

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JOHN DAVIS
106th Infantry Division, US Army, World War II
1997

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Davis, John, (1922-). Oral History Interview. 1997.

Master Copy: 1 audio cassette; analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

User Copy: 2 audio cassettes; analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract:

John Davis (a.k.a. Jack) was born in 1922 and served in World War Two in the European Theater as a part of the 106th infantry division. Davis grew up on a farm in Rocklin, Wisconsin near LaCrosse and attended university at UW-Milwaukee before he was drafted in 1942 to the 106th in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. He completed basic training and advanced infantry training before being moved to Tennessee. In Tennessee the division participated in the Second Army #5 Maneuvers. Once down with training, Davis prepared for deployment in Atterbery, Indiana and Camp Miles Standish, Massachusetts. After traveling by convoy across the Atlantic, he and the 106th went to South Hampton, England where the division learned they would be sent to the Rhineland Campaign as relief for the 2nd Infantry division in December of 1944. Davis mentions moving supplies while in England prior to leaving for France. Once on the continent, Davis's regiment quickly became surrounded by German forces near Shonberg and the narrator describes his survival experience in the brutal German winter without supplies in the few days prior to surrender. Once a POW, Davis experienced hunger and a lack of supplies as the Germans marched them east. Once in a French-made camp, he and the other POWs passed the time by reading books and keeping a close knit group of friends while prisoners. In May of 1945, Davis's camp was freed by the Russian Army, but a struggle ensued over the POWs until the US Air Force rescued the Americans. Davis then progressed to a liberty ship which returned him home. He then required medical attention back in the US for suffering malnutrition while in the POW camp. Once the war was over, the narrator discusses his use of the GI Bill, experiences in college, and his life as a farmer. He also touches upon the topic of alcohol and transitioning back to civilian life after the war. As a veteran, Davis also participated in 106th infantry division reunions and anniversaries.

Biographical Sketch:

John "Jack" Davis (b. 1922) was born in Rocklin, Wisconsin near LaCrosse and attended UW-Milwaukee University for short courses until he was drafted in 1942 and completed training in Atterbery, Indiana, Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and Atterbery, Indiana. In 1944, the 106th embarked for South Hampton, England. In December of 1944, the division entered the Rhineland Campaign near Belgium. Davis's regiment was captured that same month by the Germans near Shonberg. Davis spent the rest of the war in a POW camp until being freed by the Russian Army. After trouble with gaining freedom from the Russians post-war, Davis and other POWs were rescued by the US Air Force and brought home on a liberty ship. Davis received medical attention for malnutrition

and went on to complete college through utilization of the GI Bill. He spent his post-war life as a family farmer and also attended 106th division reunions and anniversaries.

*This interview's audio recording was poor, resulting in much of the interview being inaudible.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells 1997.
Transcribed by Yasmine Flodin-Ali, 2010, & Alyssa Kowis, 2012.
Abstracted by Kylee Sekosky, 2014.

Interview Transcript:

- Van Ells: Today's date is November the 21st 1997 this is Mark Van Ells archivist for the Wisconsin Veteran's Museum doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. John Davis, otherwise known as Jack Davis, veteran of the 106th infantry in the European theater during the Second World War. Good morning and thanks for coming in.
- Davis: It's a pleasure to be here. I've been studying this for the past time that I've been out of the army, which was in '45. I'm very interested in finding out as much as I can about the operations of the time because we were not in any position to have first hand information after being POWs.
- Van Ells: Why don't you start by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to Pearl Harbor?
- Davis: I was born in Rocklin, Wisconsin, a small town near La Crosse, La Crosse County. And I was on a farm, and so I was born on the farmstead. And then I went to school, Catholic school in Fitchburg. And there is some confusion maybe with Fitchburg, Wisconsin, which is in your county. But no, but this was a rural community. The closest town was Rocklin half way between Sparta and La Crosse.
- Van Ells: You were born in what year again?
- Davis: 1922. So, well I mean I'm close to 75 right now, right?
- Van Ells: What were you doing at the time of Pearl Harbor; you were in high school presumably?
- Davis: Let's see, I've got to think about that. Yes it was very close to that. It may have been, I was probably in high school. I'm not sure of the dates. Let's see—
- Van Ells: Well what year was it when you joined the army?
- Davis: Well I was drafted. I'd been going to school at the University for three semesters when I was drafted and decided I would go and from procedures while going to Milwaukee, the UW, I went to Fort Sheridan. And that was the take off before I got down to Fort Jackson, South Carolina where we were trained and there with the 106th Division assigned to me. And I remained under that when I was captured.
- Van Ells: What sort of training did you go through, [inaudible], was it geared towards combat or what were you being trained for?

Davis: We were not sure about that until later after our primary training started in Fort Jackson, and we went through our primary training there to become soldiers and then from there we went into another stage where we trained other people and we also were training for more sophisticated problems. And umm, there the [inaudible], were in North Carolina and South Carolina. On the North Carolina border I spent January, December, excuse me, December there and after that we regrouped and we went to Tennessee, the Hoover area and visited Nashville up there. There for a couple of months we were training then, really there for preparation overseas that was the first time we realized that probably our destination as a division would be the European Operation. And then of course we had to get to Adaberry [whistles] to Adaberry, Indiana and that was when we picked up our final legal form for overseas. And went from there to Massachusetts in Standish where we finished our preparation for going overseas from getting our shots to checking out everything we had remembered prepare and then we went down to New York, from Chicago, Illinois, that was a ship that was going over by convoy. Part of the division went by the same ship and it was not a very nice trip or a ship *Saint Marry*, we were heading over on the *Aquitania* and so we went over in convoy and we got over to Europe seven days later than *Saint Marry* because they were not in convoy and we were. And I don't know dates on that. I don't know the exact year.

Van Ells: That's fine, it's not that necessary. So what's that got to do with it, where did you land?

Davis: Yes, we landed in England. We landed in July and that's also standard. They finished the boats and we could get more equipment and one of the experiences I had was we met some [inaudible] pick up some equipment overseas, across France. So the last week we [inaudible] dragged [inaudible] to the boats. [Inaudible]. So we picked up our supplies and on our way down was that coast guard at about ten o'clock at night driving with black out lights he had vision gas filled, cartons of gas in the truck to the sides and two trucks hit the first truck and one was killed and the other was sitting to the side. And so we had crossed one truck there and then another truck comes there it hit another truck and darted out again without warning and we loaded up and went back, started back there was another accident on the way back to the south edge, South Hampton, South Hampton we were supposed to go straight there, there was a couple of us from the military in South Hampton. And then with that accident no one was hurt at all and the truck tripped over and the wheels were in the and then we were able, we had another truck it had a wrench on it so wrenched the truck back over again on its wheels and loaded these big boxes again by use of the wrench as much as we could and continued on. All the stays on the truck were broken. We went to South Hampton, and everybody, boy when that truck came, because [inaudible]. And from there we

[inaudible] traveled from the south edge of the [inaudible] and that was another trip for the day and the next morning the second division wanted to move on and so we replaced the second division and that was an eighty-mile front, from Luxemburg up to the ocean. Yeah.

Van Ells: Now this was your first combat experience, is that true?

Davis: That's right. We had had one man that had gone; he was a boy [inaudible.]

Van Ells: [Inaudible]. Your understanding of history is so [inaudible].

Davis: That is what we, we'd expect later it was probably when we were in England we were informed that we were going, it didn't say where but we were going into a quiet segment.

Van Ells: And this was thought to be pretty standard procedure usually?

Davis: Yes. The 99th went through some of the same things that we went through in preparing for this. I don't know exactly they seemed to have lost a lot of men just before we lost a lot of men. [Inaudible.]

Van Ells: [Inaudible].

Davis: Most of them went as replacements to fill companies for D-day and the others went later as a result of the filling as replacements places.

Van Ells: So you got to the [inaudible.]

Davis: Yes there was about ten or so inches of snow when we woke up in the morning, and well it was one of the coldest winters in Germany so we had to deal with the temperature and so [inaudible] especially with steel on it, steel plates. And the understanding was [inaudible]. Then when we arrived the lines joined our area because if one division was going out, another one would come in, in it was very difficult to move very fast. I always felt if we had walked that distance we might not have been [inaudible]. So then we [inaudible]. And then we had white house[?] Security and so unfortunately [inaudible]. But then it was night fever so it would be [inaudible] it was after dark and I went down there still to start a fire and that was my personal experience of that. I didn't know for sure I hadn't known it was an explosive thing; I dropped it [inaudible] I started seeing slices of red, burn up my hands [inaudible]. [Laughs]. A couple of things that [inaudible] commanding officer and I awoke in an Italian headquarters which was in a bunker. I walked up there [inaudible] Jones, he was out inspecting, and he was alone, he did not have anyone with him. [Inaudible.]

Van Ells: So how [inaudible]?

Davis: We knew right away that we weren't that we had not any contact with the Germans at all. We waited in the morning with the message that we will fall back. [Inaudible.] Queen [inaudible.] Yeah. So that was the road that we went on across going cross country. We continued going cross country the first day, and at night we had no food or water. We just had a canteen. [Inaudible] that was one of the problems we had to fill our canteens. And we continued cross country towards [inaudible] by the road. [Inaudible] I don't really remember that all that well. I think his name was Schonberg. And the first day captured we kept walking at a slow pace and mostly spread out, and not in any fashion. Our units were spread, so we continued that for that day and then we were in a cold area, and we stayed that night. The trucks were supposed to bring food for us and we left our packs, the cooks were going to bring enough, but they didn't get up. I don't know if they were captured before that or not. [Inaudible.] So when we left it was getting a bit dark, we nestled down as best we could. All we had was the peel deck. So we got through that night, got up and we started again in the morning in the front across [inaudible] later in the afternoon [inaudible] we had another day in there. So we slept that night and then the next night we slept again and following that was the day that we came out into the open. We were traveling [inaudible] and got out into the open, and then we had to cross an opening. So we were crossing and as we crossed there close to this road and the Germans were bringing in 88's. They were sent out and [inaudible] the lead squad, the lead platoon, with a gun pointed [inaudible] and then the leader said to the other man, asked the commander if we should challenge them or drop back. [Inaudible.] When he came back they had machine guns. [Inaudible.] He was above his men, and this was just before he left. [Inaudible] he was as much interesting as being in infantry [inaudible.] And we did get back, we made it all right back and he told us to get back and he was with us, but he didn't quite make it. [Inaudible] the ground and I didn't know who was around me at all, but we weren't too far from where our company would have been. They were firing target on a road and woods area, the forest before us, with those 88's. And along that road, I think that's why they had fired there, they were behind tree trunks and I think that's why they were firing there [inaudible] they thought it wasn't used much, but anyway they started firing and the 423rd was right next to us. And the 423rd it was heavy orders and heavy machinery and they were well annihilated, and I was just about 25-30 feet from there, and I could hear shrapnel fall and some fell around us too, but the [inaudible] and afterwards we went up the hill to surrender [inaudible.] That was our biggest loss **[End of Tape 1, Side A]** and he said destroy the firing squad. Bury the ammunition we have which was very little and then we piled our rifles up, marched down the same road as [inaudible.] And then we continued marching down past where they had dug in the 88's and down to the road and then they marched us up to a

small town, and we stayed in a church. And we stayed there all night. In the morning we started out, and we hadn't had food for the previous 3 days and [inaudible.] And then we were marched off in the morning and that's where we marched with the [inaudible] through the yard there and before we got over there it was night again. We stayed in some big warehouses and some of them [inaudible.] And the next morning [inaudible] Frankfurt and then finally [inaudible.]

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: Not western on the eastern front. [Inaudible.] That's from what I understood. There was really no telling what was going on in the war, but anytime we were marching east was about [inaudible.] And from there we were on the [inaudible] we were, did not have any food, some people did. If you know the right guard. And as you traveled there was a lot of coming in [inaudible.] By that time we were [inaudible.] Then they did get new stuff, send in a can and that's all we had in our water supply. Then our, one of our biggest concerns was our own plans. [Inaudible] then there was 30 feet [inaudible.] And so, I went out and as far as I understood [inaudible] 47th [inaudible.] They arrived in that order. There marched up, ah marched up the hill and that's where all the officers were. I went from there and they just [inaudible] and then they were [inaudible.] Then they continued the entire [inaudible.] They really trust, we arrived after we got up the hill. And sliced the bread. [Inaudible.] As far as we were concerned, because then [inaudible] we didn't train and [inaudible] air force.

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: Yes there was. Of course everybody was writing recipes and things like that.

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: Yes, and this was about and—this was 1 of the things I find that didn't bother me. Nope it didn't [inaudible.] The French had built the camp sometime before World War II sort of thing. Because very well built camp, I don't know what it was used for entirely. English, French, Russian troops? But it was a well run camp as far as physically [inaudible] areas and within the fence orders. Another interesting thing was in the camp [inaudible] yes he would [inaudible.] Now I'll tell you later how we got pictures with [inaudible] cause he was there. And we were a 6 man squad and we had, 3 of us were from the same area, and 3 of us were from Oregon. [Inaudible.] But anyway we were sitting tight, we stayed together really tight, we shared our problems and so on. There was also a Chaplin's assistant and he organized but he also continued to be very active after.

But we, there were things that went on there; people who had some very, we had knowledgeable people there about so many things. In fact I have brought back a book *Feeds and Feeding* that was written by the person there at the university and so we finally got some books to read and that [inaudible] and that I brought it back and took the course when I got back [laughs.] But we would always act like Germans [inaudible] friendship or something [inaudible.] He actually went into the ministry [inaudible] and other religions.

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: Well they're the standard 3 tier bunks. Of course we did not have any, some people were given blankets. They were used for blackouts but they took them off. And so of course the standard procedure of sleeping was to rotate bunks [inaudible] and so we did that. And the other field day [inaudible] some people [inaudible.] Slipped down into the [inaudible.] I always slept in a sweatshirt I think. [Laughs] I didn't have any bed bugs or lice on me at all so I don't think [inaudible] they didn't get along with him, the lice didn't get along with him at all! But anyway [inaudible] of the graveyards and dig them, then they [inaudible] Germans asked for some volunteers to go and fix up the yard. They wanted 50 people! And 50 went to just get out of the camp! They went down and I don't know what they did down there, I didn't volunteer for anything. [Laughs] When they came back [inaudible] and they kept the chicken in the barracks there and it was laying eggs! So they had eggs for breakfast! [Laughs] Of course it was very small of course there were only 6 people who lived with the guy who did brought the chicken back. Finally they de-feathered the chicken and cooked [inaudible.] Friday the chicken was gone [inaudible.]

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: We had, this is a story of why [inaudible.] I'm fairly sure it's legitimate. We had to follow that was our [inaudible] special word for it where he was going [inaudible] Germans. And see he didn't nothing [inaudible] and so they brought him into a dentist. We were kind of there [inaudible] and so we sort of [inaudible] and so we had to clear up. When we had lawyers and everyone else in New York and heard about all the crime that went on in New York. And of course we had an agriculture teacher there and of course anybody in agriculture knew folks would get together and discuss agriculture. So we were well organized. [Laughs] So I think that [inaudible.] [Laughs] Then it really was breathtaking.

Van Ells: [Inaudible] so many wanted to see it.

Davis: [Inaudible.] Then we were just biding our time there, but this time back to this well on the outside he was more than flustered. [Inaudible] And he

dealt with several complaints. He took a few years to troll the camp and [inaudible] and then they got in a group of British. [Inaudible.] He also had fight experience with being enriched, he had some [inaudible.] Then he put it out and coming in there he [inaudible] then he was telling us where those units were. Units, that were [inaudible] he had numbers! How he got it, I don't know.

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: [Inaudible.] At night across the bridge and [inaudible.] So those things are some of the [inaudible.]

Van Ells: So were [inaudible.]

Davis: Yeah, we were new and they were coming up to see [inaudible.]

Van Ells: Could you just describe [inaudible.]

Davis: Yeah, they moved out of there, except for a few. There were a few that just stayed there and they came in and of course during that period **[End of Tape 1, Side B]** even after we were liberated he had to stay there in '42 [inaudible] and they were moving prisoners into the yard and putting a big tent out there. Which is the same tent, I think, it was we stood in that day that we got there. [Inaudible.] They brought some food along with us, but I didn't participate in trying to get that. In fact I did get one can of [inaudible] in a can. Sea rations, but I didn't eat that until after when we were ready to take off on the plane, or go to the plane. That was my [inaudible] navy or suit were [inaudible.] At the end of that day. Other than that it went very, [inaudible] going to be organized by, what do you call? National MB's, so typical they were Russians. [Inaudible] and so each one contributed to men to guard the camp. And we, I guess they had different rifles I wasn't involved in it, but I they had captured some German rifles. And then they mentioned the tubes came in and we were freed at that time, everybody. Gone, left [inaudible.]

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: Yeah they surrendered.

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: [Inaudible.] But then, like I said [inaudible.] But he, this fellow would come in and he had one very sure every night [inaudible.]

Van Ells: So after your capture can you retrace your steps?

Davis: Well yes. We went to Camp Lucky Strikes, from just being converted from ah, I don't want to say induction, but the [inaudible] fellows were coming in for replacements, were coming in. They changed it for replacement people, unless they were or there for hospital [inaudible.] That's when they first got back. So I stated in Lucky Strike, that these [inaudible] I didn't leave this [inaudible.] Chicken, gravy, mashed potatoes; I didn't eat a lot of that. I was so sore that I couldn't even sleep [inaudible.] I had to lay a pillow, and then they [inaudible.]

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: Yes. We [inaudible.] I didn't, ah to get back to Camp Lucky Strike; they took us by truck from there to up near Castle up to Giessen. And from there we flew with the C 47th back to the [inaudible.] Then we got onto a ship, stayed there a couple days after I got out of the hospital [inaudible.] And that was [inaudible] I still was unable to eat solid food, in fact I went in and [inaudible.]

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: Yes. That was Okayed [inaudible.] I didn't have any problems adjusting because [inaudible.] Like they laid around the floor, and so I went to work for the farm and became a farm boy. So my father didn't mind [inaudible] so yeah we were on a farm. And even working on the farm I would see people [inaudible] so I went back and worked for him and [inaudible.] Well I'd leave and I was bearing this before [inaudible.]

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: I, well I went in a little bit too, because see I came down as one of the short course before the war. I came down as a short course, which is 3 months course given to farm boys. And the next year, after that year, I stayed more than 3 months [inaudible] because I started school here and on [inaudible.] We had to keep our own seed, and it got a little worse and [inaudible.] Angus and all of that age, that went you see to Michigan or some other places. So [inaudible] there must have been 5 or 6 [inaudible.] ROTC so that had some trials after [inaudible] and then they had [inaudible.] He was in the next company and he [inaudible.]

Van Ells: Now that you [inaudible] what else did you do? [Inaudible.]

Davis: No, I just went on G.I., I had to trust defeat and [inaudible.] But no then of course then I had [inaudible.]

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: Ah well, see I wasn't married at that time. I went; I didn't finish quite that [inaudible] signed in. [Inaudible] so I moved on to first sergeant.

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: Yes.

Van Ells: When did you start school? January?

Davis: January. No I went right back in. [Inaudible] he stayed there. Ah we brought our own [inaudible.]

Van Ells: Another [inaudible.]

Davis: No.

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: And had gone on to ask her. I worked here before I went, so they [inaudible.]

Van Ells: And then [inaudible.]

Davis: I stayed there. [Laughs] I didn't have to look for a job. [Inaudible.]

Van Ells: [Inaudible] is the problem with education [inaudible] physical, psychological readjustments [inaudible.]

Davis: Not really, this is because, well my feeling of it. When I came back I went right to work on the farm for this, which I had worked at before. And [inaudible.] So I went out and worked there, it was just like before I left.

Van Ells: [Inaudible] on a cold day to keep warm?

Davis: No, I had [inaudible.]

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: Well then I came back to a normal life—

Van Ells: Kept busy.

Davis: Yeah busy, I didn't sit with nothing to do [inaudible.]

Van Ells: [Inaudible.]

Davis: Yes. And this is the thing, [inaudible.]

Van Ells: Your [inaudible.]

Davis: [Laughs] Well I don't even; didn't even—you know it was a tremendous experience. I wouldn't want to, encourage, anyone else to do it, but it was because I was an only child. Lost my father [inaudible.] I remember when my father came home after the immigration period with all the money I got [inaudible] which was \$28, from living on a farm. Grew our own food and raised our eggs. [Inaudible.] Pretty well adjusted.

Van Ells: [Inaudible] I hear that [inaudible.]

Davis: Yup, I [inaudible.] I was gone, that was behind me. And I had some [inaudible.]

Van Ells: John, I just have one last area [inaudible.] For first time to join in the work station and the [inaudible.]

Davis: No.

Van Ells: Is there a pretty good reason?

Davis: Hardly. I guess it's because of the, a lot of them are involved in alcohol. And that's there concern not mine, but I've never, in fact I've never [inaudible.] Just a short time. To think just to get together and share thoughts. And he, he always had [inaudible] in his hand. That's the only time I had alcohol. He insisted I take a drink of it, and I spit it out and haven't had any since. [Laughs]

Van Ells: Now I know you got help [inaudible.]

Davis: Well, I went back to the minister. Minister and minister's assistant. 3 other or 4 other people got together and watched it, sat here and watched it in Washington, no not Washington it was Arlington, Virginia is where they got together. [Inaudible] so they got names together that they knew, and there were 4 of them sitting around a table and they started talking about how we should be fighting. And the minister was the first to volunteer, so we [inaudible] and they invited Dell, and he [inaudible] and they got some names of friends and got together. They organized, well I shouldn't say organized cause it's not an organization [laughs] there's no news today you just go up there and pay your expenses and then you pay a little bit for what the person was putting it on. Pay those expenses, to get enough to get it to those in there, you have to build up enough to carry over. We have a [inaudible] we have a northern part of Jacksonville, Florida, he's the one

who does all the [inaudible] and they get giddy for that. Then someone else has to volunteer next year and, I wasn't at camp but from there on yeah, last year [inaudible.]

Van Ells: Where's it next year?

Davis: Next year it's going to be back at camp. And there was one in Texas, one back in Columbia, South Carolina. It wasn't the 50th anniversary, because the division was going to have the 50th anniversary. But we had it the year before, and they were [inaudible] administered down there working full speed. [Inaudible] expect us in return to [inaudible] then in Phoenix and Tucson. Then [inaudible] go to the [inaudible.] Ended up going and it was very enjoyable and very informative. I think Peterson flew east out over to the Atlantic sea in California, and he flies to all of us. Always makes an appearance makes it fun. Also [inaudible.] There were things that we can't, really [inaudible.]

Van Ells: What about [inaudible.]

Davis: I am not used to that.

Van Ells: [Inaudible] ability to continue [inaudible.]

Davis: I been there [laughs] there were things we were able to get by. [Inaudible] be able to make it back. [Laughs]

Van Ells: Well those were all the questions I had! So if there's anything you'd like to elaborate?

Davis: I think I have gone back as I think of some things but, well this here I guess I showed you our program. Let's see. Of course I gave you this. Oh here! Ah no.

Van Ells: Well thanks for coming in.

Davis: Yeah.

[End of Interview]