

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ORVILLE J. COLLINS
Airborne Infantry, 101st Airborne, World War II.

1996

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Collins, Orville J., (1919 -), Oral History Interview, 1996

User copy, 2 sound cassettes (ca. 120 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy, 1 sound cassette (ca. 120 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

The Denmark, Wis. native, discusses his World War II service as a paratrooper with Company A, 502nd Regiment, 101st Airborne focusing on his experiences during the D-Day invasion and as a prisoner of war in Germany. Collins talks about medical training, decision to join the Airborne, and the different types of people found there. He describes Airborne training in Georgia including double time runs, calisthenics, obstacle courses, push ups, and threats used to keep soldiers from washing out. Collins touches upon jump training at Fort Benning (Georgia), trip overseas, and establishing a camp on the grounds of an English estate. He provides a sketch of military life, taking about listening to radio propaganda by Lord Ha-Ha, gambling, and learning how to gauge the atmosphere around camp. Collins describes the importance of having pilots understand that they are carrying people not cargo to ensure the safest jump conditions. Collins details his role in the D-Day invasion of France talking about being dropped at night, landing in a cow pasture near Foucarville (France), the problems hedgerows caused for Airborne and glider soldiers, and feelings of fear and isolation once he landed. On the ground, Collins was under constant fire from German troops and describes German machine gun fire and the sound it makes, hearing the cows be hit, and crawling across the field in attempt to find other Airborne soldiers. He relates trying to meet up with soldiers in his unit, the death of his friend and performing field funeral honors, and fighting as he moved through France. Collins comments on Operation Market Garden (Holland) and fighting at Bagstone. He discusses his role at the Battle of the Bulge, staying with Belgian civilians, being taken prisoner by German troops, and stay at Stalag XC and XII A. He talks about the POW camp including forced labor, lack of food and medical care, the separate camps for different nationalities, crowded box car ride to Tarmstedt (Germany), and the importance of religion and humor for POWs. Collins mentions liberation, and stay at Camp Lucky Strike (France). The interview ends abruptly while Collins is talking about veterans organizations.

Biographical Sketch

Collins (b. April 8, 1919) served with the 101st Airborne during World War II. He landed the night of June 5-6, 1944 at Normandy. Collins was a prisoner of war for 126 days. He was honorably discharged from service in 1945 as a sergeant.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, 2002.

Transcript edited by Abigail Miller, 2002.

Interview Transcript

Mark: Okay, today's date is October 16, 1996. Mark Van Ells, Archivists, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning in the Manitowoc County Court House with Mr. Orville Collins, of Denmark, Wisconsin, a veteran of the 101st Airborne, in World War II. Good morning, and thanks for driving up.

Collins: Thank you for being your guest. Don't do this too often. On occasion, we do make, I have spoke to different groups. Retirement, people in retirement homes, at churches, four or five schools. And one of the last ones I did was last year, getting about this time, just before, just a few days before Christmas. A young recruiter came out from Green Bay and I had met him at different functions. And he said, "I am going up to Seymour," he said. "I am pushing for recruits." You know. And he said, "I'd like to have you go along." Well, I said, "What is the situation?" Well, I had a jump suit, an old parachute jump suit from World War II. He says, "You wear that." I says, "You sure?" "Yea. Wear your beret. And come on. You got a little other literature you want to bring along?" I had a couple books on airborne. The fiftieth anniversary of airborne. And a couple pictures I had confiscated from the Germans. One of them was on the Olympics in 1936, when Jess Owens took over, and Hitler couldn't understand it. And that was probably one of the better ones that we have ever had. This teacher was real. He teaches, he is the football coach. And he also teaches history. And it worked out real well. Just talked for about twenty minutes. And there was two different groups. There was one before dinner, about half a hour. And then, questions and answers. And it was surprising. These are senior high school students. And he broke down the class. There was about thirty-five in the first class. And in the afternoon, about the same number. So we had about seventy, seventy-five kids. And the interest that they took in this. Really good.

Mark: Well, that is good.

Collins: And then they thanked us, the young recruiter and myself. And about a week after, I got a letter these kids wrote. And each one signed it, and just a paragraph or two, just short, thanking us for coming. And it was interesting. Especially their questions. For instance, or just for an example, you'd get a question like this: "If you had the same thing to do over again, would you, or wouldn't you?" And of course, my answer was, "Under those conditions, yes. If I was a young man, I would do the same thing." And, "Do you have any qualms about this?" "Not really. War is war, and it is tough." They really had good answers. I mentioned, I did mention a few examples, in these prisoner of war camps, two or three incidents of different things that happened. And they were at the edge of their chairs. It was good.

Mark: That's good. They say kids aren't interested in history any more.

Collins: Yea. It really was surprising. But I just, I mean, I could, I'll just go through this. I made a copy of this. This is just short. I was drafted. We left Green Bay with a bus load of draftees and volunteers on the 4th of, that was on the 4th of December. And was inducted in at Fort Sheridan, Illinois. Of this group, we left by railroad and went to Camp Barclay, Texas. Camp Barclay was about two miles out of Abilene, and it was a medical center. It was a new medical center. And it was being expanded for infantry medical training. Completion of basic training, I remained there. Now, they didn't have too many men on cadre. Somebody doesn't understand what cadre is, those are, like, you understand. I am sure. Cadre. It would be guys that remain for training.

Mark: Called permanent party, I think.

Collins: Yea. They make, you start at PFC and if you are good, you move up to corporal, buck sergeant, staff sergeant, and so on. So, out of this group, they only had a few and this thing was really mushrooming. It was really building up in a hurry. And the rest of the guys were all shipped out and I would say, this first group that I took my basic training with, about four-fifths of them were sent to Australia. And then the rest were sent to other camps for more extensive training.

Mark: If I may interrupt you.

Collins: Yea. Sure.

Mark: I have got some questions about training. Your experience is particularly interesting. And that was before Pearl Harbor?

Collins: This was, yea. About a week before Pearl Harbor.

Mark: And there is one of the continuing controversies in American history is America's preparedness for World War II. How prepared we were. And there are stories some guys will tell about training and that sort of thing. So, I was wondering, from your GI basic training perspective, your comments on preparedness. What sort of equipment did you have? What sort of training did you get? Your impressions of it, and did it help you later on, did you think?

Collins: Well, I would say that the medical training was very good. Because usually, your company commander, now, a company usually, like a line outfit, now, during maneuvers and into combat, they run about twelve or fifteen thousand, where an airborne division runs about eighty-five to nine thousand. So they are a smaller unit. But I would say that the training was very good. And as far as like this being the Medical Corps, and like I say in most cases, the commander was a doctor. Was a doctor. Usually a first lieutenant or a captain. Would be your commander.

Mark: And you had enough supplies? And you had actual guns to shoot?

Collins: Well, no, see, as Medical Corps, there was no guns. See. There was no weapons. You carried a Red Cross band on your arm, on your sleeve, that was it. So you had close order drill, and we had bivouacs, and maneuvers. And then of course, an awful lot, I would say that anyone that took the course, it ran, those training periods ran about eight weeks. And most of the people, the fellows that took those courses, I would say that they became excellent first aid men. To start them out in hospitals. That is where they usually filtered out, from there. Now, I stayed on as cadre for three or four training periods, eight week training periods. And it's noble duty. But there was something about it. I mean, what usually would happen to men after, they said, after three training periods, you should be qualified, you are an expert as far as first aid is concerned. But you will either wind up in a hospital, maybe a field hospital. That would be about as close to combat as you would get. Or, if possible, you would be a medic with a platoon. You have three platoons in a company, so you have three medics in each platoon, which we did in the 101st.

Mark: And you wanted the combat medic position?

Collins: Well, I wasn't too interested in medicine. What I wanted to do was, well, as most young men, there is a war on, and the cause is just. Let's get into it and let's be a part of it. And get it over with and get home and go back to work. Very simple.

Mark: Now, while you were in Texas, Pearl Harbor happened.

Collins: Yea.

Mark: I suppose, just for anecdotal purposes, if nothing else. Why don't you just tell me when you learned of it, and, being in the military, what was the reaction to it? How did things change after December 7?

Collins: Well, see, we went in. I believe it was the 1st or 2nd, one of the, on some of these dates, I am a little hazy. 1st or 2nd, one of the first days of December. Because we were at Fort Sheridan about the best part of a week, maybe five, six days prior to Pearl Harbor. And, of course, every place you would go, you were getting your physicals, your examinations, and questioning, and gave you your clothes. You got all your clothes, and that. And we were at Fort Sheridan maybe three, four days, before we were moved out by railroad, to Camp Barclay, Texas, this new camp. But, I would say, they had the equipment, as far as your clothing and everything, real fine. And most of these areas, they had their ambulances in training. You know, we would go on maneuvers and that. The lots were always, the lots for the vehicles were always full up and all new equipment. And the same

with the tents, being hospital tents. Our pup tents, and all our other equipment, was in very good shape. And when we trained at Camp Barclay, Texas, the 45th Division was in there when we came there. And then they were sent overseas. The old Thunderbird Division. And that outfit was primarily Mexican and Indian. And they came from out of Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico.

Mark: Yea. They were one of the National Guard--

Collins: It was. It was a National Guard division. And that was what it was made up. Primarily, I would say, I didn't notice a white skinned fellow there. They were dark skinned. Mexican-Indian, primarily. And I talked to a fellow, this friend of mine who lives in Denmark, here, now, and he was an ex-prisoner of war. He was captured at Anzio. He served with the 45th. And I said, "Did you have many Indians or Mexicans?" He says, "Most of those guys were eliminated. They were either killed or captured." He said, "Very few Indians."

Mark: Okay, so you finished your training at Camp Barclay. You stayed there for a couple of training times. Why don't you just walk me through getting into the paratroopers?

Collins: I can take that right out of here. Parachute training was taken at Fort Benning, Georgia. This is fairly brief, cut down, but I, we can always elaborate here and there. January and February, 1943. Early March, twenty of us were, these guys, we took this training and this training was tough. Now, these guys, I'll tell you what happened. One morning, it happened to come up. This was at Camp Barclay, Texas. There was a notice on the bulletin board, "Airborne is looking for people." Now, this has to be, I think, during the second training period, so the 82nd Division, Airborne Division, was already over in North Africa. They were over there and through Sicily. And they were in there. And I would say, after I had taken basic training, that first group had gotten through. The 45th was in intensive training there, and they moved out. They went out of the States. But then the 90th Division, another infantry division, came in there and they were there when I left. I was there just about a year. Just about a year. But, anyway, getting on with this training, I would say that, like I say, on this bulletin board, there was this notice that the airborne was looking for people. And I said, "Geez, that is for me." And what they did, they sent them out from Fort Benning, Georgia, I believe it was a captain and probably a lieutenant. Probably a first sergeant and three or four enlisted men, sergeants or corporals. And the date was named. There was about a week after the notice appeared on the board. And we met at a, it was a large auditorium. At Camp Barclay. And I would say, these people came in from all over. They must have had these notices because there are numerous training camps in Texas. And they came up from Fort Hood, and you name it. Dozens of others. And a lot of these guys had been, and they were from all branches. And I

would say fifty percent, in this auditorium there was at least two hundred and fifty people that were going for airborne. And it was patches for you, you name it. Infantry, artillery, air force, and so on, and so forth. And they explained the situation to you, and they ran films. They have you, they had a doctor, one doctor there, took tests. You had a written test. And they explained to you the situation was rough. It was going to be rough. Your chances of survival weren't the best, but you would be with men. That is the way they put it. You would be with men. And after they had done these tests, out of that two hundred and fifty, they took fifty. And what they were looking for that time, there was a little variation in size and weight, but the people that they took, the average man, their ideal was about a hundred and fifty-five, sixty pounds. And about five-eight. Maybe an inch or two either way. They didn't want anybody slobber fat. You had to be in good shape. And you might ask, like these kids at this high school, at Seymour. The question they asked, "Well, what kind of men were they? Where were they from and what did they do?" Well, most of these men, most of these men were born in about 1920, give or take five or seven years either way. So that was twenty. So most of these men were in their very early teens during the Depression, and a drought on top of that. '31, '32, '33, they were rough years. And you say, you ask the question, where did these men come from? These men, most of their ancestry and their parents came out of the coal mines of Virginia, the steel mills in Pennsylvania. They were farmers, they were ranchers. They were guys that worked in oil fields. They were lumber-jacks, tree-toppers. Most of them were out-door people. Most of them were out-door people.

Mark: But rough? Fairly rough?

Collins: It was very rough. And then, on top of it, you had this drought. You remember John Steinbeck's book, *Grapes of Wrath*? Where all these Okies left Oklahoma and went looking for jobs in their old Model A's and T's? Into California, for jobs that never materialized. And it was tough. Those were the days when a buck was a buck. Job was hard to come by. You had your WPA and your CCC camps that Roosevelt got started up. You'd get your uniform and your food and a buck a day. So, and of course, we went into service and what did you get? Twenty-one dollars a month, was the wage. Twenty-one dollars a month. So, the majority of these guys, even these guys who had lived through hard times and the drought, were writing home for money. If the family could send five or ten dollars on occasion. Because it was rough going. But then we took this training at Camp Barclay, I mean, at Fort Benning, Georgia. And that was eight weeks. And it was rugged.

Mark: What did you do? I mean, I assume jumping out of airplanes was part of it.

Collins: Yea. Well, the way they would start you out, primarily, it was rough. Now, where these training fields were was about a mile from where the guys were billeted.

And they would take these through in classes of probably two hundred or so. And you would get up at six o'clock in the morning. And there would be a cadre out there. Six or eight guys. Now, these guys were there continuously. Now the reason they could take this is they were tough. And most of these guys were from the Deep South. That first cadre, there, where I took training at Fort Benning, Georgia. They were brown as berries. You know what I mean? They were out in the sun. And all crew cuts. And all they had, and they would always come out in clean uniforms. They had t-shirts on, white t-shirts. With a parachute patch on it. And they had the jump pants on, and the boots. And I never seen those guys that came out of that building without a tremendous shine on those boots.

Mark: They were really GI?

Collins: Parachute boots. And they made it tough. After we left, after we had our breakfast and we lined up in front of the house, there were six guys there. And they would take you into the training area. And you ran. You ran. Double time, double time, in step. If you got out of step, if there was, say, you were smart or you were chewing gum, or you couldn't keep up with the pace, they only gave you one chance. You fell out, you couldn't make it up. Say, for example, you would run a mile. And then you'd get a two minute break, in that hot Georgia sun. And all of these guys wore their green fatigues. The trainees. And it was really rough. And a guy would drop, and maybe two guys would pick him up. In fact, that happened to me. I will give you an example of that. This one day, and this fellow had an upset stomach. And I was very close to him. He was from a place called Waroad, Minnesota. His dad was a potato farmer up there. We were real close. Good guy. His name was Jack Lyle. And we were running along, double timing along, and maybe two or three miles, maybe five miles, usually. And from the time you left, after you had your breakfast, you lined up in this building, from then on, that is all you did, unless you sat down for a minute or two break, you were double timing, double timing. Calisthenics, calisthenics. Through an obstacle course. Through an obstacle course. You know. And it was, what they did was, they always said, you can always go that extra inch. If you can't go that extra inch, we cannot use you. And, like I say, this friend of mine, he had an upset stomach, and he was running a kind of fever. And we had about a half a mile to run yet. And then we'd get a break. And he kind of stumbled a few times. And, "Geez, I don't think I'm going to make it. I don't think I am going to make it." "Jack, we'll give you a hand." So I and another fellow gave him a hand. And then we had stopped. We were carrying him along. And he kind of straightened out a little. You could give him support. There were six or eight of these guys in a group of two hundred that are double timing, give each other support. And we were at a curve of a street, and these two women came by. They were carrying baskets, were going shopping, no doubt. And this one woman looked down, and she said, "Isn't it a shame, the way those boys are being punished?" And Jack, as bad a condition as he was in, and he

put the palm of his hand on his chin, and he said, "Lady, I am going to make it." And he did. And he was killed in Normandy, D-Day. As a scout. But he did make it. But it was just one of those things. He had an upset stomach and didn't feel well, and that happened.

Mark: But he went that extra inch?

Collins: He went that extra inch. Yea. Oh, you would see a lot of guys drop out. And an ambulance always followed. Always followed. You'd gaze back, you'd see that ambulance, you'd say, "That's not for us." But, you ran, you ran. And then, what was great for these guys, because they had this group for one hour. Then you would march back to where the cadre were housed, and you'd get six fresh guys come out. All snap and go. "Straighten up! What's wrong there, soldier? Give us ten!" You'd give them ten push-ups. "Give us twenty push-ups." And, like I say, if you couldn't, at that spur of the moment, you were caught for something that was probably very simple, didn't amount to much. And they would ask for twenty push-ups, you could only give them ten, you were gone. And where did you go? It was kind of an embarrassment. You never went back to your own organization. They either made an MP out of you, which airborne soldiers detested. Or, otherwise, they put you into the gliders. And that wasn't much better, you know.

Mark: Just out of curiosity. I don't want to dwell on this too much. But why don't airborne soldiers like the MP's? Is it just because it's sort of a--

Collins: No, you really want to know. We had our own MP's, too. But, they were a group of hell-raisers. They were always looking for trouble. When they would go in on a pass, maybe I shouldn't mention this. But I remember this one bar in Phoenix City, where they used to go to a lot. And it got so bad they couldn't keep two picture windows in the front of it. And they just put up paneling. So it got rough.

Mark: So, a lot of rigorous training?

Collins: I would say very bitter training. Very bitter training.

Mark: Now, there was a term that was used during World War II and after, and I will be discreet, but it started with chicken, and ends in a swear word.

Collins: Yea. Yea.

Mark: Now, is that the sort of thing that you would characterize your airborne training and your subsequent--

Collins: No, I would not characterize it as chicken.

Mark: Why not?

Collins: Because you are, most of these guys were looking for a challenge, and they were of the feeling that anything that they did in training, in this rigorous training, you were a match for it. And another thing, I might say, they made, this training was so rough and tough that, and then they would have these, they had these high towers. You would jump out of these towers. You would go down on a rope. This was all they would train you before you did any parachute jumping. This was all done in a period of eight weeks. The first thing was a lot of rigorous training. Calisthenics, obstacle courses, you might go on a five mile road run and get a ten minute break, and then you'd go three times through an obstacle course, and things like that. So it was bitter. In other words, you were perpetually batting your head against a stone wall. And then you had these mock-up doors, these towers about thirty feet high. You'd go up and you'd jump out. You were on a, you'd snap your, you had your harness on. You would snap on to a cable at thirty feet up and you'd go down and do a roll in the sand. And they'd keep you doing that for an hour. You'd do that maybe ten different times. And then they had these high towers. They had three of those. They were three hundred and fifty feet high, with arms on them. They would come down with a parachute. A parachute was hung inside this. And you were pulled up on a cable. And then, when you got up about a hundred feet, you were laying flat, like this. Face down. You are up about a hundred feet. You pull the rip cord. And there is a spring in there, and it lets you down about twenty - thirty feet. And then they pull you up to the top. And your harness, your frame latches into this parachute, and you come down. You make eight or ten jumps like that over a period of a week. But then the final thing is five jumps. And somebody, at the high school, one of the kids asked that question: "Did you have any trouble your first jump?" And I said, "No, really not." Because the training had been so rugged, this was the last thing, these four jumps at a thousand feet, and one at twelve hundred. And that was a free fall jump. These other were static line where you are hooked up. The last one was a free fall. You count one-two-three and then you pull the rip cord. And she says, "Well, how could you do that?" Well, I says, "It is drilled into you, that when you are standing in the door, and these guys go out - - you got eighteen or twenty guys in a plane, and they clear that plane in fifteen seconds, so there is no time lost. You are being pushed, you are being pushed, you are being pushed." And you are just slapped on the leg, and you turn into the door. You are slapped on the calf of the leg, and you go. You go. This is the way they are going. Because these planes are traveling at, of course, what they do over these, this is in training, now. When they go over, they just kind of hover. They might be going about fifty miles an hour, or so. They'd just kind of hover. And in combat, I would say, in Normandy, that we jumped out of those planes, these were pilots that were anxious to get back. And they said seventy-five or eighty miles an hour was about the limit. And some of

those planes were traveling at ninety and a hundred miles an hour. When you get out, that pop really chutes, or I mean, that parachute really pops. And there is always the possibility those panels that are threaded in there, there are six stitch - - oil stitch, oil string stitch. And it wasn't unusual that six or eight of those panels were broke, and you were coming down. Coming down in a parachute, the average man falls at about eighteen or twenty miles an hour, so that is quite a bit faster than you can fall. And another thing you have to remember is that you are hanging about thirty-six feet below your chute, and if you don't get the oscillation out of that parachute, and you are up there sideways, with sixty pounds of field equipment, you are up three stories high and you are coming down sideways. With sixty pounds of equipment. A lot of broken hips, ankles, and legs, knees. But, as this question was asked, how were you able to jump out? Well, this was drilled into you. When you stand in the door, you don't look directly down. You haven't got time. It is just, you turn and you are in the door and you are out. You are not supposed to look down. Do not look down. Look off at the horizon. It gives you the feeling that you are only about three steps off the ground. And, like I say, after all this rigorous training, it was a way out. You had come this far. As many planes as I have seen on that field at Fort Benning coming out, I've never saw a case, because they wouldn't be allow you to see a second or two when nobody was coming out. And it was just a steady stream. I have never seen an instance, or was in a plane, where anybody refused to go. There was a way out. This was it. Death is better than this punishment that I have been taking.

Mark: So, about the time you finished your basic training, you were ready to go?

Collins: Ready to go. We were in good shape.

Mark: Now, you must have finished some time in mid- to late-43, if my calculations are correct.

Collins: Ah, yea. These training periods. I would say we left, I left there in, yea. I went in in December of '41. And then December, January, and it was the next January. And I took basic training there, had this test, and then went to Fort Benning, Georgia. So it had to be, I'd say, February, March. February, March of '43.

Mark: So what did you do between—

Collins: Or March and April.

Mark: Yea. Between finishing your training and D-Day, that is a year, then what?

Collins: Yea. If I can read this, I can do a little better. Because I kept this kind of brief. Right here. The parachute training was taken at Fort Benning, and it was January,

February, 1943. Early March, twenty of us were assigned to the 101st Airborne Division which was at Fort Bragg, and being built up to full strength. The full strength of that division, or most airborne divisions, was around nine thousand men, eighty-five hundred, nine thousand men. Five of us were assigned to A Company, 502 Regiment, and I remained with that company until discharged October 15, 1945. Rigorous training and two major maneuvers were next, for the next six months. For the next six months. So that would be April, May, June, July. It must have been March. March, April, May, June, July, August. Six months. And we went on three or four different extensive maneuvers.

Mark: This is in North Carolina?

Collins: Yea. One was in Louisiana. North Carolina. And one was in, we were in pup tents on the outskirts of Evansville, Indiana, in a huge area. The government must have owned it, or leased it, I suppose. In pup tents for about a month. Just stay there. And planes picked us up. They had a landing field there. And we were in Tennessee. The maneuvers were in Tennessee. And we were railroaded back.

Mark: And these were war games?

Collins: War games.

Mark: You were playing out a scenario?

Collins: Yea. Yea.

Mark: And you went overseas late '43?

Collins: Late '43. Yea. It would be March, April, May, June. That is about it. March, April, May, June, July, August. Because we sailed overseas on the 3rd of September.

Mark: Why don't you describe that voyage to me. Now, you were jumping out of airplanes. That doesn't mean that you were immune to seasickness, for example.

Collins: No, it never really bothered me. I never had any problem with seasickness, no. Because some of the division had gone over before. I would say, in fact, they were getting a place lined up in England, and so say nine thousand men. We used that figure. It was usually right in that area. They sent about five hundred over about three weeks before the regular division left. They were getting things lined up. It was primarily a headquarters company that was taking care of this. You know. Because they had to have a place for these guys to billet. And we left on the 3rd of September. Now, this is kind of interesting. We left on the 3rd of September, from

Newport News, Virginia. And the plane we were on, most of the division, so there were about eight thousand men, and there was a thousand WAACs, and they certainly kept them away from these guys.

Mark: I bet they did.

Collins: They certainly did. They certainly did. They kept a guard on them continuously, round the clock. But, anyway, we got about half way over to Newfoundland, and the name of this ship was the Strathnabor. It was an English ship and it was manned by Englishmen, but most of the people that did the cooking and that were Indians from India. So, they wore their long shawls and their turbans, and did the cooking. You'd see them sitting cross-legged out on the decks, and down below. They did the firing, and so on. But it was operated by English. We got about half way over and it sprung a leak. One of the plates on the bottom went out. They were having motor trouble with it, too. And we docked at Newfoundland, and we were there for the best part of three weeks. They sent divers down to repair that plate. And all our barracks bags were piled in the lower hold. And by the time they made that distance half way from the States to Newfoundland, and got our stuff, they had to pump this thing out, and renew these plates. And with this engine trouble, all these barracks bags, with all your worldly goods, is piled down in this hold. And there is two feet of water. So we gets over to Newfoundland and you talk about God-forsaken country. That is it. And then about every other day or so, they'd take different groups out, because they couldn't get the whole group, bunch, out, the whole division out at one time. And there was snow on the ground, of course. And it was cold. They had run a runway down for the guys, you know, to go out and run around a little bit. And a lot of calisthenics were done up on the deck. So it was tough.

Mark: It was to keep you busy.

Collins: Well, they had to keep these guys active, you know. Or there'd be a lot of, they'd tie shirts or bed sheets together and they'd have swam over, you know. We were only about twenty feet from the dock and the ground. But so it took us as long to get over to England as it did Columbus coming over to America. It was kind of sad, but funny. And you imagine these guys trying to dry their clothes out, because that had to be done or you had mildew, you know. Only a start, and it took eleven days, or at least ten days, from Newfoundland to get over there. But they did have a convoy. There was a lot of troops going over at that time. Landed at Liverpool.

Mark: And that is where you landed, too?

Collins: Yea.

Mark: Now, I would imagine, once you got to England, there were already preparations under way for the June invasion?

Collins: Well, there was no doubt in anybody's mind that those were the plans. I mean, these men knew that there was definitely going to be a war, and after we got over to England, just to get into that, we landed at Liverpool. They loaded us up on a train. I imagine there were three, four train loads, they had. And where we went, where we were bivouacked, then, was a little place called Chilton Foliat. And Reading was about half way between us and London, so we were about a hundred miles from London, fifty miles to Reading. And these are those little three-quarter gauge, single gauge railroads. Their boxcars, well, the same as the Germans and French, are about three-quarters, two-thirds the size of ours. They are narrow and not too long. But we were billeted at, they had this place there. We landed at a little village. The closest one to us was, these villages are small. Just a few houses, maybe a tavern and a shoe store, and a grocery store, and a couple bars, and that was it. But Chilton Foliat was just next door to us. But the town where we landed at when we came in on these trains, was at Hungerford. It was about, it was Hungerford, about three miles from where we were billeted. This area where we were billeted at, we only knew it as Lady Ward's Estate. So there was Englishmen, high-ranking English, that owned the place. She was referred to as Lady Ward. And in fact, her workers were always around, and we could see them. Had one guy that took care of the horses. But she was gone. The family, otherwise, the family was out. And that is where the officers were billeted. And they were maybe five hundred yards up on little knoll, from where we were. And we were in Quonsets. Each platoon had their own Quonset. There was headquarters. There was a building. Then the other group from headquarters was just above, and then first, second, and third platoon.

Mark: I would imagine more and more training.

Collins: Yes, a lot of training. It didn't let up too much, I can say that. And we trained with the British airborne, the British Commandos. They would exchange troops during that period of time.

Mark: Yea. Now, as you mentioned, there was no doubt that you were going to be going, but was there a point when you knew that it was going to be soon? And was there a rumor or mention of the way you were training, or did you hear real rumors to the effect that the invasion was going to happen soon?

Collins: Probably one interesting insight on that is, there was no doubt in anybody's mind, you know. And you always get these, what do they call them? These latrine rumors, you know? The war in close, we will be going tomorrow. Well, that was old hat. You heard that all the time. But I will tell you one thing we noticed. We

had a compound for prisoners. Our own people that were in the compound. They had a place built up, wired. A place for them. And guards to take them out for exercise once in a while. These were guys. But any time when we had to make a practice jump while we were over in England, you had to be on jump status for at least a week, a week or ten days. I just remember. It was a week or ten days. To be able to jump. Otherwise, like it wasn't legal. That is what I am getting at. See. So, it was always twenty-five or thirty guys in the stockade, and as soon as we would get up in the morning, and you would see the stockade was empty, you knew that we were going to have a practice jump. So, within a period of ten days, we would have a jump. So, well, when we were back in the States, see, we had the five jumps. And I would say, on maneuvers, the average paratrooper had, maybe, four or five jumps. So we had about nine jumps in. And then, before D-Day, at least three or four more. So most men had fourteen-sixteen jumps, parachute jumps. And quite a few night ones. And those are rugged. You know. Guys get hung up in trees. So it was nasty.

Mark: So, why don't you just describe your D-Day experience for me? I think we are up to that point.

Collins: D-Day experience. Well, you know, this is a question that one of these kids asked, too. They said, "Well, could you, would you mind, filling us in on your experience, your first experience, in combat?" You know, they kind of hold back, your first experience in combat. "Well, most certainly, now. What would you like to hear?" "Well, how was it?" Before I go into that, I would like to mention, you were mentioning about training here. I imagine you are familiar with this. Propaganda, there was a lot of propaganda before the Normandy invasion. And Tokyo Rose was in Japan. And over in England, we had Lord Ha-Ha. And this American woman. I am trying to think of her name. Lord Ha-Ha was the man. I'll probably think of it. But, they would get reports. I would say, oh, a month or six weeks prior to D-Day, we'd have that English station on, WBBC, whatever it happened to be. And they would talk. Well, they would usually start out by playing a military song. Probably one of John Philip Sousa. The Star and Stripes Forever. Danny Boy was another one they played. And then they would play a Glen Miller song, or two. And then he'd usually start out. He'd say, the program usually came on around about bed check time, about ten o'clock. This would come on about ten. So, a lot of times, we'd be listening to it in the dark. And didn't mind a bit. And they'd be on for probably twenty minutes, half an hour. And he'd start out by saying, "Well, we know where you are. And you are there. And we are here. And we are waiting for you. We are patiently waiting for you. And don't think we are not ready for you." Different things like that. And then she'd say, I can't think of her name. It bothers me. And she, she had a sweet voice, but I guess she looked like a dog. And she would come on, and she would say, "Now, you men," and she would stress this, too. She would say, "Especially

you paratroopers and you English Commandos,” she says. “You know what your wives and girl friends are doing tonight? Do you have any idea what is going on? You are going to be killed in this terrible catastrophe and they are just having the time of their lives.” Real sweet. And a little, maybe, play a part of a song, an American song. And, “Goodnight, we’ll be looking for you.”

Mark: Now, your commanding officers let you listen to that?

Collins: Oh, certainly. I’ll ask you a question. Why wouldn’t they?

Mark: Well, the whole idea of propaganda was that it would deteriorate morale. Apparently it didn’t have that effect?

Collins: It had no effect on it whatsoever. The little bit of effect, I would have to say, none. No effect at all. Because these guys would just laugh and talk and they’d drink their beer, and their coffee. And say, “Old gal, we’ll--you have a thing or two to learn.” It was as simple as all that. There was no doubt in their mind, you know. It had no effect. And I talked to these guys. Maybe you have some of these guys you have interviewed, and I think they would tell you the same thing. It was Tokyo Rose. She had little or no effect. It didn’t pan out at all. But, anyway, but getting back to this. You are asking about Normandy. That would be our baptism. That would be the baptismal jump. Again, as I mentioned before, the compound for our prisoners was empty. And we knew it was coming. We knew it was coming in, sometime in June. But it was empty. And within a week, this was around the first of June, within a week we were moved out to the marshaling area. Everyone load up, get all your equipment. Everybody get cleaned up, get your weaponry in shape. Everything is loaded up in trucks. We go to the marshaling area. And, once you got into the marshaling area, there was no leaving. There was no leaving. And that is where you got briefed on Normandy. We were there about probably four or five days. They couldn’t hold these men too long. And you stayed right in that area. They had slit-trenches built for toilets. And it was just out in an open field. Barbed wire all around it. Coiled wire. Guards patrolling back and forth.

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

And then, the start of D-Day. The sixth of June, 1944. We were all loaded up in trucks and were moved out into, they had airfields all along the coast of England. This one that we went to was probably six or eight miles from where this marshaling area was. And we loaded up in planes. Eighteen or twenty men in a plane. And, I would say, the big, the biggest problem you would have with this is that, primarily, these planes during World War II were used for hauling supplies. These C-47’s, the old work horse. And we never got close to those pilots. They’d be up, or just getting into their seats, the pilot and co-pilot, and it was dark at

night. And even Holland, being a day jump, daytime, you never got to associate with them. Which I would say was one of the bigger problems. If they had stayed with these men, spent time with them, did some minor training with them, ate with them, shook dice and played cards with them, it would have worked out better. They would have had more of a feeling. Not that they didn't, But they would have had more of a feeling toward these men. Because, well, how are you going to put it? See, the way that the division operates today, not just because I served in that division, but the 101st Division is the biggest infantry division in the United States. They figure they have, at full strength, about nineteen to twenty thousand men. Today, all they have is one hundred qualified parachutists. It is all helicopters. They have four different types of helicopters. And if my mind doesn't fail me, I believe they have four hundred and fifty in that area all the time at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Now, these pilots, they eat with these airborne people. They are a part of the airborne. They are a part of the airborne. They know, they feel that they are a part. They work with these guys every day. These guys go up in parachutes. They rappel, these pilots set them down twenty feet off the ground, and they climb down ropes. And they keep in contact with them. Maybe they will get out of the danger, they will back off from that a mile or two, but they are in contact. When these men want them back, they are back, and flying low, and they pick them up, and take them home.

Mark: I see, they are too impersonal, I guess.

Collins: That would be the word. And through no fault of their own. Because, like they were busy. In other words, carrying paratroopers was secondary. You know. It would have to be that way. Nothing against it. See, at one time, after the Normandy invasion, the field commander, Eisenhower, had a meeting with these people, and he spoke to them. And that was the commitment that he made, these are human beings, they are not impersonal cargo. Because a lot of these planes were flying over a hundred miles an hour. The safest height for jumping is not under five hundred feet. And they did a good job. They came in. But can you imagine, you are under fire, and if you got a blast, an anti-aircraft piece beneath the plane, and you could hear the shrapnel against that plane, it would be just like crushed rock on a tin roof. And that concussion would blow that plane out of position, a hundred and fifty feet up at an angle. Or otherwise, it would broke, it exploded above this plane, and it would drop them down. And a lot of these planes came in at three-fifty, four hundred feet, at night, a hundred miles an hour. So a lot of lives were lost there. In fact, one, our company commander, A Company, the plane he was in, and I knew a lot of these guys that were in that plane. Trained with them in the States, because we had trained together. You get very close. Closer than your own brother. And, six months in the States, and another six for over a year. And some of these guys had been together longer than that, a year and a half, two years. So you understand these people. There is an

association there that is hard to equal. But, Eisenhower had mentioned to these men that. And I would say that, under the conditions, they did a tremendous job. You have to pat them on the back.

Mark: The pilots, you mean?

Collins: Yea. They did a good job. But that was probably one sort-coming, was airborne, and the planes.

Mark: So, this drop at D-Day, it was at night?

Collins: It was at night. We loaded the planes, I would say, around eleven o'clock. All the planes were loaded up. All the motors were revved up. And you can just imagine the C-47's, with possibly three or four hundred planes that you could hear. And someone other nearby landing fields, strips, and took off. And it took about an hour to get over. Something that a lot of people don't understand is when you were going over, we flew over. And it was bumpy. It was bad weather. It was bad weather. And they flew low. I would say most of the flight over the Channel was maybe done at less than a thousand feet, seven hundred feet, right along there. You could see the water ripple. You could see the moon as it went behind scudding clouds, you know. A little rain was falling. Gusty winds. You could see those white-caps on the waves. Now, see, where the Germans expected the airborne divisions to land, and the commandos, was up at Calais. There, from Dover, England, it was only about twenty-eight miles. That is where their strength really was. But all along the coast, it was strong, too. But that is where they expected. Now, when the planes came in, say, for instance, this is England. And this is the Cherbourg Peninsula. A lot of people didn't understand this, or know about it. But here you have Guernsey and Jersey Island. They are about ten miles apart. They are right up on the end of Cherbourg. Now, when these planes came in, they, with all these parachute troops, they came in, and at this point, it was about seventy-five miles across the Channel, at this point. They did not come directly in over the coast. They came in in this direction. All these planes came in off the English coast, and around behind Cherbourg. And came in, the country there is about seventy-five miles, no more than that. The width of that peninsula, Cherbourg. Come in in that condition. They come in like this. So, a lot of these guns that the Germans had set up are stationary guns, in cement. And they can't swing them all around, either. They are pointed out toward the Channel. And, I hate to use the word I, I, I, but I mean, as long as it is the first person discussion, those are the things that you are going to be closest to. I can bring in the company, the platoon, at times, the division, as a whole. But I mentioned our company commander. We lost him, and about twenty men. And what happened there. The plane came in, and it was either artillery or the pilot got off sight, and three or four men got jammed in the door. I am talking to a guy that survived this. And before

they broke this jam, it took four or five minutes to either push these guys out, or got them out. A lot of, seventy-five pounds of equipment, you know, throughout. They were already over the Channel about six miles, and they had the green light was still on. And these men were dropped in the Channel, and lost. And there were a lot of cases like that. I would say our jump was perfect. We came in at about six hundred feet, going about ninety miles an hour. Blew a few panels. And the plane that I happened to be in, mostly eighteen, twenty guys. And the little town that I landed near was Foucarville. And at that time, I mean, it is hard to explain or understand, but you know there is men around you. You see them come down in parachutes. But you feel awfully alone. It is quiet. They are shelling all around you. These is distant artillery. The battleships. You could hear the ka-whoom! and these high velocity shells going over and landing in six-eight miles. This town of Foucarville, about five miles off the coast, and we were right in that area. And most of the guys--

But, anyway, I landed in this pasture and there are these little hedgerows in this part of France. And there is not more than two or three acres. And they have been built up for centuries. A mound of dirt, it starts out at the base, about ten feet. Goes up about six or eight feet, and then there is bushes that are a lot like thorn-apple tree bushes. They are wiry and tough, and you can hardly get through them. It is really rough. So, that is what happened to a lot of these gliders. Then, what the Germans had done, they called it spaghetti. This was Rommel's idea. What they did was cut a lot of poles. It would be like they cut these high power poles. And staggered them in these fields. A little field, three by five. And that is where you gliders had an awful lot of problems. They ran in to shear wings off, and busted them up. And these hedgerows. These gliders came in at seventy-five, eighty miles an hour, and slammed into them. And they were just tubular iron over canvas, that was lacquered over a little bit. So, a lot of these. In fact, the first general killed in the operation, Overlord Operation, Normandy, was our artillery commander. He was killed, a broken neck. Rammed right in. The pilot and he were both killed. But, anyway, I landed in this field. And, if you are familiar with cattle, when there is something strange, a strange dog. If you see a pasture, you are driving your car and you get out and you walk along the fence. There isn't too many fence lines any more. They pulled them out because they are cage-laid, like the chickens eggs, and that, and they are kept in compounds now, and fed. And they used to pasture and have fences. But if you got out of a car and went under a fence, these cattle, curiosity brings them over, and they are checking you out. I landed in this field, pretty much in the center of this field. And I can remember this just like yesterday. You never forget this. Like I say, you feel all blessed alone. And I landed, and there was five cows. I am up on the count. There was five of them. Cows grazing in this field. Of course, there were guys dropping all over. I landed right in the center, here. And these five cows came over. And with all this confusion up in the air. It is like a Fourth of July, plus. All this confusion.

You can hear mortars, machine guns, sporadic, all over. But still you feel alone. And I never was. I suppose it is fear. You got to admit there is fear there. I never had such a dry throat in my life. I often think of that poem, Gunga Din. "It was crawling, and it stunk, but all the drinks I drunk, I am most grateful for that one from Gunga Din." It was crawling and it stunk. I know I had my canteen cleaned up in no time. Didn't have much time. But, when I landed, when you came down, you had, I was carrying an M-1 rifle. You carried this rifle. It is broke down. You carry it in a boot, and it is strapped under your harness. And they had it down, and it comes like this. It is cross-ways, up on your shoulder, and the butt of it is down here. It rides about this, on your thigh. When I landed, coming down, I landed that hard that it hit me in the knee. The butt of that rifle in this bag, and I was sure my knee was broke. I was positive it was really a bad contusion. I was sure it was broke. So, I laid there. It might have been, it may sound like it, or it felt like it was maybe three minutes, but I'll bet you it wasn't twenty seconds, because I stripped off the parachute, and I got out the knife. And the back of your harness, there was three or four of these streamers hanging down. Cut those off. Stuck the knife back in its sack. And put my rifle together. And this couldn't have taken longer than thirty seconds, or a minute, at the most. Now, in this field where I landed, up in this corner, it was like a large hummock, like a large ant hill. Because there the water table was low, right along the coast. And then there was a cemetery up there. And it must have covered it, possibly, in our way of speaking, acres, about three or four acres. Just like a giant anthill. And these people were buried there for centuries, no doubt. And trees plotted in all over there. And these Germans, you have to remember that they were here for three or four years in this area. They knew this country like a book. All these areas were zeroed in to a T. They had snipers up in the trees. They had tunnels all the way in and around these graves, tunnels. Different openings. And in the back, there was a, I remember this, there was a deep ditch in the back of it. I landed it in these fields. The Germans had a machine gun set up here. And their machine guns, ours go dat-dat-dat. Dat-dat-dat. Theirs go brrrrp! Brrrrp! They fire faster. In fact, theirs fire so fast that when one shell is being ejected, it will nip the head of the fired shell. They were coming that close. They'd fire short bursts, but they were getting a lot of lead going in that direction. And they had this field zeroes in at about two feet high. And these two machine guns. And they used tracers. They were every color of the rainbow. Red, white, blue, you name it. And you could see, they had it completely covered, back and forth, and they were spraying it like this, back and forth. These cows were around me. They would come over and they were sniffing around, snorting around. And I could still hear them. You could hear them bellow when they got hit. They were getting hit in the stomach, right across the stomach. That high. They'd go brrrp! and you could see them drop on their knees and roll over. And perfect silence, it was all over, just like that. So, and about the same time, after they had fired, I was crawling out, like, to an area of this field away from the Germans, which you would expect. Which would be only natural. And I am

crawling over to the corner here, and I just got over there, and about this time they sent up a flare. And it illuminated that whole field, even the carcasses of those cattle laying there. Only about this high, you know, when you are sideways. They'd stretch out there for thirty, forty feet. Can you imagine a man standing up there. You couldn't miss him. I probably went out of the that field, never so alone in all my life. You know, a little position. But, nothing was done there. But I noticed, I got into the hedgerow, rolled back in there. And there were six of them, and they were speaking German, and they were not too quiet, either. They came over, checking the area out. I suppose they thought they had shot a para, you know, killed an airborne. And with those bodies, and so, they weren't sure just what it was. And they kind of checked the area, and they were only there, and then they went back to their position.

Mark: Now, once you landed, what were your objectives? What were you told as a member of this unit?

Collins: When we were in the marshaling area, they had sand boxes, and you had everything there. You know. Our objective, now, this is just our company, our objective, or I should say the regiment, three companies. Three companies. That is about six hundred, maybe seven hundred men, three companies. Was to open up two causeways, because there was Utah, Omaha, the Americans had. Those there their beachheads, and the English were Gold, Juno, and Sword. They came in on Gold, Juno, and Sword, there just below it. And ours was to open two causeways. Our regiment. And then the 501 had, there was four causeways. We had one - two, and they had three - four. **[About a ten second pause in the tape.]** Great guy. He was, I mean, they were both coming together, about ten feet apart. I gave the crossword, he gave the crossword, he gave the return call, whatever it is. Say it is Babe Ruth. Babe - Ruth you better come back with it fast. There was no action there, so he and I crawled up into this town of Foucarville, that we landed near. He was from B Company. So you could see the guys were spread around. And another thing I have to remember, when you jump out of an airplane, and you are traveling nineteen miles an hour, or ninety miles an hour, and it takes say, fifteen or twenty seconds for eighteen or twenty men to get out of a plane, going that speed, you are really getting spread out. You might be spread three city blocks. And in times like those, a lot of people, well, what is a mile or two? Or twenty or thirty miles? But here you are speaking of yards. We made fifty yards. But we got back together and I got back with him, and grabbed the other guys came in around this village, and they had, we had these crickets, too, we'd use. So it sounded like there was crickets all over. And then toward the last, we weren't using passwords any more. Sun started to come up. It was getting daylight. Day was breaking. But that's where this friend of mine was killed up there. Sent him out as a scout and he got hit. Two Germans were in, must have been a machine gun nest. And he thought they were going to surrender. They came out with their hands up. And one

guy had a potato masher. Threw it. Landed in the hole and killed him. So we took off his helmet, put it on his rifle, put the bayonet on it, stuck it in the ground, and somebody closed his eyes. So he was really the first casualty that I had seen. But then there would be many more after that. But, I was, I didn't think it would take an hour. Oh, we can do this in forty-five minutes. Then there was a lot of, I wouldn't say any long battles. What it amounted to was skirmishes. Violent skirmishes. Which might only last five, ten minutes, and the party was over. And you got, you got gray in that length of time.

Mark: I was going to ask, once you dropped in and achieved your objective, as an airborne soldier, did you then stay on the ground? There was fighting all through the hedgerows. Or did you sort of form up for the next--

Collins: I am kind of glad that you asked that question. Because, primarily, the understanding I've always had, and as you read about it, training manuals, and so on and so forth, and books written by different people. What is the mission of the airborne? The mission of the airborne, it's, they throw them on top of the fight. You are thrown into the fire. And if you don't get replenished, say you are cut off, or something, as you were at Bastogne, if you don't get replenished within three days, seventy-two hours, I mean you are out of luck. You got to have planes coming in. You got to be resupplied. And airborne outfits, the understanding primarily was that they would go in, and hit a spot, maybe blow a bridge, secure the land, and set up signals for other people to come in, and be posted and hold the area, till other forces came in. Maybe three or five days. It never did work out that way. Because, the primarily reason, undoubtedly, would be was that these were good fighting soldiers who didn't much give a damn. I never saw a man cut and run. And they would go the limit. And they would keep them there. We were in Normandy. We were in there, I believe we went in the 6th of June, and it was about the 23rd of July before they were relieved. The 17th of September, I mean, just figure this out. The 17th of September they went in to Holland. That was a day-time jump. They didn't get out until about the 23rd of November. They kept them there. So, and the same at Bastogne. We went in there. We were trucked in there. There was no jumping because planes couldn't fly. The planes were grounded. We were trucked into Bastogne. And the place that we got off at was Champs. It was about three miles from Bastogne. And nobody really knew where they were at at the time. I mean, it was confusing. Utter confusion. In fact, one position we had with our machine gun platoon there, we probably went a complete circuit of the compass on that one. Three hundred and sixty degrees. Cause they didn't know where. Set your gun up here, set your gun. Move over maybe fifty feet, hundred feet, over here. Dig in, dig in. And it was hard to dig in because it was frozen ground, you know. It was rough. But, mentioning this back at Normandy, there was sporadic fighting. And I just don't want to go into detail on all of this. But I was hit and wounded there. And this happened at, we had a

number of skirmishes through these, and it was rough going through these hedgerows. But we got orders bright and early one morning we were going, we were going to Ste. Come du Mont, French town. Ste. Come du Mont. Ste. Come du Mont was here, Carentan was here. The town of Carentan. The Germans had flooded the area. There was no tank support. We had no aerial support for this thing. But these guys, and these ditches were maybe at the most five or six feet deep, with water in most of them. And it was about two miles from Ste. Come du Mont to Carentan. And that is where I got hit. Right on the outskirts of Carentan. It was a bloody affair. Twice they called a truce. The Germans called a truce to take their, they were right at the edge of this town. And the night before they had dropped airborne soldiers in there and some special forces. And they were going to hold it at all costs. And, of course, as I mentioned before, they were in that area. The Germans were in that area for the best part of four years. And they had maps, and they knew where all the bridges were. The crossroads. Where the traffic would be. Knew where the defilades would be, where the troops would take cover. Which made it doubly tough.

Mark: And so you were out of action for how long?

Collins: Well, I was wounded there. A shell came over, it was, I'll bring this up right now before I forget it, because this is just off the cuff. But the most feared weapon, you talk to any of these guys, all these years, fifty years talking to these men, what weapon did you most fear? It had to be the German 88. That artillery piece. Because they would use it on infantry. If they saw three men dive out of a trench and they were about a hundred yards away, they would lay that thing down and fire on it repeatedly, to get those three men. And they could pull it, the horses that they used. Something else that is surprising. The Germans, even at the height of their blitzkrieg, fifty percent of their vehicles were moved by horses. These cavalry horses. They were a lot like our quarter-horses. About a thousand, eleven, twelve hundred pounds. And they were all guts, tough.

Mark: I have just gone one last thing about combat, and then perhaps we can talk about the prisoner experience. You sure had a lot. I try to ask veterans these questions. What is it about combat, in your view, that most people don't seem to really understand or appreciate? You watch a war movie and veterans, and some people, get upset. What is it that is not conveyed by this type of thing, or what can't be conveyed? Like some will say, the noise. You can't duplicate that in a movie. You can't understand that unless you have been there. The adrenalin--in your own personal experience.

Collins: Well, in the first place, what can be more realistic than the real thing? Regardless of how advanced movie making becomes, they cannot, they can come fairly close but, and then the viewers are in solid comfort. You are having a beer and a bag of

popcorn, a dish of popcorn. The situation is different. Another question a lot of them is asked is the question of what is your feeling toward the war? And I always mention this. What does the American soldier really expect when he is committed to combat? And, but most of these guys go along with this. And they put it this way. They say, our wants in training, in bivouac, is always been basic and few. Give us an occasional dry pair of socks. Give us a hot meal. Give us good weaponry. Give us men we can depend on. Give us air support. We give them support. And I think that is about the answer.

Mark: I know it is starting to get late. We can move up to the prisoners pretty soon, here, if you would like.

Collins: Well, I was wounded in Normandy. Part of this wall broke out. There was a building, a roofless building, this mortared stone. And I got hit in the elbow, carrying a rifle through this ditch. A stone fell, broke the elbow. And I had shrapnel in the left shoulder and neck. And plus this knee. You imagine, I had never went in on sick call with this knee, and I had an infection. And you are moving from Ste. Come du Mont into Carrenten, which is the best part of two miles on your hands and knees. And we got right to the outskirts of Carrenten and it took at least an hour and a half crawling. You were crawling two miles. And the closer you get, the more men are laying in the ditch. And, you don't leave them in the ditch. You roll them out. Up on the side of the highway, more. Because if they stayed in the ditch, and these shells are coming over. There was a macadam, a blacktop highway, and it was built up high. The highway was maybe, oh, five feet higher, and we were down in the ditch. And you could see those sparks hit. And that was almost perpetual, those sparks. Just like a grindstone. Machine guns. The Germans had those things zeroed in. Your only approach was the ditches. So the men that got up there had a rough time, and we were just at the outskirts. So, I got back, and was loaded up. Got treated. Put sulfa on the knee and the shoulder. And fortunately, crawling back that far, it wasn't a compound fracture, where the bone came out, you know. But it was bleeding and sore. In the neck. Well, I spend about three weeks in the hospital, and then rejoined the outfit.

Mark: This was in France, or in England?

Collins: What?

Mark: This was in France, or in England?

Collins: No, we went back, we were sent back to Foliad. Went back to Chilton Foliad. And, of course, we got back there, and almost every day there was almost one, two, or three, or maybe more, of these guys coming back. They were being released from the hospital. Ambulance would bring them over. "Well, where do

you want to go?” “Well, take me back to my area,” you know. And some were still on crutches. I had my arm in a sling. Another guy had an eye bandaged up. Ear, face. So, there was a lot of walking wounded around there. And then we got back there about maybe the 15th of July, or thereabouts. And then the division came back about the 23rd of July. What was left of the division. And, then of course, 17th of September was the invasion of Holland, Market Garden. And I had the cast taken off about two weeks before, so we were ready to go. And most of these guys are walking on crutches, and even if they limped a little bit. Had a broken ankle, or a few broken ribs, they were pretty well healed and ready to go. Yea. these guys, I mean, their general feeling is, give us statesmen, and if it is a declared war, and it is worth fighting for, if all else fails, if diplomacy and all else fails, short of a war. And if we have to have a war, let's go in and win it. If that is necessary. Of course, that is one thing about World War II. You have to remember that every continent on the planet was involved in one way or another. And we remember--I remember sitting cross legged before Attwater Kemp and hearing Hitler speak to a thunderous roar, “We shall build a regime, a regime that shall survive a thousand years.” It lasted twelve. If you had an opportunity to go through some of these concentration camps, you would fight to avoid that.

Mark: It was in the Bulge that you were captured?

Collins: Captured during the Bulge, yea.

Mark: Why don't you tell me.

Collins: I got through. We had seventy-three days in Normandy. Got through, I mean, Holland, Operation Overlord. And we got through that okay. I can go through that in a hurry. 101st dropped here. We dropped at St. Odenrode. The 82nd dropped at Viego. And the English were dropped at Arnheim. And what happened there. We were up here. We would be Dempsey's Second Army. British Army. But the Germans knew that thing. They converged on this area at the same time. We flew over anti-aircraft guns. We could see our planes, our guys going down. You could count them as we were going in there. High noon. High noon jump, that was. And can you just imagine, if your were looking out either side through these windows, two or three hundred planes, pulling gliders. Fighter planes, bombers. Oh, man. They said, when this German general, he was their parachute general, gee, I forget. Stewart, or something. He happened to be in the area at the time and he looked out the door, and he saw these planes coming. And he says, “I would give my right arm to have those men and that equipment.” You can just imagine, because for him, the war was just about over. Give his right arm. Well, same case, they found this on one of Rommel's aides, this Lang. That was just prior to D-Day, and he was making an inspection, and this aide was killed. And going through his personal belongings, they found this note that Rommel had given him,

because he was going to his wife's birthday, or something. He was going out of the area because they weren't expecting the invasion at that time. The weather was bad. And he had put it this way. He said, "For the Allies, as well as for the Germans, this shall be the longest day." And it was a long day. See, our losses, our airborne losses, the English, because they had made that Dieppe raid, raid on Dieppe in late '41 or early '42, and had taken a tremendous beating there. And they said, airborne is a must. It is required, but your losses will be 85 percent. And I think the 82nd ran pretty much the same. It was about 40 percent. But, then, talk about Bastogne. I thought this would be all over. What question do you have there?

Mark: If you would describe what happened, the circumstances when you were captured, and how you were treated.

Collins: Well, like I said, we were trucked in. It was about a hundred miles truck. We got the notice the night before, I would say, about ten o'clock. We got the notice. See, we had gotten back to, oh, and then, instead of going back to Chilton Foliad, after Holland, we were sent to France. And, gee, I just can't think of the name of that camp, either. Marmalon, it was called. Fort Marmalon. What it was was a cavalry training post for the French. This was in France. And they always kept the two divisions apart, because there was always a lot of, well, hype between the two of us. You can imagine they kept them at Rheims, about twenty miles apart. Good idea. And, anyway, we got back. That is where we were billeted at the time when we were called into Bastogne. But in this, charge of quarters came through and this was about ten at night. "Draw all your equipment. The Germans have attacked. They are pushing up through the Belgian area." That is about all they got. "Get ready, you'll be out of here in the morning." And, can you imagine, now, I would say that most of our guys that had been wounded that would come back, were back to the outfit. But they were giving so many passes into small French towns, you know. And I really never heard just how many were there, but we know that a lot of us were short. Our company alone probably went in with, oh, probably, at eighty-five percent of full strength. And the division was pretty much that way. And the 82nd was in about the same shape. Because some of these guys were on pass. Well, they just grabbed and went. Then they joined us later after Bastogne held. And they came in to fight another day.

Mark: So you were trucked up this time?

Collins: Yea. Into Bastogne. Yea.

Mark: As airborne troopers, did you feel--

Collins: No, but all you had to do was look at that sky overhang and it was an umbrella.

And all visibility, that foggy, foggy weather. Well, they didn't chance it, because it would have been a mess at that time. But it worked out real good. We went up like regular infantry the way you should. And I would say, early the next morning, we got up about six o'clock, five-thirty. A lot of guys got up before, get everything bagged, get everything you need. Draw fresh equipment, clothing. Warm clothing, it is going to be cold. And by ten o'clock, we got, we got this call at ten in the evening, ten p. m., ten a. m., Marmalon was empty. These guys, the trucks were loaded up and they were on the road. They was taking a chance, I suppose, but I suppose they thought if we are grounded, so are they. Their air force. There was no problems at all. Got in, set up. And then I was captured on a patrol. We were, got in there the morning of the 18th, and set up. And then, at Champs, the Germans were really moving in there. They were coming in with power. We were pretty well cut off. It was rough. And we went on this, well, I got it here in this book. I think it is, the night of the 23rd. It was a six man patrol. There was a lieutenant in charge. Lieutenant Constant. Myself. Judson, another non-com, Goodyear, a non-com, and two replacements. Foote and Bowen, the guys' names. They were replacements that had come up. Didn't know the men. Came in after Normandy.

Mark: You were all captured and--

Collins: On this patrol. What we did. Our mission was to contact the Germans if possible. Bring back somebody for interrogation. It was next to impossible. And see if you can kind of get some idea where their strength is. Or, like a listening post. Listen, listen, listen, you know. And so we went into this town of Gibrey, it was about a quarter of a mile from there. And we are not going to talk about the weather, because it was cold and nasty. Overhang, and it was penetrating, that frost. Right around zero at times, blowing snow. Open fields, a foot, foot and a half of loose snow. In fact, that was supposed to be, had been, the coldest winter that Europe had experienced during this century. Since 1900. The winter of '44. It was brutal. And from Arette, we had tone to Gibrey, and at Gibrey, the Germans opened up on us. We could hear tanks running. They were quietly running, idling. And your visibility wasn't much over two fifty, three hundred yards, less than a thousand yards at best. Eight hundred, probably more like it. That is about across one city block. And they opened up with machine guns. We backed off. What had happened there, at this time of night, we had left about, must have went on this patrol at about ten o'clock. And then went through this outpost where this guy, I spent time with, this Olin Howard. And he was on this outpost, with four men, and then that outpost was overrun later. But by the time we were coming back, it was about two in the morning. We were kind of probing the area. And we can't get back because this wood is, this area is heavily forested. And you have to say, instead of hills, it is small mountains. Mountainous. It is nasty country. And so, what we did the first night is laid out under, but we did as daylight came, we

couldn't get back. We climbed, we crawled in under these trees, the boughs of these evergreens. And stayed there all day. Once in a while, a guy would come out just to stamp your feet and warm up. And then burrow in under these trees. We did that all day long, that first day. And the next night, took off again. We were trying to get back to our own lines. Nothing doing. The Germans were pretty well fortified around Bastogne. We were just kind of probing. Tanks, tanks all over. Troops, you can hear them. Horses are whinnying. Men are yelling. Shelling, shelling. So, this other town, this was about two miles from where we had started out, that was Hooflies. And we came into the area of Hooflies. We walked up both sides of the town and it was a long town, but few buildings. They are scattered. And one of our fellows, coming back, he had broke through the ice and he was wet to the hips. And it was perfectly silent. This town was silent. So, then, we said, "Gee, we got to do something. What are we going to do?" He came up with the idea. He said, "Leave me. I'll take my chances." So, we took off his pants, his wet socks, shoes, wrang them out. We'll take a chance. We'll go up into these houses. One on the furthestmost sides, we had gone up both sides. Went up and then returned, and took this house on the outskirts of this town. And pushed open the door. It is dark. This is about eight o'clock at night. And, as we opened the door, fortunately there were no Germans. I don't know what would have happened in that situation. But, there was a woman sitting on the bed, on her bed. Only one room house, a little house. And she has got a little fire going in a stove. We could smell the smoke from outside. We knew there was somebody, an individual in there. She was sitting on her bed, reading a Bible. A woman, probably up in her seventies, eighties, reading a Bible. And, I suppose, with Germans coming and going repeatedly, and Americans in and out of the area, she never looked up from that Bible. She is reading this Bible and she, maybe, glanced over a little bit, but no outcry, nothing. She stayed on the bed. So we came in. In the meantime, we fired up the stove. She had a little wood brought in there. And there was some alongside the house. We stripped this guy.

[End of Side B of Tape 1.]

But his feet were frozen too numb. And we knew we had a problem. So, we say, gee, the best thing, we goes into her cupboard, and she's only got a small little cupboard, a few bowls of jelly, and something that looked like meat and potatoes. Half a loaf of bread. So we each cut off a thin slice, and left her about a quarter of a loaf. And another place, before we had gotten there, we had gotten out, it was just a little barn on the outside. I had forgot about that. We had taken no lunch along. This was the third day. We had taken no lunch along. But most of these homes were built out in the place, you would just see a house and a barn together, it was a combination house and barn. And there were three cows in this barn. We goes into this barn, and there were three cows in this barn. The living quarters were up on the other end. A little pile of hay there, and they had a few piles of hay

outside. And we pulled a helmet, just kept the helmet liner on and took off the helmet, and milked one of these cows. And filled it about three-quarters full. Full of milk, and then passed the helmet around. That kind of helped us. That was the last we had eaten till we got here and got some of this bread. Up at Hooflies. But, he says, I think I can make it. We got his clothes back on, finally got him suited up. And about this time it was breaking day, and a couple of the guys, a couple of us had mentioned the same thing. We better get back in the woods and make another try at it. Because what we did is laid two nights in the woods, two days in the woods, and then moved at night. We couldn't move during the day. And about that time, one of the guys came up. We had him out as a sentry at the window. He says, "I think we are going to have a problem." "What is the problem?" "There is Germans up on the hill, and they got two machine guns zeroed in on this house." So, where do you go from there? So, you would think, we might have run out the door screaming, but we were very level headed. See, another case like this, there had been this woman, when we milked, this helmet, we milked this, and about this time we heard the door open. And we dove in the hay. We were laying in this pile of hay behind these cows, see. With our helmet of milk, see. This woman comes down. She didn't get on this cow that we had milked. She got on another one and she starts to milk. I often mention this to my wife. Can you imagine this? Here she is, she is milking in this pail, and all at once, here comes six guys piling out of this straw with weapons, you know. She never looked up once. Undoubtedly, they were so used to that, to be moved out, moved back in, retrograde movement, we moved back, we're pushed, we're moving forward. These different troops coming and going, they just took it for granted. She milked her cow and got up and set her stool down and went back in the house. See, he had followed her back in the house, too, then. And, of course, all the young people had been taken care of. They were out of there. They were out of there. There was children. I would say one young woman with a baby, about a year or two old. Baby was sitting on her lap. Then this elderly man, and this woman that did the milking. And that was about it. No children in between there. Eighteen, twenty, early thirties, none of that. But, when we came in there, the older man came up to us and he goes like this. He goes like this. He goes like that. He pointed to the door, the outside door on the other side. So one of the fellows walked to the door and opened the door up, and the Germans had been in that area. Must have been recently. And they had thumb-tacked a sign up on there, and of course, it was in German. But what it must have meant, that if you harbor anybody, it is death. So, we left there early. But, anyway, we were taken over there, and taken prisoner. Moved back. What are you going to do? But we did manage to drop our ammunition. We threw it out a back window, away from these machine guns. Of course, in the soft snow, it went. And what surprised me, and hand grenades. Most of the guys carried two, four hand grenades. And probably forty, fifty rounds of ammunition. But we got rid of most of that. Threw it through this open window. In the snow. And the Germans never questioned us. Not this group, anyway. And they took it up. No

interrogation. And I imagine it was a rough point, because the Allies must have been right in this area, well, they were, you know. And three or four guards took us, and we went to the next, the town we went to was Geraldstein. And that was a march of about fifteen, twenty miles. And we were really getting into well, Luxembourg area, then.

Mark: I imagine by this time you are meeting with other captured Allies?

Collins: Yea, it was, they dumped us off. This was at Prum. Prum was the name of the town. I got it here on this map. And that was more or less a collecting point. These prisoners were coming in, six or eight coming in, twenty-five, thirty prisoners. And after they got about two hundred, they would take these men off. But, what can you say about it. There cannot be, to clip it short, there cannot be as a prisoner war, there can not be a more devastating feeling than being taken prisoner of war. I mean, I really can't say that I ever saw anybody in shock, or anybody get carried away, or in that case. But, like in this case, the Germans knocked on the door. We opened the door. We walked out, handed them our weapons. I thought you would expect they would check them for ammunition. But they didn't. No pistol belts, nothing. Marched us in. No interrogation. And then there was three of them that took us down. I would say it was about twenty miles from there. To Prum. And then Geraldstein, and that was more or less a collecting point, too. Because around the latter part of January, that was when the Allies were starting to push the Germans back. So they would be coming back through this area. See, they wanted these prisoners of war out of there.

Mark: Right, and that is one of the questions I have. You were captured late in the war and for just a few months. So, in terms of the regular Stalag life in camp, sort of thing, you didn't really have that too much. You were being moved around very often and you didn't have a chance to get in one camp for too long.

Collins: No, see, we were in Geraldstein, we were in there for I would say, three weeks or a month. And then we went to Ten C, and then to 12 A. I was really in three different prison camps. Ten C and 12 A. But, at Geraldstein, if we were there, oh, maybe a month. But, see, by that time, see, this would been right around Christmas time. We must have went in there. I had this at home and I should have brought it along. But this had to be getting close to the first of January. By the 24th of January, the Germans were back where they had come from. Where they had started their drive. Because that push through there, the Bulge, was about forty miles wide and about sixty feet long, or I mean sixty miles, before they were finally driven back. What they were trying to do was kind of cut in there between the English and the Americans and hoping there would be a rift there, and get a conditional surrender. Rather than unconditional surrender, which they were promised and got, and had coming.

Mark: So, when it came to labor details, and that sort of thing, did you participate in those sort of things at all?

Collins: I did. Quite a few of the guys did. One of the main reasons why most of these guys, I would say, three-fourths of them, would go on a work detail. They would more or less pick you out, too. You weren't volunteered. You, you, you and you. It was pretty much that. They were short. But, of course, some of these guys were carrying wounds. They had been wounded, in bad shape, too, see. And they weren't getting medical care. In fact, at Geraldstein, this one guy, and his name, oddly enough, happened to be Eisenhower. And I just read this letter that I got from this guy the other day, he was with the 506th. He was at Geraldstein, and he mentioned the same name, this Eisenhower. Where he shot this guy. This German points, you, you, you. And, at Geraldstein, what they had for beds there, this was a tool factory, I would imagine. It was a warehouse. And these were like bin boxes for parts. And they were four high. And they weren't much higher than this room, right here. So you didn't have much room. Well, you get four beds in there. Four bins. And they were uncomfortable. There was no blankets, no mattresses, no straw, nothing to put in them. They were about a foot and a half wide, and about four feet long. So you were more or less in a crouch or a bend all the time, with your feet hanging out. So, it wasn't too comfortable. And the first thing they gave us was that gave each man a blanket. And if you didn't happen to have a mess kit or something, they gave it to you. So you had a mess kit. Maybe you didn't have all the utensils. You had a fork, knife, or spoon. A mess kit and your canteen, and canteen cup. That was the stuff you had. The equipment that you had. But they had shot this fellow, shot him right through the neck. He bled to death during the night because he wouldn't come out on a work detail. So, it was the only case where I saw a man actually shot. But pummeled, hit in the back with a rifle butt, hit him on the head. Where it hurt most, knees, hips. Get, get going, you know. But, the worst time, mentioning this at Geraldstein, we got in there. Just one example. They were going to make soup for us that night. We had marched about twenty-five, thirty miles. Nothing to eat all day. They were making soup. And I imagine what had happened, the Allies had strafed horses that were pulling probably the captured American truck, or one of their own vehicles, but out of petrol, out of fuel. They had a team of these battery horses hooked on the bumper, chained on. And the teamster was on the hood of this, driving. They used it for supplies and troops, carrying them. And I suppose what had happened, one or two of these cavalry horses got shot. You can imagine, the Air Force came down and, because around that time, around Christmas, I mean, after we were, the division was at Bastogne, the day before Christmas when it started to clear, I mean, they really pounded the Germans, the Air Force. The Allied Air Force. But, they were making the soup and I suppose this horse had just been killed, so they dragged him in, skinned him, and cut him up. And, of course, there was shrapnel in that

animal, in that body, you know. And they cut it up in cubes. And horsemeat, if you never saw it, is blood red, it is bright red, like that book up on the shelf there. Red, red book. And they cubed it up in maybe half inch, quarter inch cubes. But we didn't see any of that. What we got was like the tallow off the brisket, the gristle, pretty much gristle off the bones. And that was put in hot water and heated up with rutabagas. And fed to you. But I suppose some of those slivers of the artillery shells got into that bowl. And they fed us that night. This friend and I were eating. They gave us a bowl of soup. Oh, it was watered down terrible, no seasoning, no salt here. Water with a little gristle in it. All at once, just like chalk on a blackboard, you get that feeling. It is just like it goes right through you, a piece of metal. The damned steel from those bullets. Ooh! Spit them out and go on eating. Oh, it was tough.

Mark: I imagine you lost some weight?

Collins: Yea. Between this friend and I, he weighed about a hundred and sixty pounds and I weighed about a hundred and fifty-five, pretty much the same weight. We both lost under about fifty pounds. Down to right at a hundred pounds. Yea.

Mark: In a relatively short time.

Collins: Right. And that had been, we were captured Christmas morning, and this would be the 28th of April when we were liberated. So that was about a hundred and twenty-six days. So you were almost losing half a pound a day. But it couldn't be any other way. Some of these men were in worse shape. But I would say that the worst treatment we got, I mean, I would say getting into the last camp, they kept all the different nationalities in compartments, you know. Compounds, they called them. So you had the French in one, British in another one, American in another one. And there was probably twelve, fifteen thousand men in this 12 A, this last camp. They had a Russian camp. Russian was right along side of ours. And I can remember this. Every morning, on the clock, you have to remember that these Russians undoubtedly never had any shots, and they got worse treatment than we were getting. Because most of these guards knew, because you had SS troops, in most cases, who were the top leaders. They were running this camp. They weren't doing the dirty work. They were spic and span, boots polished, and you'd see them with a crop, a riding whip, you know. Checking out once in a while. They'd never go into a building because these men were crawling with lice and fleas, and dirty. You know. There was always a possibility of some damned disease. So they avoided that, but you would see them strut around occasionally. Just come out and make a call, and get back in a car and leave. With six or eight other guys. And in most of these camps, and especially your concentration camps, it was the SS troops that were running it. These guys would shoot their mother for no reason at all. If they were told to shoot her, they would shoot her. Simple as all that. And

then the next people in line were guards that they got out of penitentiaries, lifers. They were probably in there for life. And out of mental institutions. As long as they could probably read sign language, a little bit. But these were guys were probably held for murder cases, and they were the guys that pummeled the political prisoners, and those people. They were the ones that did the dirty work. And then you also had most of the, by and large, most of the men that we had was young Germans, guards that we saw. They had these top SS troops, and maybe a few of these rougher guys, but most of them were guys that had come off the Russian front. They were old soldiers. They were old men. They were beaten men at forty-five or fifty years of age, you know. And most of them looked like they were up in their sixties, seventies. They were old men. A lot of them had a patch on their eye. Walked with a limp. And they still had something to do, it was to guard prisoners of war. But, these Russians, every morning, as regular as the clock, I can remember that very well. We would be out there at seven-thirty, eight o'clock in the morning, walking around trying to get a little exercise. These Germans would come out, I mean, these Russians would come out with a high wheeled cart. Two would be in between the fills for a single horse, each one on a side with a fill. Two or three of them pushing it. And they'd probably have twelve, fifteen bodies. It was regular as the clock, every morning, for those two or three weeks we were there. But the Germans had taken a beating up in Stalingrad and Leningrad. The winter up there. And they were really rough on the Russians. And another thing, they didn't have their shots. You know. We had our tetanus shots, and diphtheria. They were a lot of that, with these. And these blankets were, you can't imagine. You'd run them off in your hand and you would throw them off in your hand. Lice and fleas. And even after four months, you'd, the loaded us up and took us back to Brussels. And I bet you, for the two weeks we were there, we'd shower at least three times a day. We were completely, all our hair was cut off. And you were de-loused. And take three showers every day. And using disinfectant. And it was just like a tattoo. The dirt that built into your arm. We had no chances to take a bath, at all. Cut your hair, somebody would have a butcher knife. You might be lucky, somebody would have a comb to comb your hair a little bit. It was anything to break your spirit, you know. And filth, living conditions deplorable. But the worst time that I had, and this Olin Howard with me, we had, and this was after we moved to, we were up at Koblenz, we marched about thirty or, at least, I would say thirty or thirty-five miles, we marched. And there they kept us in a, it was a railway station. And we slept on the floors in there. And they come up with a train, and they loaded us up in these small box cars. Eighty men to a box car. Can you imagine that situation? Like I say, they are about two-thirds the size of our box cars, with a coal fired engine. And at least ten, so there was about eight hundred men. I don't know how many more. We were in this group, anyway. Eighty men got into this box car, eighty men they loaded up. They slammed the door on it, and we started to move out. The distance we moved in that box car, in that train, the train set-up, was about, I would say,

sixty miles to this area near Tarmstedt, the last camp we were in when we were liberated. And I don't know if they did it for sheer punishment, or what happened, but in a number of cases, I can see what happened. We were going through these areas, and a lot of this, this is very mountainous, we were going through these tunnels on this train. And these men are in here, and the door is locked on the box car, and all they had was windows, like, say this room is the box car, a window up in this corner, kitty-corner from each other, and a window up in that corner, with bars on it. About eight inches high and about a foot and a half long. On either side with about six bars across it. And these men are in here, and then kitty-corner from where these windows were, were cans. I would say, like fifty gallon cans. Those were the toilets that you used to urinate and defecate in. And we were on there five days, and five nights, and never got off. We never got off. All these men had dysentery. They were full of lice. It is hard to explain it. But it is something that you will never forget. And they never emptied those cans during that length of time. And I would say within two days those cans were running over. And you are trying to make yourself comfortable. You are jammed in there. Some guy gets, stands up, and you are getting stiff and you are hungry. You are starving to death. He might step over a guy. And he yells and raises hell, swears at him. Or you are sitting. Usually the position you take up is like this, you sit down, and you take this position. You pull your legs up under you, and you sit there for hours on end. Can you imagine that? And with this defecate and urine in these cans running over, it is running down the floor of this box car, and naturally you are going to get up. You got your hands on, and you know you are not going to wash. You have no idea how long you are going to be there. And, so it get tough. It gets real tough. But I remember one night we were on this box car. And they stopped in this tunnel. And we could hear bombing and strafing outside. You could see the opening. We were coming near the opening. But they couldn't venture out. This train couldn't. Because they had no Red Cross markers on these trains, on the roof. And they probably would have been strafed. A lot of these prisoners of war who were picked up in Europe were strafed in box cars going to different camps. As the Allies were pushing up, the prisoners are being moved back. And that was the final consequence of that set-up. But, you can just imagine, you move back in this tunnel, and this is a coal fired engine. In these tunnels. And, of course, you are getting a draft through there, you know. Can't you imagine that arstrie smell, that coal dust, that fleck dust from coal is coming through those windows, and I mean, it is just like a rasp in your throat. And then that dirt, and then your hands are dirty, and you are wiping your face with this mess on the floor. And your handkerchief is long gone. So you start on your sweater, and your underwear, wiping your face. So it is complete filth. Anything to break the spirit. You know. And talking to these guys over the years, and you ask them, "Well, what did you think of the Germans, and the Japanese?" And I would say that the answer you'd get, most of the answers were this. "The Germans were cruel and brutal. But the Japanese, in turn, were cunning and diabolic." Because, when it comes to human

torture, no place on earth has it down to a finesse like the eastern mind. And you might ask me, and I asked some of these men, “Well, how do you feel about them?” Instead of saying, the German people, because I am half German myself, but “How do you feel about the Nazi’s, the Germans at that time, and the Japanese?” And, as Ernie Pyle once said, that news correspondence, Ernie Pyle, he said, “There are no atheists in the fox holes.” There were, if that be true, there were fewer in prisoner of war camps. Most of these guys had a pocket Bible, and they relied on it. I mentioned, in one of these meetings I was at, our groups and I had to give a short talk, and they asked this question. “What kept you going during combat? What kept you going?” And I remember that shortly after World War II, this would be probably, along say the winter or early spring of ‘45, or early ‘46, the Chicago Tribune ran a full page notice in the paper. And the question was, it was directed to combat veterans, “What kept you going through the stress of combat?” And there was four categories. “Name them in order of importance to you. One, two, three, four.” Now what do you think was the top one? In your own estimation? What would be number one? What kept you going?

Mark: Faith?

Collins: You hit it right on the head. It would be a leader, faith. They had over nine thousand, almost ten thousand answers. Faith. What was number two? Love of country, and my home. Number three. Pride in my organization. And the last one, I doubt if you would guess it.

Mark: No.

Collins: Humor.

Mark: I wouldn’t have guessed that.

Collins: Somewhere you got to have humor. Every outfit had that type of a guy. I mean, under the most inopportune time, he would come out, come back, dry-eyed and straight-faced, and he would come up with something, and you had these guys laughing. In service, did you have the Stars and Stripes, that magazine? The Stars and Stripes, the old Stars and Stripes. During those, during that 1945 in England, the troops got them. What would these guys do when they got hold of the Stars and Stripes? The first thing, they would just check the headlines, and maybe there was three or four headlines. How the war was progressing, or regressing. Then they would go back to page two or three, for Baker’s cartoons, the Sad Sack, or Bill Mauldin’s Up Front with Willy and Joe.

Mark: Those were true comics.

Collins: One of these reunions the wife and I went to. This is kind of good. We went to this reunion. My wife never thought this was a joke. But it is cynical. It is cynical. And we went, this was Washington, D. C., they had the 50th anniversary of airborne. And this was around eleven o'clock at night, we were sitting around, guys from the company were sitting around this table, eight or ten guys having beer. Some were having highballs, and so on. And they are not talking too much about the war, just goofing back and forth, you know. And then finally, there is two of these guys are at this table. And I checked this group over. Out of these eight, three-fourths of them had been through the major campaigns, Normandy, Holland, Battle of the Bulge. Three of them had been wounded. And three had been ex-prisoners of war. And sure as hell, all of them carried the scars, the internal scars that don't show, you know. And then two of these guys are sitting here, and they are having a conversation, and they are talking about their professional baseball teams. And both these teams are doing good, you know. Geez, our teams are good. "Well, what the hell is wrong here? What is the trouble? Well, they are not drawing crowds. The stands are empty. The stands are empty. There is nobody coming. Bleachers half full. Nobody shouts, nobody applauds anymore." And what brand of ball are they playing. "Well, my team same as yours. Five-fifty, almost six hundred ball. I mean, top. And they are not drawing." And this goes on. And then it is getting loud and nasty. And finally, one of the guys sitting at the table, he looks up at them and says, "Why don't you two fellows cut it out?" He says, "As I remember," he said, "there was a time when we played on a team with an enviable record." And he says, "As I recall, spectators support was not spectacular either." Isn't there a certain amount of humor there? You know, you talk about being alone. In battle. And they are talking about these stands being half full. "Spectator support was not spectacular." Yea. Very true. I thought it was good.

Mark: So, this tape is down too five or ten minutes, or so. If you want to continue, we can. Otherwise.

Collins: That is two hours on there?

Mark: Yea. If you just want--

Collins: Well, you have a few questions. What do you want?

Mark: I want you to describe in the last five or ten minutes or so, liberation and how you got home.

Collins: Liberation and how we got home. Well, at this last camp, I will tell you, we moved, one of the people in there, one of the guys, had a hidden camera. I mean a hidden radio. And about once a week, the Germans would rip these floors up and

could never find it. So these guys kept us posted. And when I came into this prison, we were there about three weeks, yea, about that, I would say. And the Germans had let up on their guard duty, as far as that was concerned. Because what were they afraid of? Retaliation. They knew the party was over. And for three, four days before liberation, we could hear the distant artillery. But, like I say, in this room, we happened to have double beds. But the only thing that was ever issued to us was one blanket. And what most of the guys did was cut a hole in it and use it for a blanket, and then cut a hole in the center and [unintelligible] and then sleep on it at night. But these were bunk beds, no mattresses on them. Just these blankets. But up on top, on the wall, English had been in there before us and they had moved out, I don't know how soon. But this one guy had kept a map, a map of this area. And as they were advancing, some guy, maybe he was with an outfit or something, must have had a red crayon, because he had a red crayon, and you could tell, he had a mark in there in English. So a lot of this was kind of English print. And as the Allies were advancing, he would draw this spear and stuff. Because he was getting the news on the radio. So what I did before we left there, it was just thumb-tacked up there, tacked up there. I took it down and I took it home, and I was going to bring it along, but then we couldn't find it. The son in law wanted it, and I don't know if he has got it up there in the attic, or something. But I put a frame, I put in on a frame. And all it was, was like a brown bag, wrapping paper, and you could still see the folds in it. And then press it in. And I put these different camps in there. I got the correct dates and everything, you know. But, finally, we were liberated. We noticed the last two or three days, the German guards, you didn't see much of them. They were there. And there was probably, it is kind of hard to hit an exact number, but I would say that it was likely seventy-five guards in that camp, at least. And we noticed each day there was less and less guards. They were taking off. And then this last day, it was very, it was done in a very military way.

[End of Side A of Tape 2.]

We could see the tanks coming up. And it was English that liberated us in this area, in this Armsted area. And they pulled up maybe within a hundred and fifty feet of the gate. These Germans, as militaristic as they are, they came out with the best stuff they had on. These guards, but they were like the second rate guard, they weren't the top. They were long gone. But they come up, and this one guy counts cadence. They bring them up to the gate. Two of the guys step out of ranks. They open the gates, take down the bars, and they step out. The English pulled right up to them, within twenty feet. Jump off their tanks. They turned their weapons over to them. Put their hands behind their heads. Moved out. That is the way they were. So then they picked us up. I would say, like I mentioned before, probably twelve, fourteen thousand prisoners there. But then there was kind of a flat field right out near this camp and so they picked us up in C-47's and then took us into Brussels.

So after we were liberated, we got into Tarmsted, there, and went through a few of the buildings. But the Germans were very docile in the end. You go right into a house and see if there was any, I remember one house. This was happening repeatedly. Hundreds of people were doing this, prisoners of war. Displaced people were coming from out of the woods, I don't know where they came from. And it was a mess. And we walk into this house and there is two elderly men and this wife in the house. We come in and go into the cupboard. Don't even pay any attention. They are sitting there and they don't say a word. A little bread or something, or a little bratwurst, and cut off a few slices. And without even saying hello, thank you, or goodbye, leave. Make a sandwich and go. Check to see if they had some coffee, if they had some hot coffee. Take a cup off the shelf and walk out the door.

Mark: So they took you to Brussels? They cleaned you up, as you said. I imagine they tried to fatten you up, too.

Collins: Yea, well, see, there were doctors there, too. Like I say, we were at Brussels for about two, three weeks before we got out of there. But what I would like to say, with that dirt, it was just imbedded into the soil. Three showers a day for the best part of three weeks before you finally got it all. Can you imagine the filth?

Mark: And how long did it take you to get back to the States?

Collins: Ah, then we were sent to Camp Lucky Strike, and we were there about a month. This was a camp where they were setting their names after cigarettes. Camel, Lucky Strike, several other. Right along the beach there. And I would say at least a month. But they gave you a lot of milk, milk dishes. And another thing you were warned, especially prisoners of war. See, they had them in separate compounds, because the doctor goes through almost every day. Oh, he would, every day. Sometime you would see one doctor, ask you how you were feeling. And the main thing is, do not overeat. You may not have the trouble, you may not be able to because you have a shrunken stomach. So eat a little bit, and eat often. And milk dishes. And juices. And I would say, by the time I got home, well, then we sailed back. And the ship we sailed back was a Norwegian ship that the Germans must have confiscated when they first took over, because there was German swastikas all over. Burnt right into the steelwork. Burned in there. It was the John Ericson. His Majesty's Ship. English must have leased her. So, then, after that we were sent home and I was discharged, I believe it was in October. But before that I got, we were, most of these prisoners were. And this Olin Howard, living at Atlanta, Georgia. He was down there, too. We were given a month in Florida. In one of these different hotels. It was nice. Right off the beach. You could take a swim in the morning, you know. And a lot of fruit juices. Doctor check on you about every other day there, you would have to come in for a check-up. It was a nasty

experience, but, now, I mean, books that I read on it, it says that about one in every three Americans. No, I got that wrong. No, one in every three Americans who were prisoners of the Japanese died. They died in camp. And over in Europe, it was about one out of every seventeen. But, it wasn't that long a time. But it was under different conditions. And they were brutal. I like to mention this. This ex-prisoner of war chapter we got, there was three of us in Denmark and we hosted it. It was about two years ago. And then they usually have a cocktail hour. And then they have the banquet. So after about, just before the banquet, they said, "Let's go out and check the cars." You know. "Let's go out and check the cars." So three of us went out, and checking the cars, as you know, in the state here, we get free license plates. So I think we have something like, if I am not mistaken, I think the last figure I got there are about sixteen hundred ex-POW's in the state of Wisconsin. And about twelve of them belong to one of the eight chapters within the state. And, of course, these license plates have a lot to do with it. They are free for veterans. And, of course, now it also has been changed that you can, if the husband dies, the wife can still continue with them. If she does not marry, continue with the license plate. Like, "101 DIVISION." That is what I carry on mine. And I was damned lucky to get it. You know. I don't see how I ever did. I put in for it, and I put in the "REGIMENT 5026." And that was about fifteen, oh, twenty years ago. And I got the 101. At one of these reunions, too, there was a guy there from Chicago, and he'd get--

[End of Interview.]