of his, was a staff man at the VA program in Boston, because he had known Ed in the service where Ed was a doctor. So it was sort of a personal contact through Ed Ryder, plus I had been here once before. And I wanted a smaller town, university town sort of thing.

Jim: How about Catherine? Where does she fit into that?

Bob: I met Catherine in December of 1946. I had come back to the states in the summer of '46.

Jim: She was from the New York area?

Bob: Right. And we had probably twenty mutual friends. And they would say, “You ought to meet Cathy Robinson, you ought to meet Cathy Robinson.” And they told her, “You ought to meet Bob Beilman.” And we met at a Christmas party one night at a mutual friend’s house, and we obviously hit it off right away. It really clicked, you know. And that was the story of that. Didn’t get married until ’49 – we were courting for three years.

Jim: You have three kids?

Bob: Five. Five kids, right. And then there’re seven grandchildren.

Jim: Well, I think you’ve had a wonderful career, don’t you?

Bob: Oh, I loved it. I loved every minute of my career, and I enjoyed my work. I was very active at the U. I was a full professor of – clinical professor when I retired. Did a lot of work over there. And –

Jim: When did you retire?

Bob: ’92, yeah. June ’92. And, you know, I had wonderful friends and colleagues, like yourself. We were always good friends. The worst thing that happened this managed care business and, you know, dividing everybody up into pots. It was terrible. But the collegiality which we had in those days was wonderful.

Jim: Yes, the collegiality was just marvelous.

Bob: Yes, we had wonderful friends, and I just, by the way, Tony died, did you see that? Oh, I’m sorry – Palmer Cunders.

Jim: Yeah, ’94. I saw it.

Bob: But I’ve had a wonderful life here in Madison – all our kids grew up here. They’ve all done well. They’re having grandchildren. I have a daughter here at the U – she’s a sophomore at the U.

Jim: Oh, really? So that’s good.

Bob: Time marches on. Any other questions, Jim, at all?

Jim: I can’t think of any. It’s a good interview –

End of Side B, Tape 1 – End of Interview